



WRITING THE FUTURE
CELEBRATING 25 YEARS OF
WOMEN IN TECHNOLOGY
1997-2022



Women in Technology (WiT) Queensland respectfully acknowledges and recognises Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as the Traditional Owners and Custodians of the lands, winds and waters where we live, learn and work. We pay our respects and acknowledge the important role of Elders past, present and emerging.

As a community, WiT believes diversity and inclusion adds richness to our lives. We celebrate, value and welcome people of all backgrounds, genders, cultures and abilities.

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Message from the Minister

I congratulate WiT on its 25 years of commitment to women and girls across Queensland.

Over 25 years, Women in Technology (WiT) has lived its commitment to empowering women and girls in the STEM industry to achieve their dreams and be recognised for their incredible achievements. This commitment is to be commended and celebrated.

Because of WiT's unwavering commitment, we have seen more women and girls provided opportunities to develop skills in STEM industries, an increase in female representation across technology boards, and we are now working together to engage more women and girls from rural and regional backgrounds in STEM mentoring opportunities. WiT's contribution to furthering the prospects for women and girls in STEM in Queensland has been invaluable.

I am delighted to be working with WiT to install a bronze statue of Dr Abigail Allwood outside the Brisbane Planetarium as demonstration of the Queensland Government's commitment to increasing representation of women in public spaces.

I congratulate WiT on its 25 years of commitment to women and girls across Queensland.



The Hon. Shannon Fentiman MP
Queensland Attorney-General and Minister for Justice, Minister for Women and Minister for the Prevention of Domestic and Family Violence

Women in Technology (WiT) creates exciting and meaningful opportunities to advance, connect and empower women from all branches of science and technology



Today, WiT has the strength and commitment to address entrenched gender barriers and drive change

The WiT Story

Once upon a time, not long ago, in a land not far away, a small band of pioneering women set out on an ambitious quest to shape their emerging new digital world, one colourful event at a time. Their insight, ingenuity and sheer determination have been helping to write the future for Australia's Women in Technology for the past 25 years.

As a peak community for professional women in Queensland, Women in Technology (WiT) creates exciting and meaningful opportunities to advance, connect and empower women from all branches of science and technology, ensuring they have fair access to the career opportunities and rewards offered by a technology-driven economy.

For 25 years, long before it was a focus on the socio-political agenda – WiT has been helping thousands of Australian women to realise their talent, achieve their potential and gain the recognition they deserve. Many members have achieved international success, while WiT's farsighted programs have been emulated around Australia and applauded internationally.

In recent years, there has been growing investment in schools and universities to attract and equip women to pursue a career across the broad kaleidoscope of science, technology, engineering, mathematics (STEM) and related fields. WiT has been encouraging these pathways for more than two decades, providing inspiring programs for women and girls to explore technology and life sciences career options, as well as for women facing the challenges of returning to work, those in middle levels wishing to advance their careers, and senior women taking on high-level leadership responsibilities.

WiT fills an important niche in the professional support resources available to these women, helping to nurture, guide and support them during their whole working life.

As a community, WiT's strength lies in the passion, energy and commitment of its members and volunteers who band together to provide collegial support and help each other build the knowledge, confidence and skills to succeed.



WiT was one of the first organisations in Australia to bring together women from all science and technology disciplines, at all ages and career stages, into a single inclusive community. Today, WiT's network of more than 9500 members and affiliates and 56,600 supporters, is one of the biggest and most diverse, with the strength and commitment needed to address entrenched gender barriers and drive change.

Happy 25th Birthday WiT!

RSL Queensland partners with WiT to support the growth, connection and inclusivity of women in the technology field. They enable us to open the door for existing employees to flourish, whilst also inviting new employees into our organisation where they can match their passion for technology with their desire to give back to a community who served for their country.

As an organisation that prides itself on being able to improve the lives of veterans and their families, it is an honour to partner with one that prides themselves on improving the lives of women in technology. It has been a privilege to partner with WiT and we congratulate them on their 25th anniversary.

RSL Queensland, Powered by Partner



Sonja Bernhardt and Joanne Sherman (front) 1997. Credit: David Kelly, The Courier Mail.



Libby Evans-Illidge takes the chair at Board Readiness™, 2007.



WiT and the Australian Computer Society faced off in the annual Great Debate (l-r) the late Jan Power of Brisbane markets fame, ACT Senator the Hon. Kate Lundy and Sonja Bernhardt prepare their pitch, 2002.

Inspired beginnings

Queensland software entrepreneur Sonja Bernhardt was in her 30s, a self-confessed university dropout and single parent who knew what it was like to be sacked from a corporate job and rise again to succeed in the “blokey” new world of computing. She hadn’t yet launched her multi-million dollar software business, or received her Order of Australia Medal for outstanding contribution to women in the industry, but she had built a successful executive career in Queensland’s fledgling information technology (IT) sector.

In late 1996, Sonja was rushed to hospital with life-threatening meningococcal meningitis. She was lucky to survive. But near-death experiences can make or break. For Sonja, it was just the fuel she needed to change her world. She wasted no time.

Two events in early 1997 were the catalyst she needed to get started. The first was a networking function run by the Australian Information Industries Association (AIIA).
“I felt overwhelmed by the number of males in suits...it seemed like I was surrounded by a huge dark, stormy cloud”. The second was a vigorous discussion over lunch with colleague, Jane Reid.

Sonja ran back from lunch “fired up” and determined to bring Queensland’s women in IT together. Most of her female colleagues were all too familiar with the discomfort of being the only woman at industry events and meetings, where it was often embarrassingly assumed they were there to make coffee or take notes.

The first call Sonja made was to the Queensland Government’s Information Industries Board (IIB) where she had previously worked as an advisor. Knowing the IIB had considerable influence and extensive industry contacts, she floated the idea of a forum for women in information technology and telecommunications (IT&T). IIB Director Brian Cordiner pointed Sonja to soon-to-be Executive Director Dr Elizabeth Manning who had funds earmarked to support a worthy initiative for women.

In April 1997, the IIB reached out to women in its network and hosted a gathering at its Brisbane offices to gauge interest. Today, the 10 women who attended that meeting are celebrated as WIT’s founders and they were quickly joined by other professional women from the corporate and government information and communications technology (ICT) sector, who shared their hunger for connection and change.

A steering group was formed, and the new organisation called itself Women in Information Technology. Its goal was *“to sustain an active network of women in the IT&T industry, facilitating career development and promoting enhanced industry management”* – and it did so, with a level of energy and creativity that sent ripples through the male-dominated computing industry and drew women like a magnet.

“As I lay in my hospital bed recovering, I started thinking about all the fascinating women I knew who were involved in technology, who didn’t know each other or even about each other, yet. I promised myself that on recovery I would do something about it.”

From *Girls Do IT Too!*
– A memoir by Sonja Bernhardt OAM, 2020

FOUNDATION MEMBERS April 1997*

Jenny Beresford	SMS Consulting
Sonja Bernhardt	Mincom Pty Ltd
Carolyn Hill	Dialog Pty Ltd
Bernadette Hyland	Plugged In Software Pty Ltd
Elizabeth Manning	Information Industries Board
Anne McGill	Information Industries Board
Yvonne Packbier	Information Industries Board
Joanne Sherman	THEMIS Law Chambers
Glenda Slingsby	Queensland Office of Women’s Affairs
Ann Uldridge	Praxa Ltd

SERVED ON THE FIRST WIT MANAGEMENT COMMITTEE 1997*

Sonya D’Aoust	Microsoft Pty Ltd
Jeanette McLeod	Department of Tourism and Small Business

*Note: Organisations current at the time

The Queensland Women in Information Technology network was formally launched on 9 May 1997 at a breakfast function at the Polo Club in Brisbane, one of the few private business clubs in the city that allowed female members. The WIT steering committee spread the word, hopeful they would attract 60 guests – more than 130 women turned up.

The launch speaker was the Queensland Law Foundation’s Technology Services Manager Joanne Sherman, who was setting up one of the first computer-based legal information systems. The dynamic mother of two was an IT innovator with a massive job ahead.

But it was Joanne’s candid personal revelations that set heads nodding and the room tittering, as she admitted putting her young children to bed in their school clothes so she could make it to the office on time in the mornings.

For many, the “supermum” syndrome was taking its toll as women juggled the demands of an unyielding corporate world with the pressure of being primary carers for children and running a home. Less than one in five IT workers were female and traditional corporate myopia ruled the workplace. Flexible work hours, parental leave and job-sharing were almost unheard of, and women were pushed to work longer and try harder if they wanted to break through the glass ceiling and achieve the recognition they deserved.

The WIT team didn’t miss the opportunity to canvas potential new members at the launch. A survey showed less than two per cent belonged to an industry or women’s organisation. This demonstrated what the founders had instinctively known – existing networks were not addressing the needs of women and there was real appetite for a group that was focused, active, action-oriented, and fast-paced enough to appeal to women in IT&T.

The first year of operations were formative and whirlwind under the guidance of Sonja as President and Ann Uldridge as Vice President. Some of the original steering group stepped back and new volunteers joined, contributing relentless time and energy to help shape and guide the organisation.

Special interest groups (SIGs) were formed with volunteer committees to handle the operational demands of Marketing, Executive Management, Education, and Technology. The Marketing SIG organised all events.

By 1998, WiT had 140 members and was kicking significant goals in pursuit of its equity agenda.

It was growing an active network of members, with a steady increase in the number of people attending WiT activities and events, frequent interaction with other IT associations and women's networks, and the first bold steps to expand into regional Queensland.

WiT was actively supporting the career growth of women in IT, with a practical and action-packed program ranging from professional development conversations for executive women, to networking and mentoring opportunities, and the first steps to increasing female presence in the boardroom.

It was shattering the nerdy image of IT and inspiring young women and girls to join the industry. Outreach events for school and university students were bold, ambitious and designed to open young minds and tantalise young women to consider an IT career.

WiT pushed to reshape attitudes in industry and took a strong lobbying and promotional role. It built connections with government and private sector partners, identifying opportunities for strategic alliances, funding and industry development. It promoted female industry voices, encouraged thought leadership and established media relationships to amplify WiT's position on key issues affecting the IT industry.

The organisation actively welcomed members, of all genders, who shared its vision for empowering and advancing women in STEM.

Most of WiT's members did not consider themselves "feminists". Nor did they relate to the bra-burning image the label conjured. Instead, their approach was all business, encouraging women to take power and control over their own destiny, and building positive partnerships and peer relationships that could help.

Dale Spender are you there?

"Dale was scheduled as the guest speaker at a WiT event. I had not met Dale at that stage but had read her profile: "

'Dale Spender is an Australian feminist scholar, teacher, writer'

... Well, I was terrified. I was so afraid that she might say something overly controversial and that WiT might face an unfavourable incident; I was literally shaking.

On reflection I may have been scared by the use of the word 'feminist' ... I had never thought of myself as one, nor labelled myself as such, but perhaps actions speak louder than labels. Though 'feminist' can mean many things, and what I do know is I was an individual doing things to help empower other women. Dale of course turned out to be magnificent, and so interesting that we formed a friendship."

From *Girls Do IT Too!* – A memoir by Sonja Bernhardt OAM, 2020

Profile

Bernadette Hyland-Wood

Bernadette Hyland-Wood nursed her newborn son on the deck of Sonya D'Aoust (Trau)'s home in Hawthorne, reflecting on life, career and the challenges of being a small business owner with the ambition to scale her Brisbane-based startup.

The gathering of women in Queensland's emerging ICT scene remains a vivid memory as they envisioned a new community to support like-minded women in digital technologies. Their fresh ideas and shared experiences would be instrumental in shaping WiT's cornerstone programs.

Only two years earlier, Bernadette had packed up her career as a software engineer in Silicon Valley and immigrated to Australia with her then new husband in search of adventures including SCUBA diving on the Great Barrier Reef and starting a business with their early Web knowhow.

Serial tech entrepreneur with heart

Australia was at the vanguard of Web adoption. Bernadette was co-founder and managing director of Plugged In Software and led the design and implementation of several of the Queensland Government's earliest websites, including the Office of Women's Affairs.

"Australia at the time was grappling with the tyranny of distance, which is why the Web offered so much promise," Bernadette said.

"For me, WiT offered the human dimension of working in digital communication. It connected otherwise disparate people who had a common bond in ICT.

"WiT has always represented a safe place to come together as colleagues and friends, welcoming women of all ages and cultural backgrounds. We didn't set out expecting to build something that would persist in perpetuity."

Bernadette returned to the US in 2002 on a quest to secure venture capital and opened a sales and marketing office in Virginia. She left her software engineering team running in Brisbane. The serial tech entrepreneur came home to Queensland in 2016, after successfully selling her business to a Fortune 100 company, and set about building an academic career in data science and digital media research.

She was drawn back to WiT as an award nominee the following year and, in 2017, received two WiT Awards for innovation and outstanding ICT achievement.



"It felt like coming home. If you are nominated for a WiT Award it is a really empowering experience because it causes you to reflect on your life and your achievements. As women, we often do not feel comfortable putting ourselves forward," she said.

Bernadette and the Plugged In Software team, 1997.



Birth of an industry

The distinctive chatter of fax machines and the tell-tale yodel of dial-up modems was the soundtrack of business life when Queensland's pioneering women in IT decided they needed a collective voice.

By the mid-1990s, the "recession we had to have" was over. The radical economic reforms of the Hawke–Keating Labor Government were furthered by the Liberal Coalition under Howard and Costello, driving competition in basic services including telecommunications. Australia's national telco changed its name from Telecom to Telstra and a wave of new providers flocked to the nation's deregulated market.

The mysterious World Wide Web, launched just a few years earlier, was still largely a playground for computer scientists and academics until the Internet took over Bill Gates' information superhighway in 1995, transforming business models and spawning a new breed of entrepreneurs.

Wi-Fi was invented and computers were doubling in speed every 18 months. Greater bandwidth opened an unimaginable flood of digital traffic and technology pioneers were exploring a brave new world of online possibilities that promised to transform the way Australians would live, work and play. It would still be five years before the first BlackBerry smartphone made its debut.

The *Australian Financial Review* described the 1990s as a decade of equity after the indulgent 1980s "decade of debt" and WiT certainly agreed when it came to achieving career equity for its members.

The digital world was ripe for the picking. Silicon Valley was booming and Downunder was becoming an attractive place for boundary riders at the frontier of digital innovation.

Framing the change

The Queensland Government responded to the tempo of change and was on the alert to ensure women did not get left behind – either socially or economically – in the wave of technology fervour.

In 1996, the Queensland Women's Unit moved from the Department of Premier and Cabinet to Treasury under the State's first female Deputy Premier and Treasurer the Hon. Joan Sheldon AM. As the first woman to lead a political party in Queensland, Joan Sheldon had blazed a trail for female Parliamentarians, paving the way for Anna Bligh to become the State's first female Premier, and for Anastacia Palaszczuk to follow as Premier and become Australia's longest-serving female head of government.

Moving the Women's Unit into Treasury was seen as particularly significant for WiT and its members because it reflected the State's new-found appetite to fund the economic advancement of women.

Queensland's incoming Minister for Communication and Information the Hon. Terry Mackenroth set up a new Ministerial advisory committee when he took on the portfolio in 1998. He invited WiT to join his industry consultation board, along with peak IT industry associations, the Australian Information Industries Association (AIIA)

and Australian Telecommunications User Group (ATUG), and encouraged all groups to send female representatives.

Following that first appointment, WiT has contributed to numerous State and national policy forums and has been a member of the Queensland Council of ICT Associations (CICTA), an umbrella body for the State's ICT industry associations, since the Council was formed in January 2005.

Data#3 Managing Director and prominent ICT industry leader John Grant shares his memories of the early days in the Queensland IT environment and working with the Queensland Government of the day:

"The first Queensland Government Advisory Group meetings included a number of notable Queensland IT groups and people, and Sonja Bernhardt and the WiT team were a key participant at the time."

This was the start of the Queensland Industry Workgroup (QIW) which has now become the Council of ICT Associations (CICTA), and WiT was, and continues to be, a key participant in Queensland Government initiatives and engagement. The WiT team always aimed at making the industry better and have helped grow the industry to where we are today.

This has been, and is, an amazing journey for all of us, filled with challenges and hard work but also with understanding and mutual respect, and with partners like WiT the road is much clearer.

So, can we simply say Thank You! We hope this collaboration continues for a long time and we look forward to a better future!"

Queensland CIO Peter Grant with the WiT Board and ICT Chapter Committee, 2013.



Glenda Stone



Founding WiT member Glenda Slingsby (Stone) authored the State's first Women in Technology Strategy in her role as Economic Policy Coordinator in Queensland Treasury's Office of Women's Affairs, led by Executive Director Meredith Jackson.

"Back then the focus was predominantly on social equality for women. Yet it was the Government's focus on technology and gender that I believe catapulted more of an emphasis on women's economic equality.

There was growing interest in gender way back then. Dale Spender wrote her book *Nattering on the Net* and I remember very clearly the gathering in a West End bookshop on a Saturday morning.

There was Dale, dressed in her signature purple, speaking ever so candidly, questioning why we say 'abort' when we needed to trash something on the computer – and why such patriarchal language prevailed regarding the use of technology.

At that time, there were few women in technology, but you relied on trailblazers like Bernadette Hyland, Spider Redgold, Dale Spender and Sonja Bernhardt, who were sprinkled very finely across industry and academia, to say: 'Hang on, we've got a huge opportunity.

If we band together, we can do something really amazing'. And so, it was the right connections of government, industry and academia, and Sonja that brought all the parts together and orchestrated a movement. When you look at the birth of WiT, it was innovative, and it was very much a right chapter at the right time.

But at that time – and remember there was no social media, or diversity policies, and few women's networks – the sentiment which prevailed was: 'I'm not a feminist. I'm not going to burn my bra. Women's libbers!'... Negative stereotypes of strong women with an opinion abounded. That was the world we were in at that time.

Even globally, progress for women was slow. Way back in 1997-98, few people had home computers and hardly anyone was on chat groups.

It was ironic because the only women I came across who were, were fabulous feminist academics with such insightful and intelligent discourse around feminism and new directions. Women who were truly embracing technology. Women who were really on the cusp of great things."

The relationship with the Queensland Government continued to build and, in 2014, the Minister for Science, Information Technology and the Arts the Hon. Ian Walker and WiT President Sue Johnston (2012-14) announced the first whole-of-government partnership. It was the culmination of a team effort led by ICT Chapter Chair Fiona Sheridan, with support from Queensland CIO Peter Grant, and Director General of the Department of Science, Information Technology, Innovation and the Arts, Sue Rickerby.

The arrangement was described as "an important step toward creating a clever, creative and connected Queensland" and provided WiT membership benefits for all female employees in the Queensland Government's ICT workforce – along with many others employed in public sector science and technology roles.



WiT Awards recipients meet with Queensland Minister for Science and Innovation Leeanne Enoch, 2015.

Minister Walker said: "Women already make a very significant contribution to Queensland's technology industries. However, research has shown that women make up less than 20 per cent of Australia's technology workforce and higher participation rates need to be encouraged and supported.

That's why I applaud the work and aspirations of WiT, one of Queensland's most respected and active technology industry associations and a peak body for women in the technology industry."

The whole-of-government membership arrangement has continued and the Queensland Government is an active and valued WiT partner.

Queensland was ahead of its time compared with Australia as a whole when it came to setting policy for Australian women in the workplace. Although the United Nations' International Labour Organization called for men and women to receive equal pay for work of equal value back in 1951, it was 18 years before Australia made the position law.

At the same time, minimum pay for women was set at 85 per cent of their male "breadwinner" counterparts.

In 1980, Australia signed the United Nations' Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women and moved to enforce the new rights with the *Sex Discrimination Act 1984*, tightening them further with the *Affirmative Action (Equal Employment Opportunity for Women) Act 1986*.

But it wasn't until 1999 that Australia passed the *Equal Opportunity for Women in the Workplace Act*, putting the onus on employers to promote the participation of women and introducing outcomes-based reporting. A 10-year review in 2009, showed that: women continued to be over-represented in study areas linked to lower-earning industries; female-dominated industries were undervalued; women were less likely to be in leadership positions; and, despite improvements, women's earnings remained persistently lower than for men. This resulted in a new *Workplace Gender Equality Act*, in November 2012, extending the law's coverage and tightening sanctions.

Statue announcement (l-r) Queensland Attorney-General and Minister for Women Shannon Fentiman, Kelley Knox, Malia Knox and WiT Chair Bec Langdon at the Brisbane Planetarium, April 2022.



Against this backdrop, women's participation in the general workforce grew but their participation in STEM continued to lag. In 2019, the Australian Academy of Science and the Australian Academy of Technology and Engineering developed the nation's first Women in STEM Decadal Plan, a national 10-year roadmap for achieving sustained increases in female participation and retention in STEM.

Profile

Ann Uldridge

After forty years in the IT industry, Ann Uldridge has facilitated investment in more than 60 high-tech startups in Queensland.

Starting out as a software engineer, then as a co-investor and employee of a multi-million dollar software corporation, followed by angel investor, mentor and Board member, she still has a starry look in her eyes when she talks about how she stumbled into an IT career.

Chance encounters in the 1980s found Ann in one of the first IT courses at university in Melbourne after initially heading for a career in psychology.

"It was never my intention to do IT, but there was one unit of computer science and it just grabbed me. The problem-solving and trying to be completely logical about what you were doing, follow the steps and letting the computer do something that came out with a result. It was absolutely fascinating," she said.

"Surprisingly, the situation for women was quite different then. There was a good percentage of women involved in tech, but when I moved up to Brisbane 10 years later the number of women seemed to have gone down."

Ann was one of the first to respond when the call went out for women interested in joining a women in technology network in Brisbane and she has been an active and dedicated member of WiT ever since, including as its second President, from 1999 to 2001.

One of the things we discussed around the table at our first meeting was that, apart from connecting with each other, we wanted to tell young girls that there was a fabulous career for them in IT if only they would grab hold of it. And they didn't have to be highly mathematical, which a lot of the girls seemed to be afraid of, they just needed to be logical.

That was one of the early WiT objectives, to get into schools and talk to career counsellors by trying to explain that there was this marvellous, high-paying, international career they could have."

Ann has always believed that innovation thrives in diverse groups saying, "we need to support each other in working in non-traditional roles, and in non-traditional organisational forms, because it is the 'new eyes' that see challenges from different perspectives and devise innovative solutions."



As a passionate advocate for science and technology skills being essential to company board composition, Ann was an early promoter for WiT to advance women with these skills onto company boards, supporting the development of WiT's Board Readiness™ program.

In March 2005, she instigated the formation of the Women in Biotech chapter, with Anne-Marie Birkill and Jane Andrews. The chapter was later renamed Life Sciences and Ann served on the committee for eight years.

Visionary leader with a passion for innovation

Learning to fly

From the outset, WiT's members liked to think big and they had taken on an enormous challenge. By any measure, women were lagging in the workplace equity stakes and men in ICT outnumbered women two-to-one when WiT was launched.

WiT's driving ambition for change was sharply focused on four main targets.

Firstly, it set out to clear the path to STEM education by challenging gender stereotypes and expectations regarding "women's work". It did this by designing outreach events and career showcase days that would make technology careers look fun and exciting for young women.

Secondly, it aimed to help women in STEM face the pressures and discrimination that were all too common in male-dominated workplaces. The WiT Awards were launched to ensure women's achievements were visible and applauded.

Thirdly, it set out to help women help each other by creating opportunities to bring members together for coaching, mentoring and networking designed to overcome the isolation women experienced because of a lack of access to female peers, role models and mentors.

Fourthly, it wanted to encourage women into senior leadership and board positions, to build supportive workplaces from the inside and ensure organisations were equipped to recruit, retain and advance women in STEM occupations.

In October 2000, the rubber hit the road as WiT hosted its first "Real Women, Unreal Jobs" careers day. The event proved to be one of the biggest grassroots events of its kind in Australia.

Funded by IIB's iSTAR program and the Queensland Premier's Council for Women, the response from high schools, universities and TAFE was overwhelming. As the school buses rolled into Brisbane Technology Park, more than 35 presenters and 825 high school girls prepared for an eye-opening introduction to the possibilities of a career in technology. The "Role Models Showcase" was an outstanding success, establishing a model that would be replicated around the country.

WiT's own corporate capability was becoming more sophisticated with the advent of a paid secretariat and, in 2000, the organisation transitioned from a committee to a board governance structure to reflect its growing concern for female representation on boards. In 2001, after three years of successful operation, the baton for WiT's secretariat passed from Melinda Horton and Ann Black's Team Services to Martin Lack & Associates.

Rural and regional expansion was always on the horizon. WiT ambassadors had been part of an annual IT&T Awards regional tour since 1998 and made whirlwind visits to Mackay, Rockhampton, Townsville and Mt Isa. Local WiT volunteers formed geographic interest groups in Cairns and Townsville but, despite best efforts from Brisbane, the groups were hard to sustain.

The Year of the Volunteer, in 2001, was a fitting occasion for WiT to reflect on the big goals it had kicked in its first five years. In her annual report, President Ann Uldridge (1999-2001) said:

"The women in WiT have worked together to achieve goals that couldn't be achieved separately. In this financial year, we have reached more girls and women in more parts of Queensland than ever before. It is imperative that we succeed – because ICT is rapidly becoming ubiquitous and literally everyone needs these skills to participate in an increasingly online Web-enabled world. We recognise that cultural change takes time and we aim to be persistent!"

National movement

Happy 25th Birthday WiT!

Auto & General partner with WiT because we believe it's important to support an organisation that champions women in the technology sector. WiT provides terrific options via job boards, training & mentoring programs and networking opportunities for women at all stages of their career . . . from graduates through to execs.

The leadership around programs in the CALD space is another example of WiT stepping up and providing practical programs to allow more women to have fulfilling careers. The WiT Awards (still a 'must-do' event in the Brisbane technology calendar!) led the way in celebrating the success stories of our industry and continues to do so.

Here's to another 25 years!

Angela Ryan
Chief Information Officer
Auto & General, Powered by Partner

During this era, the controversial and provocative "Screen Goddess IT Calendar 2006-07" set tongues wagging. The glossy calendar featured IT women in classic Hollywood movie poses and was sold to raise funds for events and to attract media attention to the cause.

The AWISE affiliation wound up in 2013, after successfully funding 27 projects around the country in role modelling, mentoring and industry enhancement.

Many other prominent programs were inspired by the WiT Queensland approach. Victoria's Women Are IT ran the first of its famous "Go Girl Go For IT" events in 2001, closely modelled on WiT Queensland's outstandingly successful careers showcase "Real Women, Unreal Jobs". The program has continued under the auspices of Vic ICT for Women.

In 2008, WiT South Australia, led by Karen Bard, ran the Board Readiness™ and mentoring programs, emulating the successful Queensland model.

The WiT concept also helped spark Dr Jenine Beekhuyzen's work creating future leaders which includes the award-winning Tech Girls Movement Foundation and has engaged 14,000 schoolgirls in STEM entrepreneurship across Australia and New Zealand over the past decade.

The rest of Australia followed WiT's early lead. In 1998, there was talk of a national alliance to strengthen the collective voice of women in technology and streamline the development and rollout of national programs.

Early plans for a national affiliation of independent groups, under the banner "Heroines in Information Technology" (HiT), were spearheaded by Queensland WiT under Ann Uldridge. The idea drew the attention of fledgling networks in almost every state who met in Brisbane, in November 2000, for an exploratory National iWoman Establishment Workshop.

However, the concept of a true national affiliation did not emerge until 13 women in technology organisations joined forces, in May 2005, forming the integrated Australian Women in IT, Science Engineering (AWISE) association, with Queensland WiT Ambassador Sonja Bernhardt as its inaugural Chair.

AWISE built its professional development programs on the Queensland WiT model and trademarked its ideas, so other groups and associations could run similar events. It also set out to create a "funky" image for IT, challenging the "code geek" stereotype to boost the industry's appeal as a career for young people.

The Women 2 Stars proposal included a series of events and activities that attracted more than 100 workshop participants and 105 mentoring participants in the first year.

Its centrepiece was a second "Role Models Showcase", attracting 500 school children to Brisbane Technology Park's Clunies Ross Centre, on 10 October 2002.

Funding was also granted to design a new mentoring program and a board readiness/careers project that built on the earlier successful initiatives.

The first iteration of Board Readiness™ was offered in South East Queensland and during the IT&T Awards tour to Rockhampton, Townsville and Cairns. The initiative was a huge success, with more than 300 people attending events in 2002, and more than 50 women coming forward for board matching.

WiT's programs continued to mature and grow. By 2004, there had been four successful careers days drawing more than 2500 students. The WiT scholarships were recognised as the largest state-based program of their kind in Australia.

In a forum entitled "Breaking through the Silicon Ceiling", held at Brisbane's Customs House in May 2021, Ann told the audience:

"Australia will need to address a silicon ceiling issue if we are to become a smarter, as opposed to just a bigger, nation. There is just no reason for having only a 20 per cent female participation rate in IT. There are probably fewer women entering IT education courses now than when I started 28 years ago. That could be because there is a perception only blokey nerds do it. Yet the starting salaries can be up to \$50,000 per annum."

The foundation of WiT's action plan, to help women break through the silicon ceiling, was thrashed out at a weekend thinktank in 2002, at Jamieson House, in Dutton Park. Early events and discussions around board preparation, mentoring and role modelling had been popular and the group backed the idea of turning them into formal programs.

The opportunity to put WiT's ambitions into play came, in 2002, when WiT successfully applied for funds under a Queensland Government initiative called Women 2 Stars (W2*), organised by the Department of Innovation and Information Economy and managed by the IIB.

The report noted the following highlights:

- WiT scholarships doubling to 12 at a value of \$60,000
- Mini-seminars and networking events attracting 2700 participants
- Nearly 40 special interest group discussion sessions drawing hundreds during the year
- Presentations to schools, TAFE colleges, universities, parents and career guidance councillors about the nature of ICT and the benefits of IT careers for young women
- Presentations to ministers, politicians and government department heads
- Promoting women for board and advisory panel positions
- Improving WiT infrastructure to support the scale of activities.



Volunteer scholarship management team, 2000.

The art of good science

The concept of a technology group for women cast a wide net and it soon became apparent that female scientists were experiencing similar problems to their sisters in IT, as Queensland's fledgling biotechnology industry began to ramp up under the encouraging eye of Premier Peter Beattie.

WiT made its first foray into the science sector, in 2003, and early functions for the biotech set were well supported. Two years later, WiT founding member Ann Uldridge, Anne-Marie Birkill (President 2007-09) and Jane Andrews were instrumental in starting a new life sciences group for women which they chose to bring under the WiT umbrella.

Women in Biotech (WiB) was launched on 27 July 2005. The launch featured prominent speakers Associate Professor Heather Beattie, from the University of Queensland, and Dr Roz Brandon, Chief Executive Officer of Genetraks, and was Chaired by Queensland's Chief Scientist Professor Peter Andrews AO.

WiB's first event was supporting WiT's 2005 careers day for schools, at Griffith University. In September 2006, WiB entered into a strategic alliance with Australian peak body AusBiotech that included cross-promotion of events and reciprocal benefits for members.

Long-standing WiT member Dr Carrie Hillyard AM was closely connected with Queensland's emerging biotech industry, and with the science community in Australia and the US, and encouraged new members to the WiB fold.

Carrie's outstanding contribution was recognised when she was named Biotechnology Star in the first WiT biotech awards. The awards presentation, themed "Celebrating Biotech Brilliance", was held on 14 November 2006 at the Stamford Plaza Hotel, with Queensland's first female Attorney-General and Minister for Justice the Hon. Linda Lavarch as keynote speaker. Carrie was joined by Professor Jennifer Martin (Outstanding Researcher) and Dr Raisa Monteiro (Rising Star).

The following year, the ICT and biotech awards were combined in joint celebration of WiT's 10th anniversary. By 2008, WiT had 700 members working across the ICT and biotech sectors.



A new logo followed as WiT recognised that, with the right infrastructure, it could extend its influence beyond life sciences to embrace women in engineering, architecture, physical sciences and other STEM disciplines.

In a media statement marking the event, Anne-Marie Birkill said the theme of the launch – "The Future Today" – was fitting for the new association:

"The seeds of a successful biotech future already exist in our biotech community. If we are to build a vibrant, sustainable local biotechnology industry we must harness all the resources available to us and ensure women participate equally with men, at the research and business coalfaces and at decision-making levels within their organisations."

"WiB will provide women with the opportunity to share their knowledge through cultivating a diverse network within the membership and participating in the wide range of events. This creates a promising platform for valuable connections to occur."



Keynote speakers from the Women in Biotech (WiB) symposium, 2007.

Profile

Anne-Marie Birkill

As one of Australia's first female venture capitalists, Anne-Marie Birkill helps entrepreneurs make their tech dreams come true.

In her 35-year career, she has worked with hundreds of tech startups and aspiring entrepreneurs to help turn their vision into commercial reality.

Today, OneVentures, the investment firm she co-founded in 2010, has more than \$600 million in funds under management.

With a science degree, an MBA and executive education from Harvard, Anne-Marie's early career was spent working in the field of plant biotechnology. She was Corporate Development Manager at the University of Queensland's research commercialisation company, UniQuest, then CEO of the i.lab tech incubator, where she helped nurture more than 100 early-stage technology companies.

Women's advocate with an eye for good business

Anne-Marie was WiT President from 2007 to 2009, having been instrumental in bringing female scientists to the WiT fold by co-founding the Women in Biotech chapter together with Ann Uldridge and Jane Andrews in July 2005.

"I've always been passionate about applying technology to develop new products and services. I'm driven by a desire to be part of the movement of Australia's economy away from one reliant on our finite resources (mining, agriculture, tourism) to a knowledge-based economy where our resources are unlimited," Anne-Marie said. "I also want to see women benefit equitably in these new industries."

It was a period of growth for WiT when I became actively involved, with the new life sciences chapter and Board Readiness™ program launched. As President, I was quite hands-on and was fortunate that we moved into new offices at i.lab where I was CEO."

WiT events also got a facelift during this period. "Our operations manager Alice Orozco completely transformed our events – especially the awards nights which became extraordinary celebratory galas – a convention that persists today."

As part of her drive to promote gender equity in the tech and life sciences sectors, Anne-Marie was always proud to showcase the achievements of WiT members, for example by bringing industry executives face-to-face with graduates of the Board Readiness™ program.



However, she says, "We still have a long way to go. For example, in 2021 in the US, only two per cent of all venture capital went to women-led businesses (four per cent in Australia)."

We are seeing some positive changes. There are more amazing women launching aspirational companies, and there are many more success stories."

WOMEN IN BIOTECH (WiB) STEERING COMMITTEE 2005*

Doreen Awabdy	School of Medicine, UQ
Suzy Baxter	PricewaterhouseCoopers
Josephine Bowles	Koopman Laboratory
Anne-Marie Birkill	i.lab Incubator Pty Ltd
Ruth Drinkwater	Dept State Development and Innovation
Rose-Anne Kelso	Stockwell
Nicky Vaisey	Magnetica Pty Ltd
Ann Uldridge	Nanomics BioSystems Pty Ltd, UW

*Note: Organisations current at the time

In a thought leadership article, in August 2005, founding member Ann Uldridge described the underlying philosophy of WiB as “orchestrating serendipity”, or creating the path to discover something valuable by chance:

“‘Orchestrating serendipity’ is a contradiction in terms – serendipity, after all, is a gift for making useful discoveries by accident – but a dynamic new group, called Women in Biotech (WiB) is aiming to create an ambience that will foster those accidental discoveries.

In scientific discovery, many major breakthroughs have included an element of chance. Searches of the Web on one topic often led to the discovery of unexpected, useful gems in seemingly unrelated topics.

In business, the ‘water-cooler effect’ is a recognised phenomenon that occurs when two or more people have chance, informal conversations and generate ground-breaking ideas.

Serendipity is part of WiB’s strategy. Through cultivating a diverse membership and holding a wide range of events, it expects ‘lucky’, valuable connections to occur. The formation of WiB itself is a case in point....”

By 2018, Queensland had cemented its position as one of the top two Australian states for life sciences, with a billion-dollar industry comprising 250 companies and 80 biotechnology-related research organisations employing more than 6600 researchers.

“Life sciences has huge potential for our state. This is why we are focused on making Queensland a life sciences hub in the Asia-Pacific region, with a \$5.7 billion investment over the past 20 years in science, research, development and innovation.”

Premier Annastacia Palaszczuk, 2018

Building on Experience

Low interest rates in 1998-99 spawned a flurry of tech start-ups. Enthusiastic investors drove the bull market and a new generation of companies burst onto the scene. Venture capital was a relatively new concept making innovation possible and one of Australia’s earliest firms was CM Capital founded, in 1996, by prominent scientist and long-standing WiT member Dr Carrie Hillyard AM.

Despite the uneventful passing of Y2K, the dot-com dream crashed in the first two years of the new century. More than \$5 trillion was wiped off the value of Nasdaq Composite stocks and the IT job market shrank.

Declining employment saw female participation in IT industries take a backwards step. According to the 2001 census, the situation for Australian women had deteriorated and fewer were choosing IT careers.

Of the 153,183 Australians with post-secondary qualifications in IT, 30.1 per cent were women – six per cent fewer than in 1996 – an alarming indication that women were trending away from IT education. At the same time, women’s participation in IT occupations decreased by 2.3 per cent.

It was also the start of a lean period for WiT and incoming President Barbara Tobin (2003-06) and Vice President Debra Green rallied to ensure the organisation stayed afloat.

It was a bigger task than a team of hard-working volunteers could manage and WiT member Kim Roy left her job and set up her own business to provide a fulltime secretariat.

“Kim was the driving force behind saving WiT,” Debra said. “You could say the three of us planned, but largely it fell to Kim to execute.”

Companies that did survive the crash heralded the start of a social transformation as online shopping blossomed and became highly profitable. The Internet continued to grow, driven by ecommerce, easy access to online information, knowledge, social networking and the uptake of mobile devices.

Two Sydney university students used a \$10,000 credit card to bootstrap one of Australia’s biggest software enterprises, in Atlassian, and job site Seek was floated on the ASX with a market capitalisation of \$587 million, in 2005.

By 2006, Australia’s venture capital market was starting to grow again, with the emergence of firms like OneVentures, co-founded in 2010 by soon-to-be WiT President Anne-Marie Birkill.

Prior to the global financial crisis, Queensland experienced a period of sustained, strong economic growth and an acute skills shortage largely led by the resources sector.



WiT Awards (l-r) President Barbara Tobin with Minister for Small Business, Information Technology Policy and Multicultural Affairs Chris Cummins and award recipient Ibtissam Abdul Jabbar.

But optimism was short-lived as the GFC wrought havoc. WiT battered down the hatches and female participation in STEM fell to pre-1996 levels. Australia did not follow the world into recession, but economic growth slowed and unemployment rose sharply.

In Queensland, the State Treasury described economic growth as “patchy”, partly due to the historic 2010-11 floods. Queenslanders were devastated as thousands lost their homes and 33 people died. The damage bill ran to \$2.4 billion.

Technology again drove Australia forward as Julia Gillard became Australia's first female Prime Minister, in 2010, and social media took off. The new social phenomenon was to change the concept of communication and community forever.

New online products and services were introduced, led by tech-focused brands such as Netflix and Uber, and Perth entrepreneur Melanie Perkins turned her high school project idea into a \$3.2 billion design platform called Canva.

Employment in STEM grew almost twice as fast as other occupations between 2014 and 2019. Many fee-paying overseas students were attracted to STEM courses and brought international diversity to the sector.

In 2018, Australia was basking in what local media were calling a "mini tech boom". The 11 tech sector companies on the ASX200 generated \$10 billion in value – up 25 per cent on the previous year and more than double the growth of the US Nasdaq index.

The *Australian Financial Review* called it "*the most significant and important change in our capital markets in our lifetime*".

Happy silver anniversary WiT!

You are to be congratulated on creating success platforms for women in all areas of digital, technology and STEM, and for recognising and growing the breadth of female talent in Queensland. Our best wishes for another triumphant 25 years.

Chris McLaren

Chief Customer and Digital Officer
Queensland Government



A picture tells a thousand words – women are few and far between as Queensland's ICT industry campaigns for new recruits to meet the State's skill shortage, 2009.

Pandemic pivot

Few could have predicted the wave of devastation ahead as the COVID-19 pandemic gripped the world in what was described as "*the most extraordinary crisis in living memory and the biggest economic shock since the Great Depression*".

As organisations scurried to "pivot" their operations, WiT too was forced to transform its business model and find a way to take its core business, usually comprising more than 40 face-to-face courses and events every year, into the virtual environment.

Despite the rush towards technology, the Australian Academy of Science reported that working women in STEM had been hard hit by the fallout from COVID-19 and the pandemic had exacerbated pre-existing gender inequity across the Asia-Pacific STEM workforce. Its Rapid Research Information Forum reported:

"Hard-won gains by women in STEM are especially at risk.

The pandemic has shut down research facilities, laboratories, and other STEM workplaces – profoundly disrupting work patterns for researchers and practitioners in STEM. Further, parents of young children have been juggling STEM jobs from home while supervising education and care.

The disruption is likely to be more severe for women than men, given their greater share of caring responsibilities and domestic work. The pandemic appears to be compounding pre-existing gender disparity and women are under-represented across the STEM workforce.

Long-term implications of the COVID-19 pandemic for the Australian research workforce as a whole are serious. Because of the highly casualised and fixed term nature of the university research workforce, expectations are that negative employment impacts will be disproportionately felt by junior researchers including recent graduates, early-career and mid-career researchers and women."

One of the biggest dilemmas for WiT was what to do with the 2020 WiT Awards. The event was the highlight of the year and a crucial showcase to ensure the achievements of hundreds of female nominees continued to be visible and recognised. The previous year, more than 700 guests had gathered to celebrate in a spectacular event at Brisbane's City Hall.

Faced with an unprecedented financial and logistical challenge, WiT's General Manager Lisa Cawthorne searched for talent and ideas from around the country to successfully replicate the gala



First online awards Master of Ceremonies, ABC science celebrity Dr Joel Gilmore with Codebots co-founder and WiT Director Indi Tansey, 2020.



Australia's Chief Defence Scientist Professor Tanya Monro AC gave a "virtual" keynote speech at the 2020 online awards.

experience online, while simultaneously re-engineering WiT's mentoring, Board Readiness™ and networking programs to work in a virtual environment. The first online WiT Awards were a resounding success, with more than 500 participants logging in.

Profile

Chamindie Punyadeera

Chamindie Punyadeera was always going to be a scientist. As a child growing up in South Africa, her inquisitive mind led her to question everything she saw and heard.

"Even from childhood, I was always asking my mum, why is this happening?" she said. "When my mother was diagnosed with type two diabetes, I wanted to know 'what is this?' and how could I help her?"

Decades later, Chamindie is a Professor at Griffith University, the head of the Saliva and Liquid Biopsy Translational Laboratory, and she is still asking the hard questions.

Her tenacity has led her team to achieve a global research first – the early detection of human papillomavirus-driven throat cancer through salivary diagnostics and liquid biopsy.

Chamindie describes herself as "an inventor with great vision for developing the next generation of diagnostic solutions". She is driven by a passion for science she says is a calling, not a career.

But as a culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) woman who migrated to Australia from South Africa, via the Netherlands, in 2008, she says it was incredibly tough to re-establish her career in a new country with no support network. The challenges of securing a permanent research job, and feeding her family, were at times almost overwhelming.

Chamindie says when she was introduced to WiT, she attended every event and found a network of like-minded people who were personally and professionally supportive. It proved to be an inspiration for her career, as well as a journey to enable other CALD women.

As a long-standing WiT member, she is the champion of WiT's first professional development program specifically designed for CALD women in STEM. The pilot program is set to roll out in WiT's 25th anniversary year and has the potential to grow and shape the careers of women who have faced similar challenges.

"We want to develop and shape careers and give women the opportunity to network and learn from one another."

The CALD Women in Technology program was jointly developed with support from the Queensland Government to provide participants with awareness, development, training and networking opportunities to



help them realise their full potential and open up opportunities for career progression and leadership.

"We had some very tough early years. I want others to get a better, smoother, ride," she said.

Chamindie is optimistic about the future for CALD women in STEM.

"I tell everyone – my mantra is you take challenges, and you make them into opportunities. And if there are no challenges, it's no fun!"

Richness in diversity

The WiT community has long been a haven for women struggling to establish new lives and careers in a new country and almost 25 per cent of its members are from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds.

Between 1995 and 2000, as WiT was establishing, the number of computer professionals moving to Australia was bigger than any other occupational group and 45 per cent of all those holding degree qualifications in computing were born overseas.

Technology was an attractive career choice, particularly in countries like India, where more than half of all undergraduate degrees in information technology, computing and science were earned by women.

There is a wealth of statistics to show that women from different cultural backgrounds, particularly women of colour, face unique challenges. The pressure is acute for Australia's First Nations people too who are far less likely to be employed in professional, scientific and technical services (two per cent) than non-Aboriginal people (seven per cent).

Less than two per cent of ASX leaders are culturally and linguistically diverse women and research estimates it will be another 18 years before cultural diversity is represented on Australian boards.

As economic conditions tighten, barriers often become higher for migrant workers. This is particularly so for women, often far from family support and striving to find their place in Australia's largely male-dominated STEM industries. The trend became acutely apparent during the COVID-19 pandemic.

"We have much to celebrate in the work to date moving the needle for women's equality in the workplace...however, this equality is not progressing in the same way for all women – we need to start talking about gender equity when it comes to women of colour and culturally diverse women."

Div Pillay, CEO MindTribes

In response, WiT launched its first professional development and coaching program for CALD members, in 2022.



WiT's first CALD program in 2022 attracted Queensland women in STEM from around the globe.

An inquisitive mind and sense of purpose

Flying into the future

Over 25 years, WiT has shown an uncanny ability to predict the winds of change, to meet the changing needs of its community, and to stay relevant and in demand. Membership has grown to more than 9500 with 56,600 supporters across its networks.

The vision of its founders, and the cornerstone programs established in its first five years, contributed to a rich culture and tradition while continuing to set a clear direction for the legion of passionate volunteers who followed.

Technology is now Australia's sixth largest industry, contributing \$122 billion a year to the economy and employing 580,000 workers. Over 90 per cent of technology businesses in Australia are small and medium enterprises. In the next few years, STEM jobs are expected to grow at almost twice the rate of other occupations. But, according to analysts, Australia's tech sector will not reach its full potential without skilling the workforce of the future and increasing access to talent.

Women are an obvious source. Yet, despite the advances and the opportunities, one of the biggest surveys around gender equality in the STEM workforce found that more than half the women working in STEM careers in Australia had considered quitting. The survey, a collaboration by Male Champions of Change STEM and Accenture, in August 2019, revealed that everyday sexism continued to be a big driver of female attrition.

"Women's low representation in STEM careers remains a critical issue. Given that STEM skills are crucial to the future world of work, significant shifts in workplace cultures will be required to attract and retain more women to Australia's STEM workforce."

Ann Sherry AO, Convenor of Male Champions of Change STEM

Research from Professionals Australia also showed women in STEM continued to be underpaid, under-represented and under-supported. In 2021, women made up only 29 per cent of Australia's university-qualified STEM workforce and 30 per cent of directors on ASX boards. The gender pay gap in STEM was substantial at 22 per cent and more than one-third of female respondents aged 25 to 35 said they intended to leave the industry within five years.

"I originally thought '10 years out and our job will be done' but it wasn't to be. I'm really proud WiT is at 25 years but I am very conflicted because I was secretly hoping the job would be done in a decade or so."

Sonja Bernhardt, WiT co-founder

Far from abating, the need to support, encourage, recognise and reward Australia's women in STEM continues to grow and so does demand for WiT.

"Why do we still need a conversation around women in technology? The core elements are still the same. People are more aware and more willing to talk about these things, but we haven't moved the needle on the decision-making. It is still hugely relevant."

"We have always listened to the membership. As the membership has evolved, WiT has shifted. I think there is a natural evolution that happens especially as the organisation is run by women and because of the connection we have with our members. We are always listening for cues and the feedback to evolve."

Iyari Cevallos, WiT Chair (2022-).



Passion and generosity are synonymous with the WiT legacy. In 2021, Sonja Bernhardt donated the perpetual Heart of Our Values Award recognising women who demonstrate the indomitable WiT spirit. The first recipient was Dr Catarina Moreira, from Queensland University of Technology, an information systems researcher and inspiring gender advocate.



Life Sciences Committee Chair Dr Melissa Sykes takes to the streets of Brisbane to promote WiT's "Stress Down Day" workshop for Lifeline, 2019.

Happy 25th birthday!

Where would women working across science and technology be without you? WiT, you play such an important role inspiring, amplifying, celebrating and nurturing women in science and technology. The ripple effects of the work you have done over more than two decades, guiding and developing women's careers, is felt across the industry and across the world. Thank you for all you do.

Dr Kirstin Ferguson

Company director, writer and columnist

Advance

The WiT Awards

The annual WiT Awards have long been known as an elegant affair and a scintillating showcase of friendship, inspiration and women's achievement. The event has grown as a highlight on the industry calendar and, in 2022, more than 900 guests are expected to gather at Brisbane's RNA Exhibition Centre to celebrate the advancement of Queensland's leading women in STEM, and the champions who support them.

Often the best ideas are spontaneous but WiT's inimitable co-founder Sonja Bernhardt even surprised herself when she jumped to her feet to announce the launch of the WiT scholarship program. The occasion was WiT's first Christmas function, in 1997, attended by Queensland Deputy Premier the Hon. Joan Sheldon AM, in the gardens of Brisbane's Stamford Plaza Hotel. Many companies pledged donations on the spot, including Apple and Microsoft.

Sonja said: *"It was a great way to demonstrate a technology community coming together – a very warm collegiate technology atmosphere of working together and having fun to boot."*

The first scholarship was awarded, in May 1998, to Kirralee Dun, a third-year information technology undergraduate from the University of Queensland, with Raeleen Gillett as runner-up.

Four years later, the first gala awards night on 15 June was a glamorous affair at Brisbane's Tivoli Theatre and 12 scholarships were awarded. By 2004, more than 80 scholarships and awards had been presented, making the WiT scholarships the biggest state-based program of their kind.

From the beginning, corporate supporters rallied, offering recipients a year of computer equipment and grants towards university tuition, while the WiT volunteers provided ample support in the form of career guidance, work experience and mentoring. In 1999, the program was formalised as the WiT/DMR Consulting Scholarship and unveiled at WiT's Christmas function. The scholarships offered assistance to the value of \$5000 for each recipient.

"Every woman recognised at the WiT Awards should feel incredibly proud of their achievements, expertise and contributions to the technology industry and deserves their time to shine."

Dr Kirstin Ferguson, 2018



First scholarship award recipient Kirralee Dunn, (above), and runner-up Raeleen Gillett, 1998.



From small beginnings, the scholarships evolved into the annual WiT Awards and student support gave way to a prestigious showcase recognising and inspiring excellence for all women in STEM. The award categories were fluid each year but concentrated on highlighting outstanding performance in IT, and later life sciences. There were also special categories for regional women, community achievement, innovation, entrepreneurship, and employers dedicated to fostering gender equity.

The awards were designed to encourage women who were contributing to industry excellence and using technology in an innovative way. Behind the scenes, a small army of volunteers sifted, sorted, interviewed and analysed hundreds of nominations to ensure only the best and brightest stepped onto the podium.

Two perpetual awards have been inaugurated, including the "Sue Wickenden Memorial Award" for entrepreneurship, established in 2012, and the "Sonja Bernhardt Heart of Our Values Award", launched in 2021.

At the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, the 2020 WiT Awards on 9 October made their online debut, with the ABC's celebrity scientist Joel Gilmore as the event's MC, alongside distinguished keynote speaker Australia's Chief Defence Scientist Professor Tanya Monro AC.



WiT Awards keynote speaker Dr Kirstin Ferguson, 2019.



WiT's first online awards were anchored with a live broadcast from the offices of Codebots, in Brisbane, 2020.

Profile

Sue Wickenden Award

The WiT Award for Entrepreneurs was first awarded in 2012 to honour the late Suzanne (Sue) Wickenden, a true WiT heroine.

Sue broke all the stereotypes. A single mum and a successful entrepreneur, she was a keen historian and a lover of extreme gravity sports.

It was while pursuing her passion for the adrenalin-pumping sport of street luge, down Brisbane's Mt Coot-tha summit, that she died tragically, in 2011, at the age of 50.

Sue had been a highly-successful IT entrepreneur and, in 2008, the first woman appointed to the board of Software Queensland.

WiT Past President (2003-06) Barbara Tobin was a great friend of Sue's and joined her business iSmart in the early days, when it was on the new frontier of Website development.

"Sue was a good businesswoman who saw the potential of the digital age," Barbara said. "She was such a shining light and known for her warmth and vivaciousness that really highlighted her love of the industry and the people in it."

Adjunct Professor Peter Grant, a staunch WiT supporter and twice Queensland Government Chief Information Officer, with help from Glenn Irvine, rallied friends and colleagues to fund an award honouring Sue Wickenden's legacy.

"We created this as an entrepreneurial award because Sue was the quintessential entrepreneur," Peter said. "She was a single mum, but that didn't stop her taking the risk to start a new business."

She was an entrepreneur her whole life and she probably lived about four lives at once to do everything she did. She had a lot of empathy for other people in business. Sue just had a way of being positive about everything."



The inaugural award winner of the Sue Wickenden Entrepreneurial Award was ICT and digital transformation advocate Yvette Adams, from the Creative Collective, on the Sunshine Coast.

Inaugural award recipient Yvette Adams, 2012. Inset: Sue Wickenden and her team.

Yvette is also an accomplished businesswoman, speaker and author whose titles include "No kidding: Why our kids know more about technology than us and what we can do about it".

Shining light leads the way to the top

Profile

Rebecca McDonald

When a magnitude 7.0 earthquake devastated the Caribbean nation of Haiti in 2010, a volunteer aid worker from Queensland saw an opportunity to realise an ambitious vision for humanity – bringing books and literacy to the world’s most vulnerable children through the power of technology.

Rebecca McDonald, a program manager leading a billion-dollar Queensland Government housing development project, relocated to Haiti with her former husband, deeply moved by the ruin and human suffering. As she worked in the disaster-ravaged communities, she was shocked by how few books were available in the schools she visited. She soon discovered that this deficit had already been a contributor to illiteracy and endemic poverty before the earthquake.

A long-time bibliophile, Rebecca launched Library For All, a non-profit, cloud-based digital library providing culturally-relevant, age-appropriate books for children in some of the world’s most remote and low income environments.

“Library For All was built around the premise that every child, everywhere, deserves access to knowledge,” Rebecca said during a TEDx Talk in New York City. In the 10 years since LFA’s founding, Rebecca has realised her vision with impressive milestones – establishing digital libraries and eLearning tools in 14 countries and 17 languages. In 2020, the organisation merged with Save The Children Australia, solidifying LFA as a global force in education and improving the lives of children around the world. So, what’s next for Rebecca and LFA?

Rebecca recently handed over the reins of her thriving tech-based charity to a new CEO and is now focused on her most ambitious goal yet – ending world illiteracy. With a phase-one fundraising target of \$100 million, Rebecca aims to bring knowledge resources to 95 countries in desperate need.

“I could totally fail and fall flat on my face,” Rebecca candidly shared, “but there are around 800 million kids who won’t learn to read and write otherwise. Frustratingly, we know how to fix this problem. We are just not currently investing enough in the right places.”

To date, LFA has reached more than 560,000 users, delivering cost-effective solutions like robust solar-powered tablets. A massive project is under way for war-torn Ukraine where the organisation hopes to reach at least one million children.

“We’re doing some great work in Australia too,” Rebecca said, “working closely with communities to publish books written and illustrated by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island creators.”



Rebecca’s vision earned her the inaugural WiT Community Award, in 2019.

Through WiT, Rebecca met 2020 award winner and former Queensland Government Chief Entrepreneur Leanne Kemp, an internationally-renowned pioneer in emerging technologies. Leanne has helped advise Rebecca on some of the new opportunities for global technology businesses.

“If you want a career in technology these days, you don’t have to work in the commercial sector,” Rebecca said. “You can decide you want to live a life of impact. Money isn’t the only measure of success when you get up with passion every single morning.”

The annual WiT Awards gala reached sensational new heights in 2007 largely due to the efforts of WiT’s young, entrepreneurial operations manager Alice Orozco.

The WiT Board at the time, led by President Anne-Marie Birkill, had little idea that the enthusiastic 19-year-old they were hiring would make such an indelible mark.

Until then the awards had been elegant but corporate affairs, taking their lead from the traditional black-tie industry dinners. As a young person, Alice was determined that if hard-working women were going to take time away from their families, then the event had to be fun and exciting. It is a tradition that continues.

“I come from a humble background and of Latin American (born in Colombia) descent. I never knew women could achieve so much until I worked at WiT... working with Anne-Marie and the other women on the Board had a lifelong impact on me, one I’m passing on to my children and other women I’ve worked with ever since.”

Alice Orozco



Joint winners of the 2017 WiT Entrepreneurial Award, Dr Bernadette Hyland-Wood (left) and Dr Carrie Hillyard.

“WiT gives us a wonderful opportunity to support our rising stars and acknowledge accomplished women doing world-leading healthcare and life sciences research. And with that platform you have the opportunity to speak up and participate in public forums and be a role model that advances the ethos of WiT, to ‘pay it forward’, and be what we couldn’t see but can now. We should never take it for granted!”

Bernadette Hyland-Wood

“Every year we’re astounded by the quality of the entries we receive. Our nominees are intelligent, professional and accomplished – talk about inspiring. The WiT Awards are about celebrating women and those that support them. We’re looking for women who are experts in their fields and succeeding in traditionally male-dominated technology and life science positions.”

Fiona Hayes, WiT President (2015-16)

Interest in the awards flourished. In 2015, WiT received more than 200 nominations and, in its 25th year, the glittering 2022 award celebration will again shine a national spotlight on the outstanding contribution of Queensland’s women in science, technology and related fields, with a record 500 nominations across more than a dozen categories. More than 900 guests are expected to gather at Brisbane’s RNA Convention Centre to recognise and reward the vital contribution these women make to research, policy, economic and social development.



WiT Awards night, 2016.

**TechEd founder
driven by passion,
not profit**

Profile

Alex Sorina Moss

Alex Sorina Moss's family thought it was a joke when they discovered she had won the 2016 NASA Global Award in a field in which she had no formal training.

But they were nowhere near as surprised as guests at the 2018 WIT Awards, when Alex stepped onto the stage to collect her winner's trophy dressed in a black latex catsuit and elbow-length gloves.

Entirely self-taught, the British-born Alex drew on her design theory background as a graduate of the famous Courtauld Institute at the University of London, to create a haute-couture headdress with a difference. The high-tech earpiece is an advanced micro-computer she invented which predicts both fatigue and heat stress – a potential lifesaver for astronauts and miners in high-heat and high-pressure environments.

Delivering life-saving tech with style

On the eve of her 30th birthday, Alex now heads a multi-million dollar business in Canaria Technologies, with co-founder and research head Dr Rob Finean and former WIT Board member Theodora Le Souquent as Managing Director. The team have designed and developed a real-time predictive biometric device which is powered by machine learning and inspired by the computer-assisted biomimesis movement in haute couture (as seen in the works of Iris Van Herpen and Daniel Widrig).

It's one thing to have a brilliant idea, and a lot more work to bring it to fruition. The Canaria earpiece, for which Alex produced proof of concept for the NASA competition in just 48 hours, was the start of things to come.

One year later she took out the 2017 Richard Branson Worldwide Top 10 Technology Startups Extreme Tech Challenge, which was followed by a string of international achievements including, the 2018 Sue Wickenden Entrepreneurial Award for WIT.

The company relocated to Australia in 2017 and Alex resides in Queensland as founding Chair of Canaria Technologies, which has a team of 25. They are now on version 5.2 of the earpiece. It's an achievement that speaks volumes considering only two per cent of the technology industry is led by women.

"I believe we are all stronger together, not apart. Female founders for technology have so many more barriers to overcome than our male counterparts," Alex said.

Alex models her biometric earpiece. Inset: Meeting with NASA scientists.



"And that's where WIT comes in. It's just so good to be able to network, and the group has great emotional resonance."

She said winning a WIT Award had helped build her profile in Australia which, in turn, helped establish the credibility and grow the business.

"I'm incredibly grateful for it and a huge continuing supporter. WIT makes a real difference and its value can't be quantified."



Connect

Networking | Mentoring | Outreach

Making connections is part of the fun and WiT members take fun seriously. Witty slogans, enticing events, warmth and friendship are all part of the serious business of building career pathways in STEM and changing the narrative to make it an attractive and rewarding career choice for women and girls.

WiT is driven by energy, generosity and commitment, and founded on the belief that by making the right connections, and sharing their knowledge and skills, women can make a significant difference to their industry and take control of their own success.

Thought-leaders and inspirational role models share their experiences in an active and hands-on program of career-based learning experiences and social networking with more than 40 events each year. The program provides a platform to recognise challenges and achievements, showcase female role models and offer an accessible, safe forum for women to seek collegial advice and support.

WiT works closely with many other professional networks, startup incubators, universities and technical interest groups to actively promote activities and opportunities of interest to its members. Its extensive social networks attract more than 56,600 subscribers and are an important source of news and information on matters of significance for professional women in STEM.

The annual WiT survey keeps a finger on the pulse of priorities and opinions in the community.

The first WiT networking lunch was held at Indooroopilly Golf Club, in 1997, attracting an unexpectedly full house of more than 100 people. Founding member Jenny Beresford remembers her keynote presentation titled "Do I Have to Play Golf?":

"Unfortunately, the answer was 'yes, probably'. The power of female networking continued from there, as women invited other women, bringing out the hidden talent lurking across Brisbane's private and public sectors, hungry to talk and help each other get ahead.

We created our own momentum, ambition and purpose. Even from the first meeting, we spoke with a sense of urgency about getting into schools, creating scholarships and mentoring programs to encourage girls to take up IT."

Queensland Chief Entrepreneur Leanne Kemp and 14-year-old Shakira Pearce, from Maryborough, shared the stage at the WiT Awards, 2019.



WiT General Manager Lisa Cawthorne, (centre), and Board members, 2014.

Profile

Lynore Close

Lynore Close was a 25-year-old farm hand, travelling and working in the Adelaide Hills, when she was tapped on the shoulder to consider an IT traineeship.

For the young Queenslander, who attended numerous schools as her family moved around, the idea of an office job and a tertiary education was a very foreign concept.

Today, she has a successful technology career and is part way through a Masters in Information Technology at Queensland University.

"I just fell into IT," she said. "I was working on a farm, in the mud, in the rain, and cold and freezing, and my job advisor said I should go for this interview – I didn't even know what IT was, but I just went along because I love adventure and the air-conditioning sounded good."

A week later she found herself providing computer support for young people in schools.

Lynore's career has taken her from first female and indigenous ICT trainee in South Australia, to her latest role as a security analyst with Flight Centre. She was not only the first Indigenous woman but the first female IT employee in the first four companies she worked for.

"My journey has been really independent and quite alone," Lynore said. "I didn't know any women I could talk to and connect with, to say 'how do you do it' – even someone to just bounce ideas off."

She found a supportive network of leaders and entrepreneurs when she was introduced to WiT, in 2021. "Even if you haven't entered the workforce yet, it's good to know there are women you can talk to, see what other women are doing and gain confidence in your career path."

When asked what could have been easier if she had had more role models, Lynore replied, "everything!".

She says she feels fortunate to have a fantastic male mentor. "He was one of the best teachers I've had, he taught me everything I know so far and is still teaching me to this day." But Lynore wishes she had more female ones along the way.

She believes her cultural background has contributed positively to her career. "Our capability to be resilient gives us the ability to excel at whatever we choose, but the first step is knowing that there are opportunities and options. I wish more First Nations people knew what opportunities were out there," she said.



Lynore's next goal is to set herself up for management and leadership.

"I would like to hit executive leadership before I'm 40 and have the ability to help women who come after me and make their journeys easier.

I don't necessarily need to change the world. Even if I can change someone's day, that's enough for me."

A woman of firsts



Sonya Trau facilitates the mentoring program, 2014.

Providing opportunities for girls and women across Queensland to meet and talk firsthand with female role models and mentors was seen by WiT as a crucial step for encouraging women to consider and advance their STEM career. Many lifelong friendships have been built in the process of discussing ideas and experiences and the rewards of giving back are shared both ways.

The first WiT mentoring activities were piloted, in 2001, and expanded as part of the ambitious 2002 Women 2 Stars program. The structure of the program was revamped, in 2014, by WiT founding member and executive coach Sonya Trau, who introduced formal induction sessions to ensure both mentors and mentees were equipped to gain maximum value from the process. The first intake of 80 women, successfully completed the program in 2014. After five successful years, the program was re-engineered with a focus on collaborative technologies, encouraged by WiT Co-Chair Joanna Field (2018-19).

Since then, more than 500 mentors and mentees have experienced the structured 12-week mentoring program and used it to explore and achieve their personal and professional goals. Participants are carefully paired and can stay connected with their peers via a dynamic community of practice and ongoing support.

"What advice do I have for academics who want to make the move into a commercial arena? Get a commercial mentor – it really makes the difference. Often, they don't know what other careers are available or what opportunities there are. They don't always know that you need a science degree to be a patent attorney, for example. There are just so many potential careers that use a science base and all the skills you get with a PhD."

I always tell my female mentees to join WiT because it's so valuable for networking."

Dr Carrie Hillyard AM, company director and mentor

In 2018, WiT took the lead in the Australia Awards Mongolia Women's Leadership Program. WiT Co-Chair Dr Alison Rice (2017-18) was invited as a mentor and speaker at the first event and WiT was asked to participate again in 2019.

As a consequence of WiT's involvement, when the Queensland Women in Public Service organisation wound up, in 2019, it chose to donate its remaining funds to support WiT mentoring programs.



8 March 2002: WiT marked International Women's Day with "A celebration of Women in Information Security over the past 60 years and into the future".

The event recognised the contribution of women who worked as code breakers and input operations (information security) at Central Bureau, in the Queensland suburb of Ascot, which had been the operations centre for signals intelligence during WWII.

Nine of the original female operators attended a reunion at the Miegunyah Folk Museum, in Bowen Hills, an historic house used during the war by Z Special Force Commandos.

It was the first time in more than half a century that they had been able to openly talk about their work during the war. WiT President Melinda Horton (2001-02) paid tribute to their service and role as technology pioneers.

Profile

Alison Rice

Standing on the edge of a career precipice, there are times when your only real choice is to take a leap of faith.

Just ask Dr Alison Rice, who has taken the plunge several times with brilliant results.

Alison admits that being part of a network and ideas exchange like WiT gave her courage – first when she was forced to leave her academic career and reinvent herself, and again, 10 years later, when her dream job contract came close to a nail-biting end.

Alison completed her science degree majoring in immunology at the University of Adelaide, and headed to Europe to work as a scientist before completing a PhD (in French) in hematopoietic stem cell biology at the University of Bordeaux.

She went on to become team leader and Associate Professor in the bone marrow transplant team at the Mater Medical Research Institute. But the shift away from the laboratory only came with some help from WiT mentors.

"I first heard about WiT through the awards programs," Alison said. "Then I saw Carrie Hillyard (WiT Sciences Ambassador) presenting at an event and she encouraged me to join and take the Board Readiness™ program."

Alison credits WiT for a fresh perspective just when she needed it.

"One of the things I really value about WiT is the random conversations you can have that can change your life.

I was struggling to get a job and at the AGM and someone happened to say to me you should turn your academic CV into business speak. That was all I needed to try things differently and I got an interview, and won a great job and things went from there."

Today, Alison is again on the frontier of ground-breaking science. Her latest career adventure is with the CSIRO's Synthetic Biology Future Science Platform as Deputy Director and Business Development Manager, where she is helping Australian industry move to a bio-based economy.

"Moving away from a petro-chemical to a bio-based economy is the future. Think 'wild ideas' like enzymes that can clean up waste, novel materials, or the impossible burger.

The great thing about WiT is the connections you make. There is an openness and generosity of spirit that makes it work.



I wanted to return the support and help other women in STEM, so I was invited to join the Board of WiT in 2015 and was elected co-President from 2017 to 2018."

In 2018 Alison represented WiT as a mentor and guest speaker at the Australia Awards Mongolia Women's Leadership Program. As a consequence, the now defunct Queensland Women in Public Service group left its remaining funds to support WiT's ongoing mentoring activities.

WiT Co-Chairs Alison Rice and Joanna Field, 2018.

Networks open new worlds of possibility

Profile

Malia and Shakira

Role models come in all shapes and sizes, and WiT has always worked hard to empower women and help them find the inspiration and support they need to reach their dreams.

Malia Knox was only eight years old when she asked her mother why all the plaques in one of Brisbane's main public parks commemorated men.

After doing some research, she could only find three statues of women across Brisbane. This sparked her to start an aspirational project, which grew to include a Parliamentary petition attracting over 800 signatures and a GoFundMe page raising an impressive \$20,000.

WiT worked closely with Malia, Statues for Equality and Brisbane City Council, to help raise additional funds for Malia's #femalefaces4publicplaces campaign.

Never too young to have big dreams

The Queensland Government contributed \$35,000 for the first installation – a bronze statue at the Brisbane Planetarium of pioneering Australian geologist and NASA astrobiologist, Dr Abigail Allwood.

Dr Allwood, who grew up in Brisbane and studied at the Queensland University of Technology (QUT), was the first female and first Australian to work as principal investigator on a Mars rover mission.

WiT Acting Chair Bec Langdon (2021) invited Malia to present her project at the WiT Awards in 2021.

"I felt really sad that in every park and playground I go to I am only seeing pictures, plaques and statues of men," Malia said.

"It's important because young girls like me need to see more female role models so they know what they can be when they grow up."

Shakira Pearce took judges by surprise when she became the youngest ever entrant in the Entrepreneurial category of the WiT Awards.

The year nine student, from Maryborough State High School, entered the awards for a mobile app she had developed as part of an innovative school program run by technology teacher Peita Bates.

WiT admired the young technologist's courage and creativity, and arranged for Shakira to attend and speak at the 2019 WiT Awards where she said it would be an



Malia Knox (left) and Shakira Pearce.

absolute dream come true if her app helped women her age, younger and older learning to appreciate themselves. The app is designed to help address negative body, self and lifestyle images of females in today's society.

Ms Bates said the rare opportunity WiT provided for a country student to attend gala industry awards, meet professionals in the field of science and technology, particularly connecting with Queensland's Chief Entrepreneur Leanne Kemp, was invaluable.



Hundreds of families visited WiT's STEMed Fest, 2016.

"Technology Takes You Anywhere" series, in Brisbane, Logan and Ipswich. Lessons learned were shared with other groups and helped seed Women are IT's "Go Girl Go For IT", which has been running in Victoria, since 2001.

"Go Girl Go For It" was later trademarked, under the auspices of the Australian Women in IT, Science Engineering (AWISE) coalition and Women are IT, to ensure the model was readily available and to make it easier for other groups to run similar events.

WiT's role model showcase returned in a fresh guise, in 2016, as the "STEMed Fest", championed by WiT's General Manager Lisa Cawthorne under President Fiona Hayes (2017). The event drew hundreds of children and parents to an action-packed day of robots, coding, social media, gaming, app development and 3D printing, at Brisbane's Royal International Convention Centre.

It was only one of many outstanding achievements driven by Lisa who has cemented her position as a genuine heroine in the WiT story. Notorious for her warmth, resourcefulness, creativity and boundless positive energy, the community recognises Lisa as the lynchpin in WiT's operations, first as secretariat and later as General Manager. In 2011, Lisa celebrated 10 years of service with her sights firmly focused on nurturing the relationships that continue to boost WiT into the future.

Corporate partners have always played an integral role in WiT's growth and sustainability. Many organisations have supported the WiT community for years, including Queensland's biggest technology companies, Government agencies, major universities and research institutes.



Data#3's Jayne Smith collects the 2017 Employer of Choice award from Alex Blauensteiner of Brisbane Marketing.

Congratulations on the WiT anniversary!

Established during an IT revolution, we love that WiT also continues to support and champion the ongoing revolution for equality, technical excellence and mentoring.

We at Data#3 appreciate the energy, compassion and all the work that you do. This does not feel like just a company anniversary... but it is a family anniversary that continues to grow strong and achieve great things together. Thank you for inspiring us to do better over the years!

Finally, thank you for the opportunity to celebrate the WiT achievements with you, all your members and partners, and we wish you a successful future on your anniversary!

Ray Merlano

Queensland General Manager
Data#3, Powered by Partner



Empower

Board Readiness™

WiT has always had an intuitive finger on the pulse of its community and an uncanny sense of timing when it comes to predicting emerging needs and opportunities for its industry members. Empowering women to win a seat at the corporate table was an issue hotly debated at the first WiT strategy sessions and today, over 200 candidates have completed WiT's internationally-recognised Board Readiness™ program.

Female-founded businesses were still a novelty in the 1990s, but the WiT community attracted more than its fair share of budding female entrepreneurs and corporate executives who went on to make their mark in the national and international business arena.

The WiT Board Readiness™ certificate course started as an idea and a workshop. Supporting women to achieve peak leadership roles was a natural extension of WiT's mission and finding ways to springboard women with IT skills onto government and corporate boards was close to the heart of many of WiT's entrepreneurial leaders, particularly Sonja Bernhardt, Ann Uldridge and Wendy McTainsh.

Ann and Wendy collaborated on a paper to the Australian Institute of Company Directors, in 1999, pre-empting the competitive advantage that the new wave of technologies would bring and the importance of having tech-savvy executives to bring IT skills into the boardroom.

WiT's successful bid for funding from the Queensland Government's Women 2 Stars program, in 2002, created the opportunity to turn its informal workshops into a more formal Board Readiness™ development program.

A team of WiT volunteers – Marjo Timson (Greiner), Monica Bradley, Julie Savage and Robyn Gibson – were credited with early construction of a program specifically designed to grow the number of IT-skilled women on government and private boards, increase candidates' understanding of the risks and rewards of board participation, and increase awareness of the value of board diversity (especially the inclusion of women with ICT skills). Participants were encouraged to network and were given the opportunity to showcase their skills to high-profile organisations in Queensland.

The first WiT-hosted board event featured the Deputy Director General – Governance of the Queensland Department of Premier and Cabinet, governance specialists Helen Ringrose, and Professor Sandra Harding, later Vice-Chancellor of James Cook University.



Board Readiness™ graduates, 2021.

WiT founding members (l-r) Ann Uldridge, Bernadette Hyland-Wood and Sonja Bernhardt at the 2022 Board Readiness™ graduation.



The Board Readiness™ program was trademarked, in 2009, and won global accolades when it was named among 109 global best practice programs by the EU-funded project PRACTising Gender Equality in Science (PRA.G.E.S). It has since been emulated by other professional women's groups.

WiT President Anne-Marie Birkill (2007-09) said, "We are very pleased that Board Readiness™ has been included among such a prestigious cohort of programs. This is a great outcome for a volunteer-led organisation, and a credit to the wonderful team of women who developed and contributed to the program over the past few years.

While Board Readiness™ has been singled out in this way, this is the standard to which we aspire for all our programs and events. The program has generated an enormous amount of interest from government, industry, other associations and executive members."

In a letter welcoming incoming Minister for Innovation, Science and the Digital Economy and Minister for Small Business the Hon. Leeanne Enoch, in 2015, WiT President Sue Johnston (2012-14) wrote:

"It is well documented that the representation of women in ASX firms in Australia continues to be lagging at around 13 per cent. The numbers are even more concerning regarding women with senior executive experience and technical knowledge. It is hard to imagine Australian companies and organisations now and, in the future, not benefitting from having technical experience at board level. In addition, research indicates that companies with female representation at board level perform about 23 per cent better than their counterparts. Of even more concern is the estimated eight per cent of women in executive positions who are potential board members."

The Queensland Government released its landmark Queensland Women's Strategy, in 2016, setting an ambitious target for women to fill half the seats on Government boards by 2020. It was a strategy WiT had been working on for the best part of 20 years.

Economic modelling by Deloitte Access Economics captured headlines when it suggested that gender parity on Queensland boards would deliver an extra \$87 million into the State's coffers. The research quantified what the women of WiT strongly believed – *"that boards perform better when they include the best people with a diverse range of perspectives and approaches in an inclusive culture"*.

"Having more diversity on boards is good business sense and this is reflected in the bottom line of companies with women at the top table. Here in Queensland, we can lead the way as a strong voice for women in leadership roles across the workforce, while increasing productivity and growing our economy."

Hon. Shannon Fentiman,
Minister for Women, 2015

The WiT Board Readiness™ certificate has continued to evolve and keep pace with corporate governance standards. Today, it is a nine-week practical program helping aspiring female STEM leaders to build the skills, confidence and connections to secure a board seat. Practical workshops are conducted in a safe and inclusive learning community, with key technical sessions presented by the Australian Institute for Company Directors.

Participants are guided by experienced board directors and corporate leaders as they create a unique executive profile and develop a strategy for securing a seat on a board.

Profile

Bronwyn Venus

As a research and grants executive with a multi-million dollar track record, Bronwyn Venus knows a lot about bulls.

The agricultural scientist has seen her fair share of cattle pens. But the tough conditions of the outback are nothing compared with the personal challenge she has faced coming to terms with her own success.

It was her involvement with WiT and the recognition of her peers that finally gave Bronwyn the confidence to acknowledge and build on her rapidly-growing list of achievements. It was a watershed moment when she was highly commended in the 2020 WiT Awards.

"It took me a long time to acknowledge I was good at something," she said. "I have gained so much from being involved with WiT."

Now established as the Head of Partnerships and Grants at Sugar Research Australia, Bronwyn recognises the significant contribution she is making to agricultural industries and is setting some high goals to achieve as part of her own advocacy efforts.

Making peace with success from bottles to bulls

As a WiT Board member, working to strengthen external relationships, she says her passion is to bring more rural, remote and regional women into STEM.

Speaking from personal experience, she knows not everyone gets a good start in life. Bronwyn had a tough start, juggling high school and helping to support the family with a job at the local country servo at the age of 13. Circumstances forced her to leave school before her grade 12 exams. Determined to complete her education, she applied for a job as a bottle washer at CSIRO and worked her way through the laboratory ranks, studying after hours.

She made two trips to Bangladesh as an aid volunteer digging latrines, while building her career from laboratory management and animal science field research to industry-academic liaison at the executive level.

"It's important to me that women know that they are not locked into one career, and they can be anything they want to be," she said.

"I want them to find their tribe and know that it's not necessarily where they expect it to be. They will have many tribes in their life. They are not defined by the start they got in life."

At the University of Queensland, Bronwyn won the 2015 Professional Staff Achievement Award, the 2018 Queensland Alliance for Agriculture and Food Innovation (QAAFI) Leadership Award and the inaugural 2019 Deputy Vice Chancellor (Research) Award for Excellence.



At QAAFI, she built her portfolio to more than \$300 million in grants, success Bronwyn attributes partly to just knowing how to listen to people.

"Scientists can be very good at identifying problems that they think need solving, but not very good at asking what the problems are that need to be solved," she says. "I don't tell – I ask. I say what are your pain points and how can I help you?"

Bronwyn heads to Beef Week, in Rockhampton, 2021.

The program culminates with an industry luncheon introducing graduates into the business community and giving them a platform to display their skills.

Manager of the Queensland Office for Women Heidi Mathieson acknowledged that while much had improved for women, more needed to be done:

"Over the past century, the role and status of women has improved substantially and, in Queensland, great progress has been made. Women now represent 54 per cent of people appointed to Queensland Government boards and bodies, up from 31 per cent when we first established targets in 2015. More than ever before, we need to increase the visibility and profile of women in technology and in leadership."

Although female participation reached equilibrium on Queensland Government boards, the national corporate view was lagging. In November 2021, the Australian Institute of Company Directors reported that the percentage of female directors in Australia's biggest public companies had peaked at 34.2 per cent, from 21.7 per cent in 2015, and while there were no men-only boards on the ASX 200 for the first time (a record that was undone months later) fewer than 10 per cent of publicly-listed companies had a female chairman.

In true WiT style, the campaign to boost women into Australia's C-suite has continued to gain momentum. The first "Be Board Ready" virtual event series, supported by the Queensland Government's Office for Women, in 2021, featured a formidable all-female line up of more than 70 business and community leaders from across Queensland.



I am one of the early winners of an award, winning the Executive Woman of the Year award in 2000 with a presentation about why there needs to be more people with IT skills on boards based on the theme of 'adapt or become extinct'. The prize included enrolment in the Australian Institute of Company Directors' course, which got me started on my board career and I am now a Fellow of AICD.

Kathy Campbell
Director, Ockham Consulting Pty Ltd



Board Readiness™ takes to the regions, Cairns 2015.

Profile

Jenny Beresford

One of the first women executives in Australian IT, Jenny Beresford says there may be more career opportunities today but the goal for diversity and equality is still to see more women at the top.

"We don't need more women just to be coders now; we need more women in leadership roles," says the WiT founding member, who recognised 25 years ago the potential for women to make whatever professional life they wanted to in the emergent field of computing.

Today there is acceptance that women have technical capability and leadership talent, entry barriers have lowered, and cultural and regulatory constraints to career progression have decreased – but they are still there. We are still battling for support in areas like maternity leave, and everything you need to have a balanced professional and family life."

Jenny says when WiT started, there weren't a lot of women working in IT – or "computing" or "data processing" as it was called.

"They were mostly those who were good at maths, or process analysis, and worked at big multi-nationals like IBM, or a major bank, who were tapped on the shoulder to do coding (aka 'computer programming' back then).

When WiT started, we were frustrated at being outliers, but we were designing and creating the first business systems, usually on mainframes, carrying coding around on reams of paper and huge disk drives, logging into client sites via the old dial-up modems to fix bugs in real-time.

I had a fine arts degree and aspired to be an artist or author – but I also had maths and science competency, so I enrolled in a post-graduate qualification in computer programming (COBOL and FORTRAN) because I needed a day job to be financially independent, but I also saw technology as a wildly creative domain, and I could see the possibilities of it changing the way we worked and lived – which has definitely been true."

Jenny said she started out as a coder and systems analyst, then a project manager, did an MBA at the University of Queensland, and slipped side-ways into management, gaining many strategic and transformational C-suite roles all over the world.

Her three-decade career as an international business executive includes leadership roles as Research Director, Digital and Innovation, in Gartner's CIO advisory practice, CIO of Swinburne University and Pearson (APAC), VP at Mahindra-BT and Proudfoot Consulting, and the founding Regional Director for SMS Consulting in Queensland.



She believes WiT will continue to play a vital role in Australia's future, injecting diversity and creativity, empathy and equity, into the ever-expanding digital economy.

"No matter what field they are in, we have to make sure women have a sustainable career and don't get burnt out. We have to make sure the women at the top survive. If they aren't there, they can't change things for others. You can't be what you can't see."

"WiT shows me that anything is possible. Whenever I attend an event or class I learn from wonderful women who are fantastic examples of what is possible." WiT Member



Sonja Bernhardt (left) shares a laugh with a fellow member.



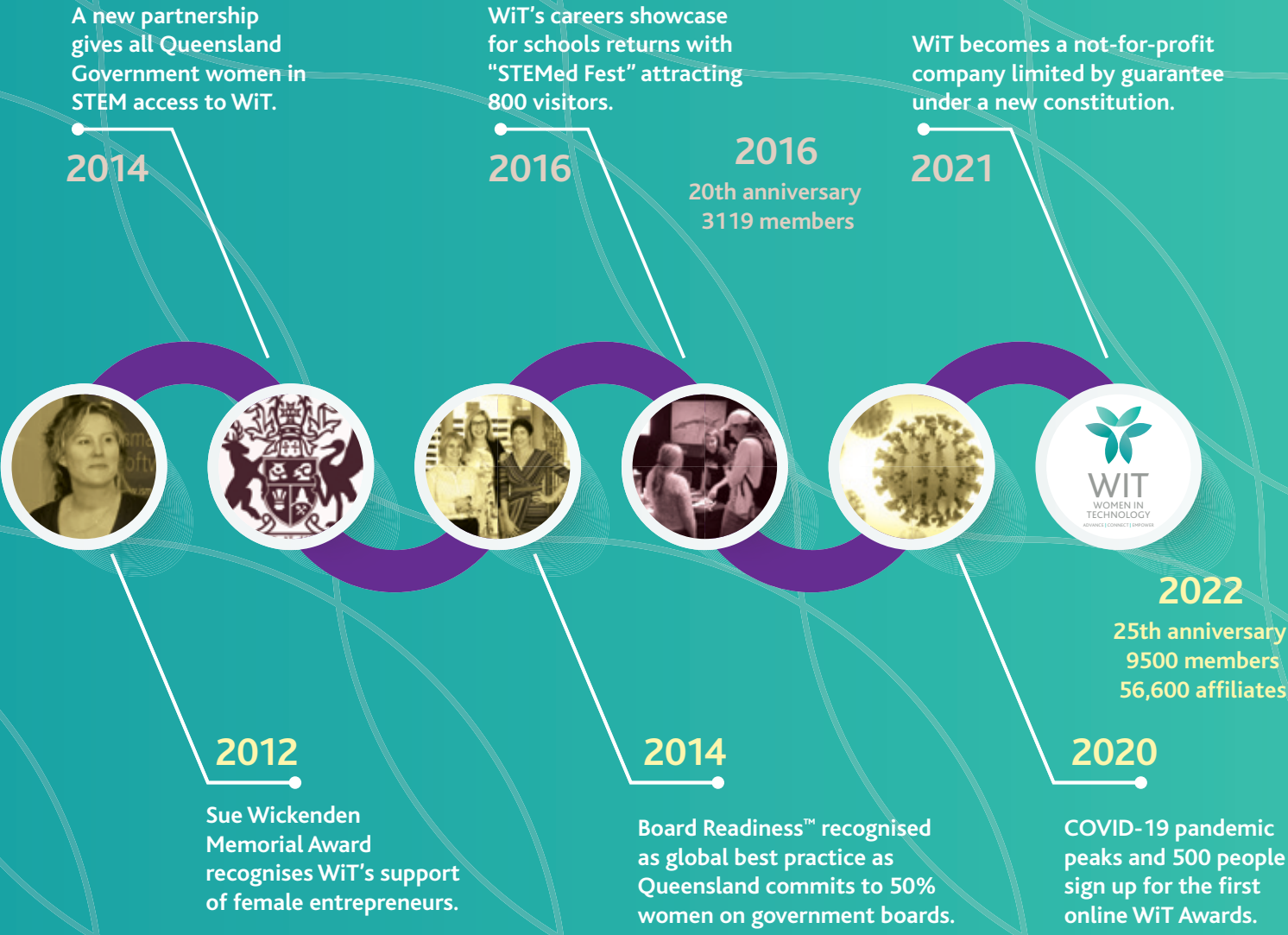
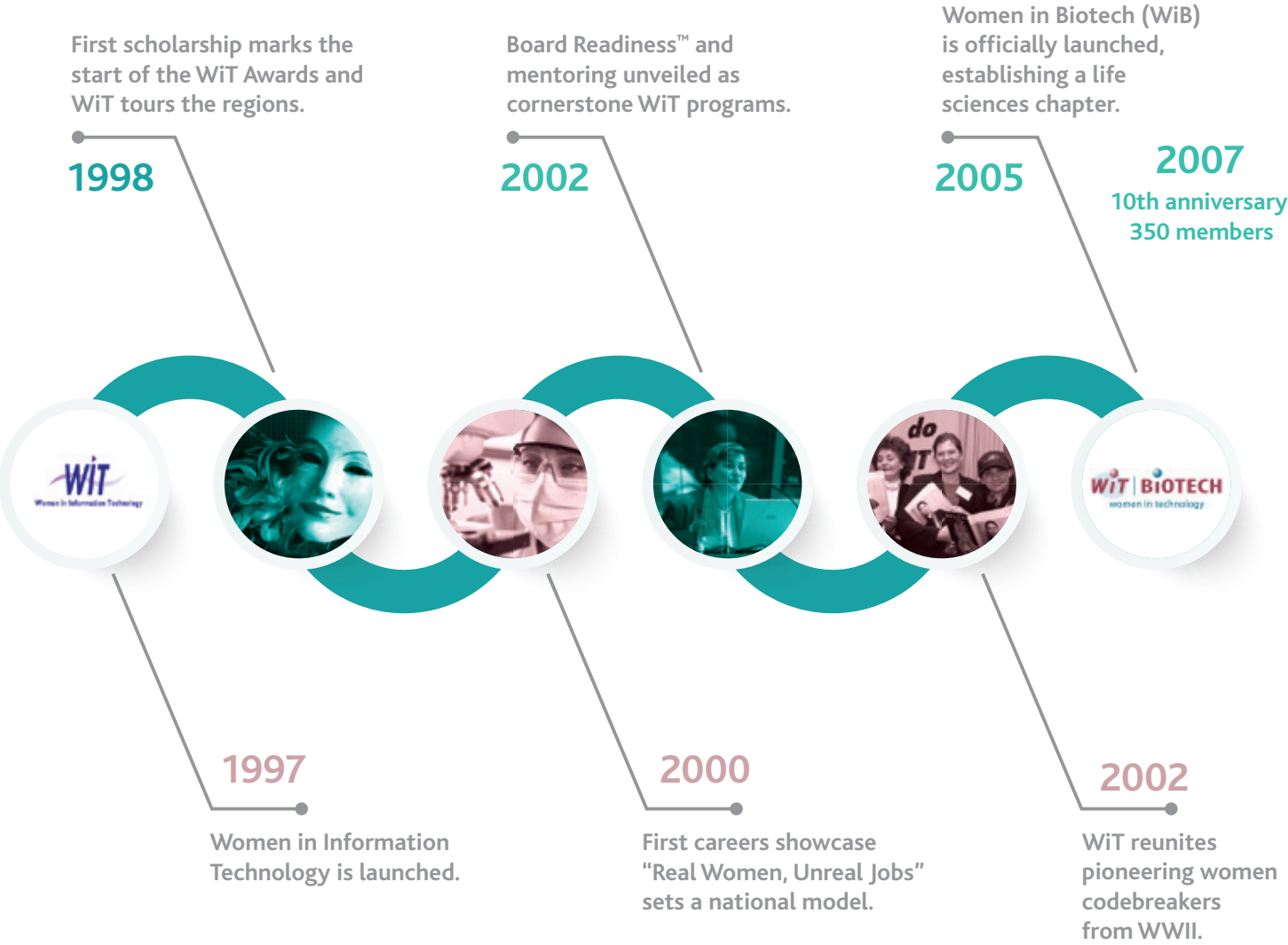
Board ready! (l-r) WiT Co-Chair ICT Joanna Field with 2019 graduates Alice Peterson and Della Churchill.



A computer hardware workshop for school girls at the WiT careers day, 2005.

"WiT is the only community where I am surrounded by so many accomplished and impressive women...and we are all there for the same reason, to support and guide each other. It's very special." WiT Member

The WiT Journey



WiT Values

As a not-for-profit organisation, WiT's values and commitment to its members have shaped its culture and continue to guide its decision-making. WiT's founders set out to build a community which demonstrated an unswerving commitment to being:

Dedicated
Professional Active
Collaborative
Open Results-oriented
Enthusiastic

To mark its 20th anniversary, in 2017, WiT expressed its vision and goals in a memorable three-word statement. In doing so, it reaffirmed its commitment to

Advance | Connect | Empower

women from all fields of science and technology to help them achieve their full potential and realise their dreams.

In 2020, the WiT Values Project was initiated to ensure that WiT's driving principles continued to resonate with members as strongly as they did when WiT was founded. The top 20 values identified by members and stakeholders were mapped to five themes confirming WiT's priorities and articulating them in a fresh and contemporary way.

Today WiT expresses its values as:

FUTURE FOCUSED

We embrace change and learning opportunities to advance the skills and careers of our community.

STRONGER TOGETHER

We leverage the power of our network to foster professional relationships and partnerships.

WE LIFT EACH OTHER UP

Incredible things happen when we support, guide and trust each other.

INSPIRING EXCELLENCE

We celebrate our success and achievements to inspire the next generation of leaders.

WE ARE THE CHANGE

We challenge the status quo by advocating for women in STEM with courage and respect.

Board Members

WIT is working to improve its archives. Please contribute to this list by visiting the 25th anniversary section on our website.

1997

Sonja Bernhardt *Founder / President*
Jenny Beresford
Anne McGill
Carolyn Hill
Bernadette Hyland-Wood
Liz Manning
Yvonne Packbier
Glenda Slingsby
Ann Uldridge
Sonya D’Aoust
Jeanette McLeod

1998

Sonja Bernhardt *President*
Ann Uldridge *Vice President*
Jodie Lupton
Bernadette Hyland
Liz Manning
Lynn Cochrane
Lisa Chesterfield
Jenny Beresford
Wendy McTainsh
Sonya Trau

1999

Ann Uldridge *President*
Spider Redgold *Joint Vice President*
Lynn Cochrane *Joint Vice President*
Sonja Bernhardt
Wendy McTainsh

2000

Ann Uldridge *President*
Spider Redgold *Joint Vice President*
Debbie Metters *Joint Vice President*
Sonja Bernhardt *Ambassador*
Dianne Davis
Julia Ponder

2001

Melinda Horton *President*
Debbie Metters *Joint Vice President*
Marjo Timson *Joint Vice President*
Sonja Bernhardt
Marilyn Beamish
Margaret Turner
Barbara Tobin
Trish Sherrill
Ruth Christie
Dianne Davis
Julia Ponder

2002

Melinda Horton *President*
Debbie Metters *Joint Vice President*
Marjo Timson *Joint Vice President*
Dianne Davis
Julia Ponder
Sonja Bernhardt
Jackie Lack
Ann Uldridge

2003

Barbara Tobin *President*
Kim Parascos *Vice President*
Debra Green
Emilia Seibold
Marjo Timson
Melinda Horton
Amanda Jackson
Maryse Alvis
Kim Roy

2004

Barbara Tobin *President*
Debra Green *Vice President*
Christine Gilbert
Allanah Blair
Sandra Beach
Jane Reid
Kim Roy

2005

Barbara Tobin *President*
Debra Green *Vice President – Members*
Kim Parascos *Vice President – Regional Care*
Emilia Seibold
Amanda Jackson
Kim Sheree
Carol Woodhouse
Anne-Marie Birkill
Helen Partridge
Sandi Tollasepp
Allanah Blair

2006

Barbara Tobin *President*
Debra Green *Vice President*
Kim Sharee
Carol Woodhouse
Anne-Marie Birkill
Tracey Turner
Kim Roy
Raisa Monteiro
Helen Partridge

2007

Anne-Marie Birkill *President*
Debra Green *Vice President*
Barbara Tobin
Carol Woodhouse
Kim Sheree
Tracey Turner
Lynda Edwards
Ruth Drinkwater
Liza Foster
Toni Reid

2008

Anne-Marie Birkill *President*
Toni Reid *Vice President*
Jillian Hellmuth
Ruth Drinkwater
Doreen Awabdy
Kim Sheree
Theodora Le Souquet
Erin Wansbrough
Wendy McTainsh

2009

Anne-Marie Birkill *President*
Topaz Conway *Vice President*
Teresa Murphy
Sue Johnston
Wendy McTainsh
Jillian Helmuth
Doreen Awabdy

2010

Teresa Murphy *President*
Topaz Conway *Vice President*
Jan Massey
Jane Kenna
Celia Webby
Sue Johnston
Tania Singer
Sonia Poothia
Virginia Tobias

2011

Teresa Murphy *President*
Lauren Hall *Vice President*
Jane Kenna
Wendy Dwyer
Sonia Poothia
Sue Johnston
Fiona Sheridan
Celia Webby
Jan Massey

2012

Sue Johnston *President*
Jane Kenna *Vice President*
Catrina Codd
Victoria Clarke
Terry Woodcroft
Fiona Sheridan
Sue Colclough
Felicity Cooper
Celia Webby

2013

Sue Johnston *President*
Jane Kenna *Vice President*
Fiona Sheridan
Terry Woodcroft
Melissa Chiem
Margaret Calder
Sue Colclough

2014

Sue Johnston *President*
Fiona Sheridan *Vice President*
Margaret Willis
Sue Colclough
Michelle Cheong
Fiona Hayes
Mathilde Desselle
Jason Sorby
Kristy Simpkin
Danielle Neale

2015

Fiona Hayes *Chair*
Kristy Simpkin *Vice President*
Sue Johnston
Sue Colclough
Jason Sorby
Fiona Sheridan
Michelle Cheong
Sarah Smith
Mathilde Desselle
Alison Rice
Kaisu Christie
Nina Meyers

2016

Fiona Hayes President
Kristy Simpkin Vice President
Michelle Cheong
Joanna Field
Lisa Crowley
Kaisu Christie
Alison Rice
Andrea Schuessler
Anjuna Singh
Kate Richards

2017

Kristy Simpkin President
Alison Rice Vice President
Penelope Holder
Tracy Russell
Sarah Smith
Emma Greenley
Melissa Sykes
Di Su
Joanna Field

2018

Alison Rice Co-Chair - Science
Joanna Field Co-Chair - ICT
Di Su
Emma Greenley
Penelope Holder
Tracy Russell
Natasha Duerden
Bec Langdon
Marie Howarth
Melissa Sykes

2019

Claudia Giurgiuman Co-Chair – Science
Joanna Field Co-Chair – ICT
Christie Green
Di Su
Penelope Holder
Marie Howarth
Natasha Duerden
Bec Langdon
Melissa Sykes

2020

Claudia Giurgiuman President
Marie Howarth Vice President
Gunjan Allen
Simon Smith
Bec Langdon
Angela Jones
Indi Tansey
Genevieve Alder
Melissa Sykes

2021

Bec Langdon Acting Chair
Gunjan Allen
Simon Smith
Genevieve Alder
Angela Jones
Indi Tansey
Melissa Sykes

2022

Iyari Cevallos Chair
Alison Stokes
Petriea Skitek
Rowena Beckworth
Janet Xiang-Yu Hou
Krysten Bougoure
Bronwyn Venus
Kelly Wilkes
Indi Tansey

Acknowledgements

This book celebrates the legion of talented women who have helped write WiT’s story over the past 25 years. Inside its pages you will discover the beating heart of a community that continues to blossom and grow.

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INTERVIEWS

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Alison Rice
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Bronwyn Venus
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Glenda Stone
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Every WiT member has a story to tell and this is only the first chapter.

We apologise to those who haven’t yet made it into these pages and for any inadvertent errors or omissions. If you have records, photos or other memorabilia to contribute to WiT’s archives please let us know.

About the Author

Was it foresight or serendipity – a lucky coincidence or success preordained?



As a journalist, corporate author and one of Australia's communications industry leaders, Marie Howarth found her tribe when she moved to Queensland and discovered WiT.

A past Vice President and Director (2018-20), she is part of the rich tapestry of talent, experiences and backgrounds that make up the eclectic WiT community.

As WiT burst onto the scene in 1997, Marie was busy juggling a young family while running one of Perth's first digital publishing, Web and multimedia agencies, a business she co-founded in 1987.

She doesn't think of herself as a technologist but rather as an awe-struck fan of the brilliant female founders, researchers, academics, scientists and innovators who are shaping Australia's digital world. Telling their story has been a privilege and a labour of love.

Connect with Marie at
www.linkedin.com/in/mariehowarth





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