

Impact Report 2021

Your support.
Our stories.
Their success.



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Our commitment to donors

RMIT Philanthropy connects our community of supporters - donors, staff, alumni, industry partners and students - with University initiatives they are passionate about, to deliver strategic funding and support that advances RMIT's ambitions.

To ensure that RMIT Philanthropy protects the University's interests and maintains the respect, trust and confidence of our supporters, we make the following commitments:

- All RMIT fundraising activities will abide by the [CASE Principles of Practice and Statement of Ethics](#).
- We will not seek or accept philanthropic support that compromises our fundamental values and principles, including that of academic freedom, or where there is a likelihood of reputational damage, financial loss, or illegal or unethical activity.
- Any philanthropic gifts accepted will meet the University's legislative and policy requirements and support RMIT strategic objectives.
- All philanthropic gifts will be used effectively and ethically in line with donor wishes and any applicable cultural protocols. Where it is no longer practicable or appropriate to use a gift for its intended purpose, we promise to remain as true as possible to the supporter's original intentions and stipulations.
- Every philanthropic gift or pledge made to the University will be receipted in a timely manner, as well as acknowledged in line with the size and designation of the gift or pledge, and in accordance with donor wishes.
- Donors will be kept informed of the use and impact of their giving, and offered opportunities to meaningfully connect with the University and its mission.
- Donors will be kept informed about RMIT, its evolving priorities and strategy, services, events and achievements.
- We will comply with all relevant privacy laws and regulations, respecting the privacy of all donors. Donor details will be treated confidentially and not shared with any third party without their explicit permission. Any request to be removed from contact lists, or to limit the number and types of contact with us will be respected and actioned promptly.
- All donated funds will be invested in accordance with the RMIT Investment Strategy and the Responsible Investment Principles. RMIT will, upon request, share its most recently published financial statements with donors.

Thank you for standing with us

We live in a time of unrelenting challenge and it has made me more appreciative than ever of what is constant in our life and work. At RMIT, the extraordinary support of our donor community has remained steadfast. Your generosity continues to allow our students, researchers and innovators to reach new heights, and has supported the University in the face of unprecedented complexity.



RMIT was established through a £5,000 gift from Francis Ormond and the support of working people who donated their hard-earned dollars to an institution created just for them. This legacy of giving continues with every donation you make, ensuring that RMIT remains one of Australia's most trusted tertiary institutions for generations to come.

It's a terrific privilege to serve in this role until we welcome Professor Alec Cameron in early 2022. The Vice-Chancellor's Executive is grateful for the strong legacy of Professor Martin Bean and the close guidance of RMIT's Council as we navigate this time with true clarity of purpose. The impact of the pandemic has been deep in our sector and the communities in which we're embedded. We are determined to play a significant role in the social and economic recovery ahead, and we'll bring our resilience and adaptive spirit to the task.

Your ongoing support and partnership throughout this journey will ensure we deliver the same great education and research in ways that are fit for the times. In recognition of your contribution to the University, we have restructured the RMIT Philanthropy Fund to increase governance and deliver focused growth to maximise your support. We are also committed to improving transparency around the impact of your

giving, so you understand exactly how your gifts make a difference and who they support. These are two of many steps we are taking to improve your experience.

Thank you for believing in RMIT and the work that we do. Thank you for standing with us through the toughest of years. Most of all, thank you for offering our students, researchers and staff such incredible support and generosity. Your contribution is making a significant impact on today and tomorrow.

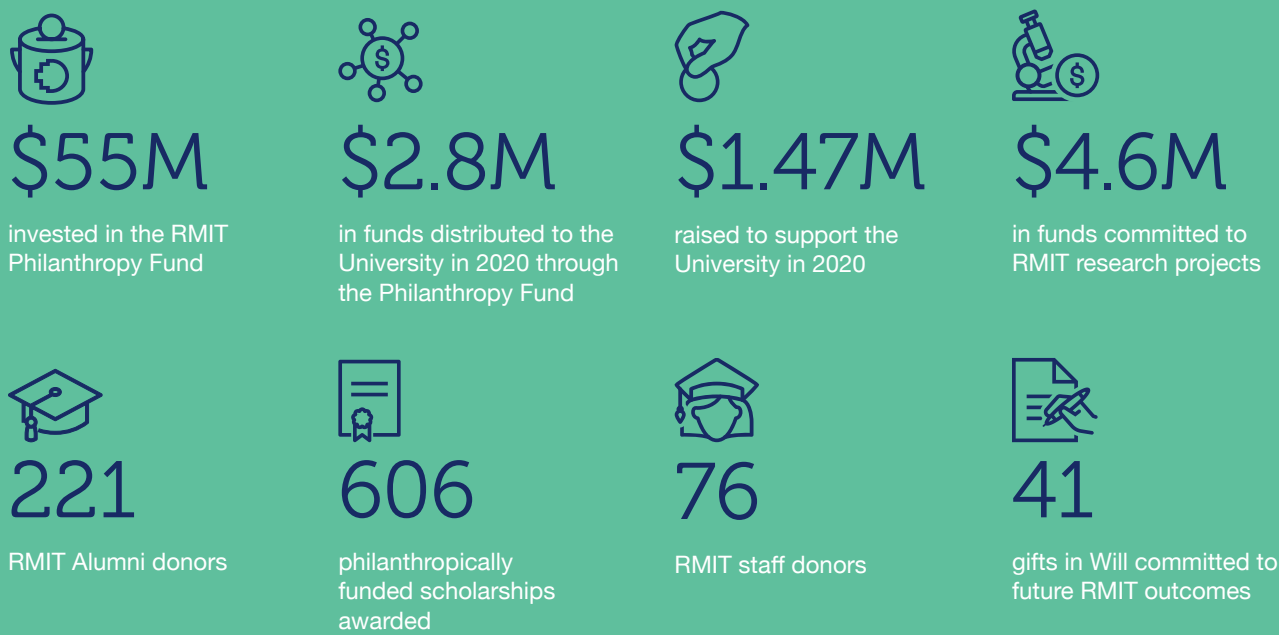
Best wishes,

Dionne Higgins

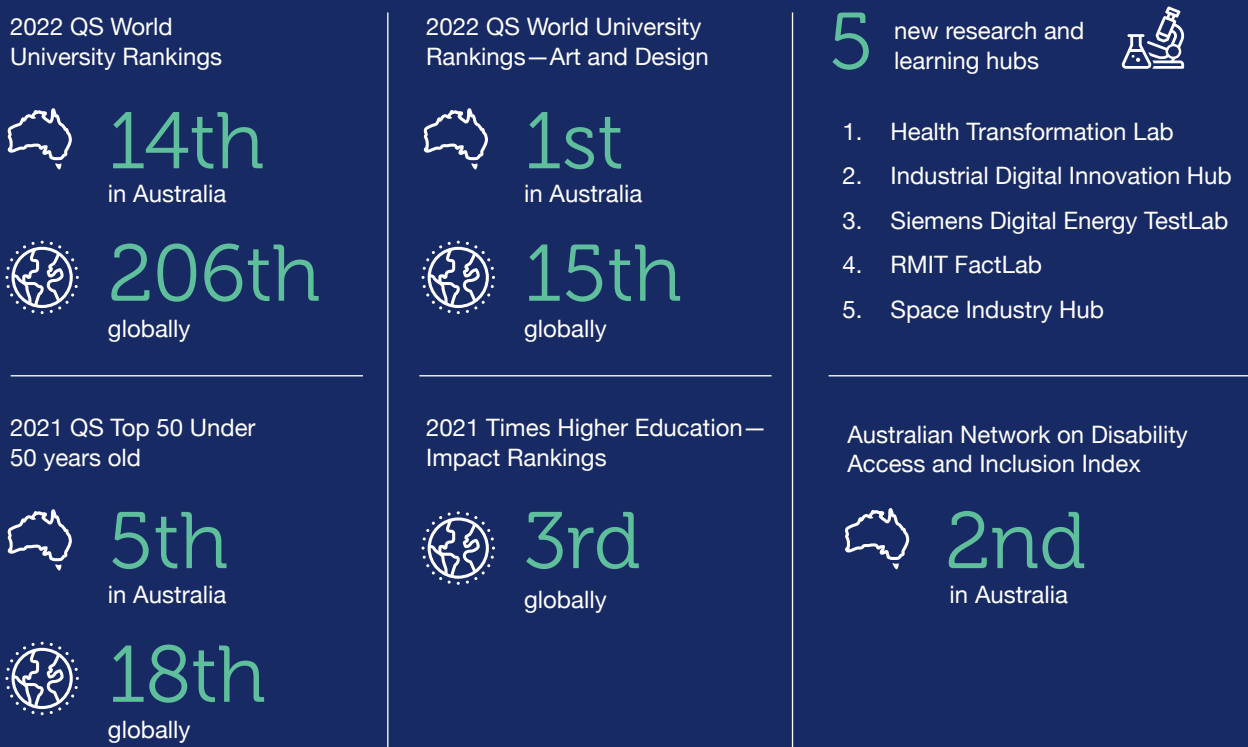
Interim Vice-Chancellor and President

Last year by the numbers

The impact of your giving



A global university of excellence



We appealed, you responded!

In an unprecedented and challenging year, you showed up for our students, generously supporting them when they needed it most.

At the beginning of 2020, we could never have guessed that by April, remote work and study would be the norm, and by May, our community would need critical support.

As the University expanded the RMIT Student Hardship Assistance and Equity Scholarship funds to provide \$15 million in immediate support for students impacted by COVID-19, we reached out to you through the Student Hardship Appeal. Though times were tough, you donated \$35,559 and combined, these funds awarded more than 8,000 grants to students in need.

Alumnus and donor Dr Onisha Patel supported the appeal in honour of the education she received at RMIT.

"I am grateful for the education I received as an international student at RMIT, which has allowed me to be where I am today. I'm giving back for the students who are doing it tough right now."

By the end of 2020, we truly appreciated the impact frontline workers make and committed to supporting the next generation through our Frontline Scholarships Appeal. RMIT alumnus and donor Michael Efron pledged \$5,000 to match your Appeal donations - doubling their impact - as part of his continual commitment to supporting our students. You rose to this challenge, raising an incredible \$19,093 to support two frontline scholarships.

Diploma of Nursing student Pia and Bachelor of Social Work (Honours) student Gary are already benefitting from your support and grateful that you're helping them succeed in their studies.

"Nursing is rewarding and at times challenging, but having a positive influence in people's emotional and physical wellbeing is something I've aspired to."



Pia

"Words can't tell you how much I appreciate this Scholarship. Thank you for helping us students not only with our studies, but to lead better lives. This support means we can focus on our goals and dreams."



Gary

This year, we debuted RMIT FactLab, Australia's first research and teaching hub entirely dedicated to fighting misinformation. The COVID-19 crisis has brought with it a pandemic of misinformation and RMIT FactLab will make sense of the nonsense, debunk the fake news and call out the spin. Its popular CoronaCheck newsletter has become the go-to for critical pandemic news including the vaccine rollout, and the team are working on new tools to fight misinformation before it becomes embedded and legitimised. So far, you've raised over \$15,000 and counting to fight damaging misinformation and disinformation.

Throughout the past year, you've continued to show up and your swift response to our pandemic-related appeals is changing lives for the better. Thank you.

To read about what's next for RMIT Philanthropy, see page 15.

Celebrating our staff donors

Meet three RMIT staff members whose passion for education inspired them to give back.



Staff Donor: Frank Kennedy

Our staff community is dedicated to delivering great student outcomes and for Professor Supriya Singh, Frank Kennedy and Lara Rafferty, this passion inspired them to join our donor community.

Associate Deputy Vice Chancellor Strategy and Innovation for the College of Business and Law, Frank Kennedy drives the strategic direction of the College. He became an RMIT donor upon joining the University, establishing two Prizes: the Frank Kennedy Prize for Best International Marketing Student and the Frank Kennedy Prize in Bachelor of Management (Marketing).

"I feel the need to give back in as many ways as I can and supporting future leaders in their education is a great investment that connects me with students and our programs.

"I believe everyone should have the opportunity to participate in education and all the experiences and activities that higher education offers."

Professor Supriya Singh was also inspired to support future leaders by establishing three Scholarship programs. The Inder Kaur Resilience Scholarship gives women who are refugees, migrants, family violence survivors or experiencing financial and educational disadvantage the

"Frank, thanks again for your recognition with this Prize. I was very humbled to receive it. It was reassuring that my competencies were recognised and it gave me a lot of confidence to continue working hard and doing my best work."

Harrison Jennings, Frank Kennedy Prize in Bachelor of Management (Marketing) recipient

support they need to continue their education. The Inder Kaur Reconciliation Scholarship supports Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women in similar circumstances. The Inder Kaur Scholarship supports disadvantaged students, focusing its support on refugees.

An accomplished researcher with a special interest in the sociology of money, Supriya named the Scholarships after her mother,

whose quest for an education changed her life and those of her daughters.

"For many years, I didn't realise the courage my mother had to pursue an education as a refugee in a patriarchal society.

"After she died, I realised what a wonderful gift I'd been given to have a mother who valued education and made it a priority for us.

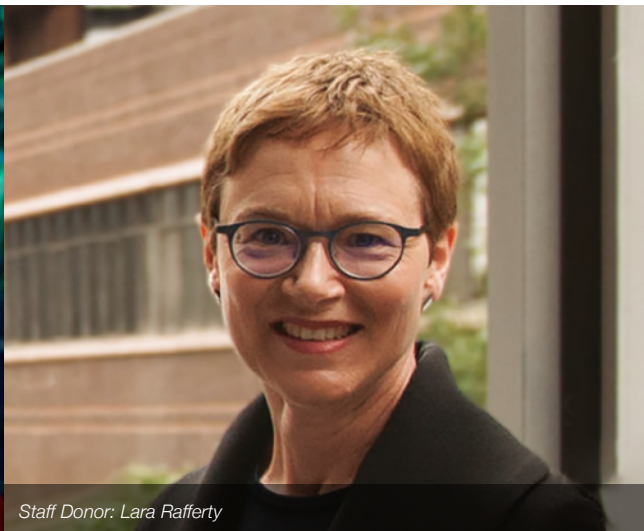
"Through these Scholarships, I hope I can pass on that gift and empower future generations of women through a great education."

As Associate Director Equity and Inclusion, Lara Rafferty has seen firsthand the impact scholarships have on students. Her team ensures that students from a variety of backgrounds and circumstances can attend RMIT and succeed in their courses.

"I donate to the scholarships program because I see the impact for individual students, especially those who are under-represented, such as students with disabilities; from regional, remote or low social economic status areas; who have Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander heritage; or women in STEM.



Staff Donor: Professor Supriya Singh



Staff Donor: Lara Rafferty

"Thank you so very much for helping me. Life has been hard and this Scholarship has meant that instead of worrying about how I am going to support myself, I have been able to complete my studies."

Lauren Calleja, Inder Kaur Reconciliation Scholarship recipient

"We did an analysis of scholarships to determine if they supported students experiencing educational and financial disadvantage to succeed.

"I'm very happy to say that scholarships had an overall positive impact on student retention and success, which for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students or students from a low socio-economic status background, was even greater."

By expanding and deepening their impact at RMIT, each has felt the benefits of supporting our students.

"One of my recipients was the first in her family to go to university, another the first to get a graduate education," said Supriya.

"It gives me great pleasure to think I have made a difference in their lives, and sharing my resources with others has shown me that I am rich in many ways."

For Lara, it's satisfying to offer practical and immediate assistance to students through her donations.

"It's easy to make a fortnightly donation through your pay and this support could be the difference between someone completing their studies or not, especially for those who are first in their family to pursue tertiary education."

Frank sees the time, effort and emotion staff put into creating the best possible experiences for students, and says he felt even more connected to that mission after becoming a donor.

"By supporting students through these Prizes, I felt a deeper connection to them and their achievements," said Frank.

"I'm proud to think that one day, my contribution may help a student differentiate themselves in the market and land a dream role."

"Receiving a scholarship made me feel amazing! It really helped me so much, especially after losing my job due to the pandemic. This scholarship made me feel equal to other students, as I could afford to buy the equipment needed and not feel left behind in class."

Elizabeth, RMIT Humanitarian Visa Scholarship recipient

Legacy of generosity

RMIT celebrates the legacy of five community members and the impact that gifts in their honour will have on generations of students.

When beloved members of our staff and alumni communities pass away, their connection to RMIT can inspire loved ones to leave gifts in their honour to support the University.

These gifts extend the impact these staff and alumni had beyond their lifetimes, supporting our students today so they can become tomorrow's leaders and change makers.

Here we celebrate the lives of five incredible people and the legacies they leave at RMIT.



Amber Gooding

From an early age, RMIT alumnus Amber had a creative spirit, which developed into a lifelong passion that inspired and motivated her. A talented photographer, she was also skilled in design and music, with a love of travel and exploring as many cultures and places as possible. In the midst of her Bachelor of Arts (Photography) at RMIT, Amber secured a coveted exchange at Parsons School of Design in New York, incorporating her love of photography and travel into a once in a lifetime experience.

In her honour, the Gooding Family has established the Amber Gooding Global Experience Scholarship. Each year, it will support one Master of Photography student to embark on an international study tour, allowing them to follow in Amber's footsteps and enjoy a unique learning experience abroad.

The Gooding's believe that Amber would be delighted with the opportunities this Scholarship will offer students and are excited that her passion, kindness and generosity will live on through this gift.

"Losing Amber has left a massive void in our lives and knowing how much she still had to give led us to establish this Scholarship in her name. Amber thoroughly enjoyed her time at RMIT and connected professionally and personally with so many students. We hope that giving them the opportunity to travel and learn will inspire future generations to fully embrace life the way Amber did and ensure that no day is wasted in the limited time we have."



Marieluise Jonas

A Senior Lecturer in Landscape Architecture at RMIT, Marieluise is remembered as an educator who was passionate about learning and creating opportunities for others through sharing knowledge and cultural exchange. She inspired many with her love and understanding of Asian urbanism and sensitive exploration of dynamic landscapes, most notably in her work with tsunami-affected communities in northern Japan.

Founded by her friends and colleagues, Claire Martin, Heike Rahmann and Mark Jacques, the Marieluise Jonas Global Practice Scholarship in Landscape Architecture honours her work by offering landscape architecture students the opportunity to undertake an international internship in landscape architectural practice or self-guided research and exploration.

Claire, Heike and Mark feel that Marieluise would be both humbled and excited to see her passion live on through this Scholarship.

"What better way to recognise Marieluise's legacy than through the generosity of the landscape architecture community in support of learning and personal growth. We hope it strengthens the canon of landscape architecture through an appreciation of her contribution to pedagogy and a speculation about future practice. But most importantly we hope it creates life-changing opportunities that recognise emerging leadership and evolve Marieluise's legacy."



David Phillips

For more than 25 years, David changed lives by teaching English at RMIT Training. A cherished son, brother and uncle, David was committed to issues of social justice and had a wide range of interests including football (both AFL and soccer), playing the guitar and the financial markets. Known for his intellect, sensitivity and wit, David was a beloved member of the RMIT Training team and his unexpected passing resulted in an outpouring from colleagues.

For Lisa and Fiona Phillips, it reinforced the impact David had as a teacher and colleague, and the significance of RMIT Training to his life. In honour of this, Lisa and Fiona established the David Phillips Memorial Scholarship to assist students from refugee, migrant or disadvantaged backgrounds to acquire English language skills at RMIT.

Lisa and Fiona imagine that David would be proud though humbled to see students supported in his name.

“David was a passionate believer in the life-changing value of English language acquisition, so establishing this Scholarship seemed like a perfect way to honour his work and life. We hope that it helps students from refugee, migrant or underprivileged backgrounds acquire English language skills and make a better life for themselves.”



Gina Solomon

Joining VicRoads after graduating from RMIT, Gina quickly became a valued member of the team and went on to contribute to some of Major Road Project Victoria's (MRVP) most important transport projects. Known as a quiet yet diligent expert in her field and nicknamed ‘the brain's trust’ by colleagues, Gina was beloved for her honesty, integrity and dry sense of humour.

A planning and environment specialist by trade, Gina loved the outdoors and had a particular passion for bushwalking and hiking. To recognise her contribution to transport infrastructure across Victoria and passion for the environment, the Solomon Family and MRPV came together to establish the Gina Solomon Scholarship in Environment Studies. It will offer a female undergraduate student support to succeed in their environmental or conservation-related studies. The recipient may also be offered paid work and professional development from MRPV as part of the Scholarship.

Though Gina was a quiet achiever, her MRVP colleagues believe she would be honoured by this acknowledgement of her work.

“We established this Scholarship in recognition of Gina's contribution to transport infrastructure across Victoria and her dedication and passion for the environment. We hope it gives a student who shares Gina's passion for planning and the environment the opportunity to commence a rewarding career that contributes to conservation.”



David Turnbull

An RMIT alumnus and celebrated Local Government Planner and Executive, David was known for dedicating his career to enhancing and strengthening communities. Loved and admired for his intellect, humanity, and calm and considered approach no matter the issue, David leaves behind an incredible legacy in the cities he planned and the communities he fostered.

David was an inspiring Director of Planning at City of Hume (formerly Shire of Bulla) and City of Whittlesea, leading a vision for growth area planning that saw the creation of many liveable communities. He progressed to Chief Executive positions with City of Whittlesea and Mitchell Shire, providing strong organisational leadership during his distinguished career. He championed promoting better outcomes in both established and growing suburbs.

To honour his contribution, David's friends, family, colleagues and community came together to establish the David Turnbull Memorial Prize. It supports exceptional final year Bachelor of Urban and Regional Planning (Honours) students with a passion for community building. David's family feels that he would be proud to see his leadership in community planning carried on through future generations.

“This Prize will not only support students, but signal to them how one can conscientiously progress a planning career and expand their opportunities to better communities. David had a long-term interest in supporting and mentoring students and young professionals, and this Prize will carry on that tradition for years to come.”

Building urban biodiversity and resilience



Thanks to philanthropic support, Professor Sarah Bekessy's cutting-edge research is exploring the intersection between urban design, planning and biodiversity.

We've all felt the joy of spending time in nature – the sights and sounds, its calming and inspiring influence. However, with recent requirements to stay closer to home and the reality of cities expanding into rural areas, our opportunities to engage with the great outdoors are evaporating.

The need to incorporate nature into our urban and suburban areas is clear, but the role biodiversity can play in planning and development has yet to be widely explored.

Enter Professor Sarah Bekessy, a conservation biologist passionate about the benefits of biodiversity and the innovative ways we can weave critical ecosystems back into our neighbourhoods.

"We stand to lose a lot of biodiversity if we don't actively enhance habitats in and around our cities, rather than offsetting nature into rural areas," says Professor Bekessy.

"Even the most densely populated parts of our city can provide critical habitat for native species if designed correctly.

"We need to create intentional spaces, street to street, community to community, so wildlife can thrive alongside people."

Thanks to visionary funding from the Myer Foundation, Professor Bekessy developed innovative industry protocols to support architects, developers and city planners in effectively incorporating biodiversity into their projects.

Subsequent funding from the Ian Potter Foundation and the Naylor-Stewart Ancillary Fund has taken her work to the next level.

Mr Charles Goode AC, Chairman of The Ian Potter Foundation says the Foundation's Board is pleased to support this collaborative research project that is focused on incorporating biodiversity considerations into urban planning and development.

"This demonstration project is expected to provide strong evidence to support biodiversity sensitive urban design and demonstrate to existing industry developers the social, economic and environmental benefits of preserving biodiversity on site rather than the standard practice of biodiversity offsetting," he said.

Professor Bekessy has also partnered with two major landholders/developers - Yarra Valley Water and Lendlease – to weave biodiversity into their latest projects.



“Even the most densely populated parts of our city can provide critical habitat for native species if designed correctly.”

Professor Sarah Bekessy

“Yarra Valley Water and Lendlease are co-funding the work that RMIT is undertaking and providing key case studies on Melbourne’s urban fringe to demonstrate new approaches to enhancing urban ecology in urban development through biodiversity sensitive urban design.

“They are championing this work and using our protocol to incorporate solutions that enhance on-site biodiversity and improve the likelihood that native species and ecosystems will persist in urban landscapes.

“It signals a big shift in the industry and will progress us beyond green buildings to intentional planning that aims to protect and bring back critical native species.”

Through these projects, Professor Bekessy hopes to inspire a fundamental shift in urban planning and development that puts biodiversity at the forefront.

“The ideas we’re trialling now are providing the evidence that shows it’s cost effective and beneficial to incorporate native species into development design.

“My long-term aim is to formalise ‘biodiversity sensitive urban design’ as an approach adopted by architects, developers and governments to ensure that every development can be net positive, onsite, for biodiversity.

“Not only will this protect native species and ecosystems, it will also deliver impressive benefits to individuals and communities, including health and wellbeing benefits, cooling and air and water purification.

“Bringing nature back into cities is also an important opportunity to generate sense of place, to re-enchant urban residents with the very idea of nature and to tell important cultural stories about the land we reside on.”

The enduring gift of good culture

The University's hub for creativity and design, RMIT Culture is bringing unique cultural experiences to Melbourne and supporting generations of artists through philanthropy.

A thriving arts and culture scene has the power to define a city, as Melburnians well know. Yet many don't know that RMIT is home to one of the city's beloved cultural venues, The Capitol, and a significant range of galleries and collections.

RMIT Culture unites these cultural spaces, creative programs and collections for public engagement and enjoyment. It also supports the University's creative learning and teaching activities and disseminates related research.

A number of the cultural assets managed and maintained by RMIT Culture were gifted to the University, and some of its programs are philanthropically funded.

Head of Cultural and Public Engagement at RMIT Paula Toal is inspired by the generosity of these gifts and the creative legacy they leave for generations to come.

"Many of our prolific alumni artists or their families choose to donate their life's work – from automotive designs to jewellery and textile collections – to RMIT for current and future generations to study and enjoy.

"We take our responsibility to care for and showcase these collections, cultural spaces and programs seriously because they have great power to inspire students and audiences into the future."

RMIT Cultural Collections

The University is home to an impressive array of collections, each of which houses works by some of Australia's renowned artists and designers.

The **RMIT Design Archives** represent historical and contemporary design practices that tell the story of Melbourne as a design city. Highlights from the Archives include the works of RMIT alumnus Phillip Zmood and former Adjunct Professor Peter Corrigan.

Mr Zmood is one of Australia's most celebrated automotive designers and was the first Australian Director of Design at GM Holden. He was instrumental in their iconic muscle car designs including Monaros and Commodores, and gifted his portfolio to the Archives. Mr Corrigan was one of Australia's celebrated architects, and his works and collections were donated by his family, honouring his passion for the University and Melbourne.

The **AFI Research Collection** features an extensive collection of cinema and television materials from across the globe including film and television scripts, film promotional materials, festival catalogues, newspaper clippings and more.

At the onset of the pandemic, the team focused on extensive digitisation of the Collection so global film and television researchers and lovers could enjoy it in lockdown. These efforts were recognised at the 2020 Victorian Museums and Galleries Awards, where the team



McCraith House

was Highly Commended in The Archival Survival Award for Volunteer-Run Museums/Galleries category.

The **RMIT Art Collection** has been in existence for over 120 years and encompasses some of the finest examples of modern and contemporary art in Australia. Its more than 1,500 works include paintings, sculptures, photography, prints and drawings, gold and silversmithing and new media, and are a wonderful resource for education and research.

Last year, RMIT welcomed the donation of the Bluestone Collection of contemporary Australian craft. Significant to the University given its commitment to teaching and researching craft practice, the Collection is on display within RMIT's Carlton Library.

The Collection was started over 10 years ago by a dedicated group of craft supporters, who privately funded each purchase with the aim of building a collection that promotes current Australian craft exhibition practice and fosters critical dialogue.

Manager Collections and Archives Elizabeth Marsden says the RMIT Cultural Collections are an important reflection of the history, influence and impact of the University in design, screen research, and artistic practices.

"The RMIT Cultural Collections provide inspiration and enjoyment to current and future staff and students, and place RMIT within the wider Melbourne cultural context.



Bin Dixon Ward and Robyn Phelan



Hootan Heydari



The Capitol

"Our ongoing digitisation programs will make our Collections available to national and global audiences, so artists and creative practitioners the world over can enjoy these significant cultural assets."

Supporting artists

RMIT also has a long history of supporting artists and through partnerships with donors, offering them the funding and space they need to create.

The **Cultural Visions Grant** was established through a gift from RMIT alumnus and donor Ling Ang. The \$3,000 Grant supports students in realising an artistic project exploring the exchange of culture in Australia, highlighting diversity and encouraging awareness of different cultures.

The 2021 recipient, Varuni Kanagasundaram was thrilled to receive the Grant and complete her project.

"I am truly grateful to receive the Cultural Visions Grant that allows me to put forward the creative project *Ritual Drawing (Kolam)_Messages that Link*, engaging the RMIT community, with the support of the RMIT Culture team.

"The project brings to life a traditional ritual drawing that has its origins in South Asia, giving it a contemporary context.

"It hopes to convey what is embodied in displacement, transience, loss, uncertainty and meaning in connection to community and culture, particularly important in current times."

For artists and writers requiring a peaceful retreat, the **RMIT McCraith House Residency** program offers a unique opportunity to work at the historic mid-century house on Port Phillip Bay.

Gifted to RMIT by the Dixon-Ward Family, the home was commissioned by Gerald and Ellen McCraith and designed by modernist masters - and RMIT alumni - Chancellor and Patrick in 1955. It now serves as a getaway for Australian and international writers and artists to pursue their projects in a tranquil environment.

Graduate artist Hootan Heydari feels privileged to have spent time at McCraith House, especially after the difficulties of 2020.

"I was able to immerse myself into my practice for an entire two-week period in the amazing McCraith Butterfly House, looking out every day onto an ocean view, which is every artist's dream. I used my time at the residency to do uninterrupted research into my continuing project *Yeki Bood Yeki Nabood* (There Was One, There Wasn't One/Once Upon a Time) which began at the end of my Honours year at RMIT."

Public engagement

The Capitol was recently restored to its former glory thanks to the support of our donor community through The Capitol Theatre Appeal.

Though the pandemic saw its doors close for much of the past year, RMIT Culture has continued its creative connection to the community through online streamed events, film

screenings and digital exhibitions. They are also working with industry partners such as the Melbourne International Film Festival, Melbourne Writers Festival and Melbourne Design Week on 2022 events.

Plans are also underway to celebrate The Capitol's centennial in 2024.

Next year, RMIT Culture in partnership with UNSW are bringing **The Big Anxiety** to Melbourne. A world-leading mental health arts festival, The Big Anxiety is built around multi-year research and community engagement projects aimed at developing and implementing novel tools, technologies and experiences promoting mental wellbeing and recovery.

RMIT Culture's Manager, Partnered Projects Ali Barker says that the upcoming public engagement program will reflect RMIT's deep cultural ties and a desire to give back to the arts after such a challenging period for the sector.

"So many of the co-curated cultural experiences we are developing for our audiences in the coming year are through innovative projects with leading cultural partners, also showcasing RMIT's wealth of expertise.

"We look forward to sharing these experiences with the community as we emerge from the pandemic."

Supporting migrant entrepreneurs in a post-COVID economy



Associate Professor Afreen Huq



Dr. Ashenafi Biro

The pandemic-related shift from in-person to online business has left many migrant and refugee entrepreneurs behind. A new RMIT research project is exploring ways to upskill these entrepreneurs for success.

The pandemic has rapidly shifted most of our interactions online, with working from home and online shopping the new norm. For migrant and refugee entrepreneurs, adjusting to this shift and the impact of COVID-19 on their customers and communities has been difficult.

RMIT Associate Professor Afreen Huq says that migrants and refugees often become entrepreneurs because it is one of their best options for a sustainable livelihood.

"Refugees and low skilled migrants become 'necessity entrepreneurs' because they face several barriers such as lack of access to education and training, lack of social networks, and hostile institutional and societal environments. Hence, they are driven into entrepreneurship and forced to bear the burden of the associated risks," she said.

These risks were borne out last year, when lockdowns and restrictions put immense pressure on small business owners in Australia, who struggled in adapting to new ways of working and received little in the way of pandemic subsidies.

Recognising the need to support this community through the pandemic, Associate Professor Huq and RMIT Entrepreneurship Lecturer Dr Ashenafi Biro have joined forces on a new project that seeks to build the digital and financial management skills of migrant and refugee entrepreneurs to improve how they deliver value to their customers and sustain their businesses in the post COVID-19 economy.

Philanthropically funded by the Helen Macpherson Smith Trust, the project is a partnership with Migrant Women in Business and YGAP to co-design skills workshops that offer migrant and refugee entrepreneurs the skills for a digital world. The pilot will begin in late 2021 with 30 participants.

Associate Professor Huq is passionate about supporting this community because she was a skilled migrant in Australia.

"Though Australia is my home now, I understand how it feels to arrive in a new country and culture, and how hard it can be to establish yourself.

"Thanks to this funding from Helen Macpherson Smith Trust, we can generate impact in the migrant and refugee entrepreneur community and help them rebound after the pandemic," she said.

Upon completion of the trial, the co-designed resources will be evaluated, refined and shared with the Migrant Women in Business and YGAP member communities for greater impact.

"We're excited to develop these resources and share them with as many migrant and refugee entrepreneurs as possible," said Dr Biro.

"Everyone deserves an opportunity to succeed in this new world of business and if we give these entrepreneurs a little push in the right direction, wonders can happen," said Associate Professor Huq.



What's next for RMIT Giving?

As our Ready for Life and Work strategy comes to a close, we've worked with the RMIT community to shape the directions for our NEXT Strategy.

It's been a year of rapid and global change, one that has altered the role public institutions play in society. It was in this environment that we embarked on the process of developing RMIT's NEXT Strategy.

Over the course of 12 months, we spoke with students, staff, alumni, industry partners and community members to understand their ambitions for RMIT and discuss our role in responding to the societal challenges we face.

The past year has also been a difficult one for the tertiary education sector, and presented an opportunity for us re-evaluate how we can navigate and contribute to the pandemic recovery.

Through the many discussions and explorations, six clear directions have emerged to reflect the possibilities, and focus the way we finalise RMIT's NEXT Strategy in 2022:

- A mission-led University serving the community in a fast-changing landscape
- A lifelong learning revolution: RMIT's distinct multi-sector offering to students and alumni
- A new age of hybrid work and learning
- An adaptive RMIT that enables our diverse people and communities to succeed
- An impact-driven approach to research and innovation
- An inter-connected global and urban ecosystem.

Our Philanthropy team is working hard alongside us to support these directions through targeted fundraising initiatives that drive RMIT outcomes.

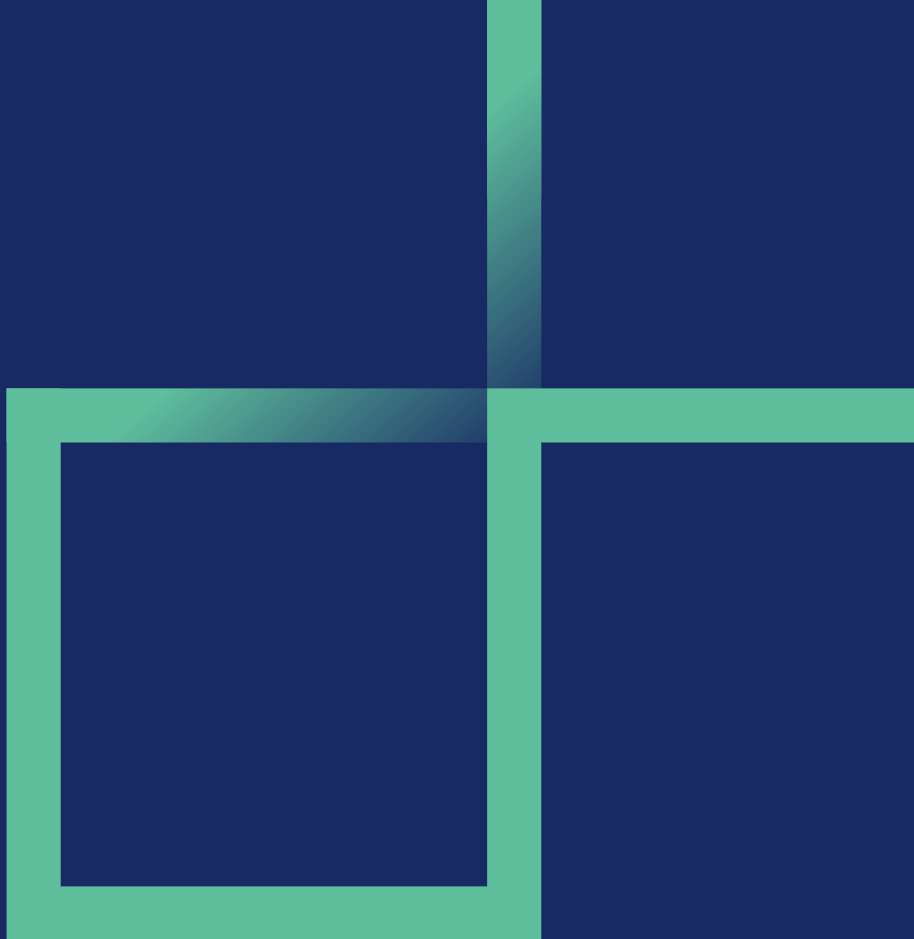
For example, as the COVID-19 pandemic brought with it a pandemic of misinformation, ongoing fundraising for RMIT FactLab is proving critical in the fight against fake news and to keep our communities informed of the truth in the fast-paced online environment.

Critical efforts to fundraise for access and equity scholarships are helping students who experience financial or educational hardship to succeed in their studies. RMIT's Diversity in STEMM initiative offers women and students from diverse backgrounds the opportunity to pursue world-changing professions across science, technology, engineering, mathematics and medicine. Together, these actions and investments are enabling a diverse community of students to enjoy a quality education and exciting future careers, helping to build a more inclusive society.

As we explore what's next for RMIT and Philanthropy, I want to thank you for empowering our community and supporting education, research, innovation and community excellence at the University. Your support is vital and greatly appreciated, as we begin this new chapter.

Tom Bentley

Philanthropy Fund Committee Chair
Executive Director, Policy & Impact
RMIT University



Our Mission

Aligning supporters' passions with RMIT expertise to realise the University's greatest ambitions.

Our Vision

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GPO Box 2476
Melbourne VIC 3001 Australia

+61 3 9925 5220

giving@rmit.edu.au