

Melbourne Writers Festival's commitment to diversity

Melbourne Writers Festival (MWF) is Victoria's premier event for writers, readers and thinkers. For almost 35 years MWF has showcased the best writers from Australia and around the world. Through discussion, debate, storytelling, performance and educational programming the Festival challenges, entertains and inspires over 55,000 Victorians each year. Their mission is to bring people together to celebrate words and stories, and share human experience.

For the past 2 years, the MWF has been running an international student volunteering program in partnership with Study Melbourne. The program has been highly successful and the State Awards, and in particular the Inclusion Award, was a perfect fit.

International students reported that volunteering at MWF gave them a platform for 'meeting new people' and 'helping people' at the Festival, as well as the opportunity to 'enjoy the environment of arts and philosophy' and 'see talks that I otherwise would not have been able to afford. The post program evaluation found that 91% of international students felt supported and 86% were satisfied with their volunteering experience. The exit interviews with participants has found that international students highly value the opportunity to engage with Australian writers and thinkers through the Festival program and events.

MWF believes that diverse volunteer cohorts can be a huge benefit to host organisations, bringing new skills and perspectives. It is so important that the volunteers reflect the diversity of the city around us. MWF encourages all organisations to ensure they are running inclusive volunteer programs. It is essential that you do your research in advance, and ideally co-design the program with the community you want to engage. This will ensure that you understand the unique needs and potential barriers that your targeted community faces and help you put in place the support they need to access your program.

The volunteers program that won the Inclusion Award is the International Student Engagement Program. The program was co-designed with international students and is supported by Study Melbourne. It aims to provide a rewarding volunteering experience for international students, giving students opportunities to practice English in a professional environment, while building social and professional networks, as part of a major cultural event in Melbourne.

Winning the award has given MWF a platform to share the insights and knowledge that they have learnt through running the program with other arts organisations in Melbourne, helping them to improve the inclusivity of their own volunteering programs. Through the partnership with Study Melbourne, MWF has also had the opportunity to share this knowledge with the education sector more broadly across the state.

Congratulations to Melbourne Writers Festival on their well-deserved Inclusion Award at the 2019 Volunteering Victoria State Awards.

