

Publishing

FutureNow is the Western Australian Training Council for the creative, leisure and technology industries. The Council is a skills advisory body that represents the voice of industry, advising the State Government on the training and workforce development needs of our industry sectors.

Current industry environment

"... as an artist, as someone who writes stories and tries to make words into beautiful forms, it's vitally important to me, especially in a culture that's forgotten the value of beauty... It's important for blokes to be able to do beautiful stuff, impractical stuff, that adds to life." Tim Winton, West Australian author¹

Global decline

There is evidence that globally, people are reading less books.ⁱⁱ However in Australia at least, our overall time spent reading has increased slightly in recent years.ⁱⁱⁱ Newspaper and magazine publishing, and academic book publishing, have been particularly impacted by a consumer shift to digital alternatives, and publishing overall is contracting globally. However the data around children's and non-fiction book publishing is more positive, with modest increases in sales in the past five years. Digital book downloads are also slowing globally, confirming the overall decline in book sales.^{iv} Fragmentation of consumer attention by other low-cost, mostly digital, forms of content-based entertainment; a challenging physical outlet environment, particularly acute in bookselling owing to the early disruption of the model by online giant Amazon; the ready availability of online academic information; and the related growth of illegal downloading of content-based product, particularly acute in the fiction and academic publishing spheres, are key factors in the global decline of the broader publishing sector.

Local sustainability

These challenges have constrained productions and led to reductions in staffing and commissions nationally. The Western Australian publishing sector is small however, and consists of small publishers with core critical staff. While editorial work is largely outsourced to independent contractors in WA and may have contracted slightly, local publishers have maintained existing staff and are operating largely as before.¹ Western Australian publishers including Fremantle Press and Magabala Books have capitalised on the continuing growth of the children's publishing sector by expanding their children's portfolios. For writers, the proliferation of online content has led to a 'noisy' market where authors have access to a global audience but a very large degree of competition. This has meant that sector priorities are focussed around initiatives that create opportunities for writers to work and be seen. Professional development areas have included pitching, self-publishing, marketing and career management. Sector organisations including Screenwest and the Black Swan State Theatre Centre support Emerging Writers Groups to provide career pathways for playwrights and screenwriters.

¹ Note: At the time of writing, UWA Publishing has received notice that the University of Western Australia is withdrawing funding and the 85 year old publisher will cease to trade in its current form within the month (November 2019). WA has only three small semi-commercial publishers and as such, UWA Publishing, together with Magabala Books and Fremantle Press, performs a very significant role in the local publishing ecology. The sector will be impacted by this closure, particularly in the form of reduced opportunities for Western Australian writers, illustrators and editors. FutureNow will revisit this snapshot as new information emerges.

A snapshot of Publishing

Books | Periodicals | Online | Journalism | Academic |



71%
of Australians believe that books have a value that's greater than their monetary cost.***

Book sales are up slightly in Australia, but fierce price competition means overall revenue is predicted to decrease.*^

Australians value and enjoy reading and would like to do it more – **reading books** ranks higher than browsing the internet or watching TV as the leisure activity Australians enjoy most.***

Australia's top 10 employability skills*

1. Communication skills
2. Organisational skills
3. **Writing**
4. Planning
5. Detail-oriented
6. Collaboration
7. Problem solving
8. Time management
9. Research
10. Computer skills

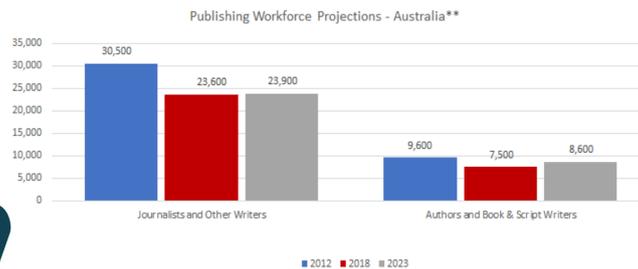
Writers apply all these skills in their daily work.

Despite challenging conditions within publishing, **writers have the skills** broader industry seek and are therefore highly employable across diverse sectors.

The future workforce

Stability on the horizon

Employment for writers and journalists peaked in 2012 and then declined suddenly. The next 5 years see very slow but steady growth for the sector.**



References:

- * https://www.ncver.edu.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0027/3238245/Internet-job-postings-Employability-skills-infographic.pdf
- ** Job Outlook Data: November 2019
- *** <https://www.australiacouncil.gov.au/research/reading-the-reader/>
- *^ IBISWorld: Book Publishing in Australia: May 2019

Industry developments

Bespoke publishing

Magazine and book publishing are evolving through this period of contraction to provide a more bespoke consumer offer. Larger scale book publishing and bookselling is price-sensitive, with narrow margins for industry and fierce price competition by online retailers, whereas bespoke publishing is about finding a discrete audience for tailored product. This space is dominated by small and 'micro' publishers and self-published authors, and is tailored to an audience that is focussed on specific content over price. Micro-publishing can take the form of digital-only, but also high-end, high-quality publishing. Small print runs are inherently expensive, resulting in higher price points, however the risk is relatively small, and the market is price tolerant. Taking these trends into account, growth in publishing in WA is likely to be in this bespoke space. There is therefore an associated need for accessible training and upskilling in small business management and marketing skills, contextualised to the industry.

Inclusive publishing

The Australian Inclusive Publishing Initiative (AIPI) ^v was 'initiated by the Australian Publishers Association (APA) in 2016 to address the challenge of improving access to books by people living with a print disability.' It is estimated that up to 20% of Australians experience some form of print disability, and this is likely to continue as Australia's population ages.^{vi} The Australian publishing market is relatively niche, and an opportunity to expand the market by up to 20% is considered significant. Currently people with a print disability face an array of difficulties accessing the written material, in online and physical formats, they are interested in or need. This problem can be mitigated by publishers and content producers applying different design principals which incorporate inclusive publishing parameters. Training or professional development for skilled people already embedded in the publishing sector can likely be addressed through skill sets, or other short courses.

Parallel Import Restrictions

Industry continues to watch for updates from the federal government on the potential removal of parallel import restrictions (PIRs). PIRs are a significant source of government support for the Australian publishing industry, preventing the importation of books which are also published by an Australian publishing house. While online sellers are able to bypass these rules when selling to individuals, there is still a significant benefit to industry from the scheme. IP Australia drafted legislation for the removal of PIRs in October 2017, and as of November 2019, the draft Bill is with the Senate.^{vii}

Workforce opportunities

Supporting journalism careers

Media publishing has seen several large-scale redundancies in recent years, while graduate numbers have remained steady, leading to poor employment outcomes for graduates. Unpaid internships have grown concurrently, and this can be problematic if it excludes graduates from less privileged backgrounds, who are unable to sustain themselves through a period of unpaid employment.^{viii} Together these trends are viewed by industry and more broadly as undermining journalistic quality and restricting the diversity of voices to be heard in the Australian media.^{ix} A traineeship model, while potentially difficult for industry to deliver in the current challenging environment, would support broader access to journalistic careers.

Demand for writers

The National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER) confirms writing as the third most in demand skill across Australia, behind only communication and organizational skills.^x Writers with a good understanding of opportunities outside of the publishing industry will be better able to build sustainable careers, so these workers need the capacity to identify their own skills gaps and upskill appropriately.

Writers working in field need to know how to pitch for work and price their services appropriately. They need strong self-employment and enterprise skills, and an understanding of digital media and potentially self-publishing.

Skills and Training Strategies

Better content across industry

Conditions continue to be difficult for writers, with traditional opportunities for paid employment in the media sphere diminishing and pay-per-word rates falling. While demand for content has grown in the wake of the digital revolution, consumer expectation to access content for free has undermined the profitability of the traditional employers of writers and journalists.

Concurrently however, demand for the *skills* of writers has grown and for this reason, writers are highly employable, despite not working directly in their chosen field. Written communication skills are of increasing importance to a very wide swathe of contemporary roles throughout the workforce, so related training will be of broader benefit than to the publishing sector only. The first vocational training to be nationally accredited relating to these skills was endorsed in February 2019, being a Certificate IV and Diploma in Professional Writing and Editing. To date there are no providers with this new training on scope to deliver in Western Australia.

Please Get in Touch

FutureNow is continually seeking broad input from stakeholders and representatives in the Western Australian Publishing sector. If you would be interested in providing your perspective on this snapshot or related workforce matters for your sector, we would love to hear from you:

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References

All links accessed 8th November 2019

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