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How Australia's trade publishing industry is challenging the white standard of its workforce

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How Australia's trade publishing industry is challenging the white standard of its workforce

Trade publishing is not alone in being a majority-white industry. Its role in creating and reproducing cultural artefacts, however, makes it unique. Such production entails substantial responsibility to represent all cultures of a society equally and accurately, but what does it mean for the industry when its gatekeepers do not themselves represent the diverse cross-section of social and cultural identity? An understandable hypothesis is that the cultural artefacts being produced inevitably reflect the homogeneous nature of their producers (Jackson 2017; Saha & van Lente 2020). This is problematic for myriad reasons and the potential causes of such homogeneity must, therefore, be addressed. This report outlines three fundamental obstacles that impede diversity and inclusion in the trade publishing workforce. As these barriers uphold and reinforce the issue at large, the report analyses the actions that have been taken by the Australian publishing industry to overcome such challenges through an investigation of the schemes and initiatives that already exist or are currently being designed.

The issue of diversity and inclusion in the trade publishing workforces of the United Kingdom and United States has been researched and reported widely (Lee & Low Books 2016; Lee & Low Books 2020; Saha & van Lente 2020; Spread the Word 2015). Analysis of the Australian publishing industry, however, is scarce. This report builds on

previous research of the industry's obstacles to diversity, in both local and global contexts, and compiles in one place the schemes and initiatives that, to date, the Australian publishing industry has undertaken to remedy the lack of diversity and inclusion in its workforce. Accumulating this information is useful in gaining a broad understanding of our local industry, the work it has done thus far and, in comparison to other markets, the meaningful change that is still required in Australia. The research includes information gathered directly from Australian publishing houses and organisations through conversations and interviews; however, this empirical data is limited to publishing employees who were able and willing to participate in discussions about such topics and future research would benefit from additional respondents.

Note on language

This report uses various acronyms to describe publishing employees from non-white backgrounds. The term FNPOC (First Nations and People of Colour) is used when discussing non-white peoples in the Australian context, while BAME (Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic) and BIPOC (Black, Indigenous and People of Colour) are used in discussions of the United Kingdom and United States respectively. This report acknowledges the inherent problems of such catch-all terminology and the ways in which it obscures the rich multiplicity of these individual groups (Chowdhury 2020, p. 7).

Obstacles

The barriers of access for people of colour and minority ethnicities to most industries are manifold and complex, and discussing them all, if not most, in the case of trade publishing is beyond the scope of this analysis. Instead, this report identifies three obstacles that it deems the most fundamental and challenging for the publishing industry in Australia and across the world.

The university problem

Higher education is the established standard for employability in most knowledge-based industries and is a principal criterion upon which one's eligibility for a role is assessed. It is also a privilege primarily enjoyed by people with a certain degree of social and economic capital. In Australia, First Nations students made up just 1.4 per cent of domestic students in 2014 (Parr 2015). Barriers to university enrolments for First Nations peoples range from the financial pressures of living away from home to insufficient academic support, racial prejudice and a lack of Indigenous visibility and representation on campus (Pechenkina & Anderson 2011, p. 4). Like universities in the United States, which employ methods of affirmative action or 'open admissions' to encourage and recruit BIPOC students (Okechukwu 2019, p. 7), Australian universities have implemented 'special measures' to close the gap between the number of FNPOC and white-Australian student enrolments, including 'alternative' entrance for Indigenous admissions (Barac & Kelly 2013, pp. 57–62). This is crucial for FNPOC students not only because university equips students with an academic qualification that is desired by most employers but because it provides significant opportunities for students to network with prospective employers and peers who may become future colleagues in the industry.

However, 'despite various efforts made by Australian universities to tackle issues behind low education participation rates of Indigenous Australians, the state of Indigenous education can be currently described as being in crisis' (Barac & Kelly 2013, p. 57). Given the general requirement for a higher education degree for employment in creative sectors, and in particular trade publishing, it follows, then, that First Nations peoples will be underrepresented in the workforces of these industries. Lack of diversity among the student population, therefore, hinders diversity in workforces like book publishing, but so too does publishing's reliance on higher education to grant entry into its workforce. In an interview conducted for this report, Roxy Ryan, Managing Director at Hardie Grant Books, stated that, 'The lack of diverse candidates going through the usual employment channels has a huge impact [...] and has driven [Hardie Grant] to seek new avenues for finding potential employees' (email 8 May 2021). Hachette Australia is the first of its publishing peers to launch an internship that will potentially bridge this divide,

but universities must do more to reach, encourage and support FNPOC students if we are to see more First Nations peoples and people of minority ethnicities employed in the publishing industry (Jackson 2017; Spread the Word 2015, p. 15).

Who can afford to work for free?

It is of equal concern to the publishing sector that the industry is essentially an ‘apprentice system, whereby people eventually get paid jobs in publishing after unpaid work or internships’ (Salisbury 2015, p. 68). The very design of such a system inevitably excludes people from low socio-economic backgrounds and plays a crucial role in publishing remaining dominantly white and middle-class, despite this group representing such a small percentage of the overall population (Spread the Word 2015, pp. 15–22). Patrizia Di Biase-Dyson, Chief of Staff at the Australian Publishers Association, attests to this system being a decisive shortcoming of the industry generally. In a discussion about impediments to diversity for this report, she remarked that ‘the main issue in this market is that internships and work experience are the main way people get into the industry’ (tel. conv. 16 April 2021). Completing unpaid work is an unwritten requirement of securing future paid work in publishing and, while paid work experience seems the obvious answer to this, tight publishing budgets restrict the possibility and availability of these programs.

Also noted by Di Biase-Dyson are costly factors like insurance and superannuation, which play a key role in unpaid internships remaining a primary method for publishing houses to discover and train potential employees. University students are lawfully unpaid while completing an internship and are covered by the insurance policy of their university for the duration of the program (tel. conv. 16 April 2021). While this is hugely cost effective for publishers, it narrows the pool of potential interns to those who are not only undertaking higher education but, further, to those students who can afford to work for free. Fiona Hardie, Director of Hardie Grant, believes this needs to be remedied, stating in an interview for this report that, ‘We need to spread our recruitment networks wider, to non-traditional environments and in non-traditional ways. We need to open diverse students to publishing as a career choice, by working with communities and universities, as we are doing, for internships and roles’ (email 8 May 2021). The few paid

internship positions offered by publishing houses in Australia also remain underpaid. Even if an FNPOC candidate were to be accepted for a paid internship, they are statistically less likely to be able to afford such an opportunity (Ibrahim 2018). This problem extends beyond internships and unpaid or underpaid work to the low salaries of entry-level publishing positions generally, as well as the years required in such roles before a sustainable wage is earned, limiting the demographics for whom this low income and time commitment are a viable career option (Ibrahim 2018; Saha & van Lente 2020).

Diverse leaders and industry culture

It is unsurprising that the obstacles inherent within university education and unpaid internships are not only problematic in themselves but augment each other in such a way that pathways into the industry at all levels are incredibly selective and restricted. Diversity Arts Australia's *Shifting the Balance* 2019 report found that culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) peoples make up only 14 per cent of leadership roles in the literature and publishing sector. CALD peoples include 'first, second or third generation migrants or members of ethnic communities' and anyone Australian-born who engages with a cultural heritage that is not Anglo-Australian (Diversity Arts Australia 2019, p. 7). The report found this group under-represented in the industry by 25 per cent, while only 3 per cent of respondents identified as First Nations peoples. This means that 83 per cent of leadership roles in publishing and literature are held by non-culturally or linguistically diverse peoples (ibid., p. 20). Similarly, a 2018 industry employment survey by *Books+Publishing* reported only 6 per cent of respondents identified as a person of colour (21 November 2018) and an anonymous collaborative Google document of Australian publishing wages (Hollingsworth 2020) shows only 15 per cent of contributors identify as BAME and no contributors have thus far identified as First Nations (see Appendix 1).

While this needs to be audited and overhauled by publishing houses at the recruitment stage, Raphael Mokades tells Danuta Kean in *Writing the Future* that 'the problem with just looking at recruitment is that it could be a sticking plaster on a gaping wound' and the culture of trade publishing as an industry needs to be reviewed (2015, p. 7). Tokenism and the additional work required of FNPOC staff—both administrative and

emotional—have been cited as reasons publishing is deemed an inhospitable and alienating industry for minority groups (Chowdhury 2020, pp. 50–52; Ibrahim 2018; Pham 2020). Interview respondent Roxy Ryan of Hardie Grant Books attests to this, stating that ‘fitting in to a culturally homogenous (white) employer can be difficult and stressful for diverse employees which can affect staff retention, progression and satisfaction’ (email 8 May 2021). To retain a diverse staff, then, and to see more First Nations and people of colour in leadership positions, the culture of the industry must first become more hospitable to such diversity.

Kate Thompson, Strategy and Innovation Director at Hardie Grant Media, explained in an interview for this report that ‘People are habitual and things like unconscious bias, as well as many other biases and heuristics, are at play. In practice, this means that publishers could have a preference to operate habitually and without giving explicit awareness and attention to broader cultural issues, opportunities or talent’ (email 8 May 2021). Diversifying staff in senior positions and leadership roles—those with the most power and influence in decision making—would not only demonstrate that such career development is possible for people of colour at junior levels but would create a ‘pipeline’ effect that would work towards making trade publishing as a career more inclusive and accessible (Chowdhury 2020, p. 54). Meaningful change should instead begin at the top of the publishing food chain as ‘efforts being made at entry-level are failing to filter through to the wider trade’ (Spread the Word 2015, p. 21). Without such work, retention of FNPOC employees and, in turn, their career progression to senior positions, will remain a major obstacle to achieving widespread diversity across the industry.

Initiatives

While there are numerous schemes in place at publishing houses that aim to diversify our bookshelves by encouraging, acquiring and publishing authors of colour, this report

focuses on the initiatives by Australian publishing houses that specifically target diversity in the industry's workforce.

Hachette Australia's Summer Internship Program

In November 2020, Hachette Australia took on its first intern under its new Summer Internship Program. This unique annual internship is a paid, full-time placement at Hachette Australia's Sydney office, working 38 hours per week for an entry-level wage. Interns report directly to Hachette's CEO, Louise Sherwin-Stark, and gain experience in all departments, including editorial, production and sales. It is the first of its kind in Australia to not only tackle the problem of unpaid internships but the issue of diverse recruitment generally. Launched via a virtual event on Facebook and YouTube during which Hachette staff discussed the various roles within the publishing industry and what each entail—a highly accessible campaign in itself—it is designed for and open to anyone with an interest in a publishing career, regardless of age, education, qualifications or prior experience. This targeted effort by Hachette Australia to engage a wider audience of industry hopefuls by launching its program via social media lays the groundwork for the Australian industry to move beyond traditional avenues to reach potential employees and attract applicants who are perhaps unfamiliar with the usual channels through which the publishing sector advertises internships and job positions. Furthermore, the internship's lack of prerequisites for eligibility, as well as Hachette Australia's distribution of a highly detailed FAQ booklet of information and guidance for applications, encourages diversity through its inherent accessibility. With this program Hachette Australia has effectively created an internship that not only confronts the major obstacles to diversity but also supports and assists those from diverse backgrounds to apply.

Broader industry strides

A comparable publishing initiative to Hachette's Summer Internship is the new industry-wide Open Book program, a paid publishing internship spearheaded by multiple publishing organisations, including the Australian Publishing Association, multinational houses and small presses. Funded by the Copyright Agency's Cultural Fund and the

Australia Council, it is offering two paid placements for a six-month duration, one in Sydney and one in Melbourne, at a range of commercial and small publishing houses, literary agencies and festivals. This is the first Australian scheme to involve numerous industry organisations and provide extensive work experience in multiple areas, companies and positions within publishing. Following the lead of Hachette's Summer Internship, it does not require applicants to have any previous industry experience, nor a high school or university qualification, in a widespread effort to introduce candidates from diverse backgrounds to a career in the publishing sector.

Removing the requirement for a university education is paramount to an inclusive workforce, as Hardie Grant's Kate Thompson explains: 'The primary challenge is internal: significant change is required to transform a workforce and instil new behaviours at scale. This could include, but is not limited to, policy developments such as removing the need for people to be university educated [...] or offering training within the workplace; expanding recruitment from traditional channels to include more diverse sources; or introducing new employment or internship programs...' (email 8 May 2021). While publishing houses in general recognise the innate problems in requiring interns and staff to be university educated and are gradually creating schemes that reflect this understanding, other beneficial initiatives have been created for current FNPOC students and graduates in Australia. The University of Queensland Press (UQP) launched its Indigenous Placement Program in 2020, offering one Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander university graduate a year-long position in its Marketing and Publicity team. Similarly, through the CareerTrackers Indigenous Internships Program, Hardie Grant offers 12 weeks of paid employment to a university student over the course of their degree, with a view to full-time employment after graduation.

Further, Hardie Grant has approached Australian universities and their Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Coordinators to seek First Nations applicants for their Indigenous Trainee Editor Program, a new three-year training program, likely for university graduates, that will include on-the-job editorial training. This follows Magabala Books, Australia's leading Indigenous publishing house, which announced a cadetship in 2020 for First Nations peoples interested in a career in publishing, due to launch for its

first cadet this year. Made possible by funding from the Western Australian government and various grants, Magabala's cadetship is a two-year program that offers training across all areas of the industry with the aim of establishing more Indigenous peoples as publishing professionals. Recently, there has also been a move towards building safe and inclusive spaces for FNPOC publishing employees and freelancers in response to the majority-white culture of the industry. The FNPOC in Publishing Network was created in 2020, mirroring the UK's BAME in Publishing group, to establish 'a vital and valuable resource for all members to navigate the myriad complexities of the Australian publishing landscape while being a person of colour' (*Books+Publishing*, 13 November 2020) while connecting and providing a private and supportive environment for FNPOC staff.

Conclusion

There have been substantial advances in diversifying Australia's trade publishing sector in recent years and paid internships with flexible eligibility and groups like the FNPOC in Publishing Network are already shifting the industry's building blocks to make it more accessible and inclusive. As Roxy Ryan of Hardie Grant Books explained, paid internship programs, a genuine commitment to diverse employees in key decision and commissioning roles and a general move away from requiring university education are vital to trade publishing achieving more diversity in its workforce (interview via email 8 May 2021). Further change is still required, however, and Australian initiatives for unconscious bias and sensitivity training, support programs for staff and freelancers and specific opportunities and training for FNPOC employees remain meagre compared to our publishing counterparts around the world.

While publishing houses like Hardie Grant currently offer training in unconscious bias, we are yet to see, for example, Diversity and Inclusion Managers appointed in Australia, as has been done by Hachette in the United Kingdom and Simon & Schuster and HarperCollins in the United States, which would facilitate changes to a workforce culture that has been cited as unapproachable and alienating for people of colour. Further,

although it has been increasingly recognised that ‘the trend in publishing more diverse Australian voices and stories has outpaced the growth and development of editors, publishers and sensitivity readers with similar (or comparable) experiences’ (Larson 2020), systemic change is still required by Australian publishing houses and organisations to address this disparity, including equitable and fairer wages to retain FNPOC staff and build a diverse workforce across the entire industry (Pham 2020). It is important to recognise that although the work is still in progress, there is indeed work being done, and through an ongoing commitment by the trade publishing sector to combat the white standard of its workforce, meaningful change can and will occur.

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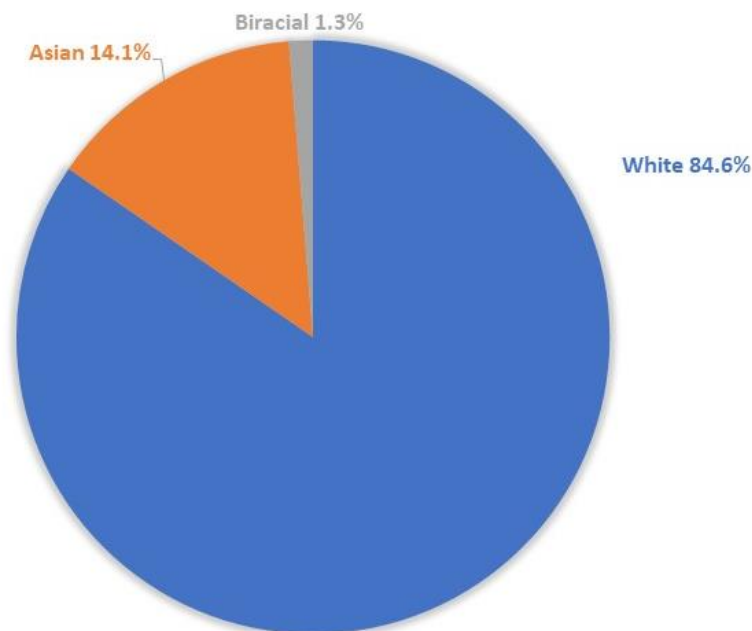
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Appendixes

Appendix 1

Graph of data collected by Sarah Hollingsworth in the Google document *Australian publishing wages, 2020*

AUSTRALIAN PUBLISHING WAGES: ETHNICITY OF RESPONDENTS



Appendix 2

Industry Analysis Interview Questions – Hardie Grant

Respondents:

- Fiona Hardie – Co-Founder & Director, Hardie Grant
- Kate Thompson – Strategy & Innovation Director, Hardie Grant Media
- Roxy Ryan – Group Managing Director, Hardie Grant Publishing

Questions:

- Q1. In your opinion, what are some aspects of the Australian publishing industry that are responsible for its lack of diversity?
- Q2. What do you believe are the biggest challenges faced by publishers in diversifying their workforces?
- Q3. Are there currently any initiatives within Hardie Grant to employ more people of colour and people of diverse ethnicities? If yes, please explain the scheme(s) and its/their outcome(s), if known.
- Q4. In your opinion, what obstacles are potentially impeding the acquisition and publication of works by diverse authors?
- Q5. Are there currently any initiatives within Hardie Grant to acquire and publish more diverse authors? If yes, please explain the scheme(s) and its/their outcome(s), if known.
- Q6. From your experience working in Australian publishing, what kinds of meaningful change must occur for the industry as a whole to become more diverse?