



THE UNIVERSITY OF
MELBOURNE

Melbourne School of
Psychological Sciences

STRATEGIC PLAN 2021-2026

CONTEMPLATIVE STUDIES CENTRE



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Amid the action and distraction that fill everyday life, contemplative practices help to provide insight and connection into who we are, who we want to be, and what is most meaningful to us. With foundations in introspection, connection and awareness, contemplative practices help individuals to achieve a quieting of the mind and realisation of what it is to be human, and aid in the development of a more balanced and ethical life. Enabling deeper connection, these profound practices have the potential to transform not just individuals but the entirety of human society.

The Contemplative Studies Centre (CSC) works with interdisciplinary collaborators across the University of Melbourne, in the broader community and worldwide to develop, deliver, support and promote innovative and authentic contemplative practices through our core activities that sit within our three programs of engagement, education, and practice, all underpinned by the foundation of research.

The overarching focus of the CSC is to:

- Facilitate and foster truly **interdisciplinary, evidence-based research** into contemplative practice and methodology. In the public interest of helping to identify and promote authentic and efficacious contemplation-based offerings in Australia, the CSC will rigorously evaluate mindfulness and meditation policy and programs.
- Develop and lead the delivery of **outstanding education and lifelong learning** to encourage the pursuit of knowledge for the wellbeing and flourishing of society.
- Offer accessible **opportunities to take part in a range of contemplative practices** including (but not limited to) mindfulness and meditation.
- Deliver a **world-class engagement program** and forum that starts, pervades and concludes all our work. These endeavours will provide an opportunity for the transfer of knowledge, new ideas and discussion for a diverse range of audiences.

This document seeks to clarify the CSC's goals, challenges, and the steps required to meet those goals. It is intended as a dynamic document, evolving as necessary with greater understanding of the environment in which we operate.





VISION, MISSION AND VALUES

We envision a future where the empirically underpinned knowledge gained from contemplative wisdom, innovative research, lifelong education, and authentic dialogue and practice allows us, our society, and our world to flourish.

Our mission is to build a truly inclusive community of novice and adept practitioners, scholars and academics, clinicians and researchers, and secular, Indigenous, religious and spiritual leaders and changemakers who are focused on understanding, investigating and sharing these profound practices to the benefit of both individuals and the entirety of human society, through greater connection and compassion.

Our values and ethos

- **Compassion** | We seek to nurture the potential of all by bringing a boundless humanity and kindness to our work.
- **Inclusivity** | We warmly embrace diversity of thought, experience, perspective, and tradition, and are committed to the principles of true accessibility.
- **Authenticity** | We embody trustworthiness, transparency, and genuinely seek positive change for the world. We will stay true to our vision and take responsibility for our actions.
- **Integrity** | Our values, ideals, and actions align. We are committed to honesty and accountability.
- **Transformational change** | Our unwavering commitment to excellence in research, education and practice will help to reduce the world's suffering and improve wellbeing.

CONTEXT

Why contemplative studies

Fundamentally, we are committed to the study and advancement of contemplative practices, which includes a broad array of activities that can help generate meaning, create transformation, and cultivate insight and connection, not just within individuals but across the entirety of human society. Contemplative studies critically often entail engagement with, and integration of, 1st (subjective), 2nd (interpersonal), and 3rd (objective) person perspectives in the study of these practices.

But what, exactly, are contemplative practices? For the CSC, contemplative practices encompass a wide variety of individual and group activities where there is close and careful examination, consideration, and/or experience of focused and sustained attention, concentration, and/or awareness. These practices are often used in the cultivation of particular attitudes (e.g., compassion, empathy) or states (e.g., presence, stillness, self-transcendence) and include such things as meditation, prayer, chanting, purposeful movement, and ritual activity. Participation in any number of other activities, including dance, poetry, art, music, writing, listening, singing, and gardening, may also create the conditions for and/or cultivate contemplation directly. However, it is important to note that passively allowing the conditions for contemplation/insight to arise is not the same as intentionally setting out to cultivate contemplation. While we are open to a broad array of contemplative practices, we are most interested in those with an intentional focus on sustained introspection (contemplation) and where there is an authenticity and commitment to practice in an ongoing way. By authenticity, we are referring to practising in alignment with the value of advancing a greater good as well as the values of a tradition or philosophy.

The landscape

Mindfulness and meditation offerings are continuing to proliferate across the globe, with an overwhelming number of practices available to everyone. These practices have been incorporated into the estimated \$1.5 trillion commercial wellbeing industry while also becoming embedded into many education, health and community service delivery models. As the practices have become monetised, the offerings have expanded, and in some cases, profits have been prioritised over substantive tradition and empirical evidence. The resulting practices therefore often lack rigour, ethical content, authenticity and integrative conceptual frameworks.

It is essential that we further develop our understanding of meditation practices in discussion with the traditions from which these practices have arisen. Such efforts will allow us to simultaneously ease the suffering endemic to life, especially via the mental health crisis, and facilitate the pursuit of flourishing and meaning-making more broadly. A greater knowledge of contemplative traditions will provide the perspective required to continue to improve and develop practices to ensure they are safe, efficacious and can provide individual and societal benefits.

The necessity for collaborative centres is well recognised around the world: Mind and Life, Mind and Life Europe, Center for Healthy Minds, Contemplative Sciences Center, Oxford Mindfulness Centre, Contemplative Studies Initiative, The Institute for Mindfulness South Africa, The Leuven Mindfulness Centre, Thomas Jing Centre for Mindfulness Research and Training, The Danish Center for Mindfulness and the Centre for Mindfulness Research and Practice Bangor all exist to encourage greater understanding and collaboration. Prior to the establishment of the Contemplative Studies Centre, The University of Melbourne, and the Monash Centre for Consciousness and Contemplative Studies, no such academic centres existed with a focus on contemplative practice and meditation in Australia.

The CSC was established to encourage dialogue between:

- Scientific disciplines (e.g., psychology, biology, physics, neuroscience),
- The humanities (e.g., philosophy, anthropology, religious studies), and
- Contemplative practice traditions (e.g., monastics and lay contemplative practitioners, secular contemplative practice centres, spiritual directors).

How the Centre provides an integrated approach

The Centre convenes a very experienced, multidisciplinary cohort of academics and practitioners from religious studies, education, philosophy, the social sciences, psychology, psychiatry and neuroscience, as well as contemplative scholars, teachers, and practitioners. The team works together in a synergistic process, with each discipline informing and contributing to the other.

The CSC collaborates with a broad array of disciplines to ensure diverse representation of academic research, education, and engagement. It is especially important that those from sociology, anthropology, religious and cultural studies, and other observational disciplines are part of the process to ensure we avoid in-group biases and situate our work within a broader context.

The Centre is secular, focusing on the experience of this life, not with antipathy to religion but with a neutrality or agnosticism to it. However, we do focus on meditation practices inspired by established traditions and we welcome the inclusion of all historically and contemporarily established traditions with clearly delineated guidelines for the transmission of knowledge and insight, as we also welcome traditions that are open to empirical investigation, a dialogue with science, and have accessible transmission of knowledge and insight.

The Centre's work focusses on evaluating practices within traditional contexts (e.g., Buddhist meditation instruction) and contemporary implementations (e.g., secular mindfulness), as well as evaluating various traditional and secular training programs, in an attempt to identify common and disparate factors in practice across contemplative traditions.

Sustainability

The Centre will further develop and refine a sustainable funding model with an emphasis on the viability and efficiency of its administration and resourcing beyond the initial 5-year investment. As we establish our research, practice and education programs, we will seek out research and education funding from grant bodies. The Centre will also explore opportunities for further philanthropic funding, and will also work with industry to uplift standards, which may see fee-for-service work, service contracts and corporate partnerships become part of our sustainable funding model.

Our model

Our model is based on a strong research program foundation, which drives our interconnected education, engagement and practice programs. It is in this context that we seek to first establish our research program, all the while advancing our efforts to meet with communities on equal ground, involving lived experience and providing wide-reaching opportunities for people to engage with meaningful and authentic contemplative practices. The goal is that all the elements of the Centre's program and our aims mutually inform one another.



OUR GOALS, PRIORITIES, AND STRATEGIES

RESEARCH

Strategic objective 1: Develop world-class collaborative research capacity, evaluation and outputs

The Centre will foster truly interdisciplinary, evidence-based research into contemplative practice and methodology. The Centre will facilitate evaluation of the best ways to learn, practice, and understand contemplative concepts and ideas. The research program will include:

- Two flagship programs.
- Development and encouragement of contemplative studies research capacity through seed funding, research training and supervision.
- Development of genuine interdisciplinary research-practice partnerships.
- High-impact, accessible and translatable research outputs alongside community, stakeholder, and policy engagement.
- Sustainable growth via the active pursuit of additional research funding.

What critical gaps are we addressing through our research program?

There are many unknowns in contemplative science. The Centre views these research questions as integral in the development of the field of contemplative science:

- Do modern adaptations of traditional practices work?
- Who is (and isn't) using contemplative practices in Australia, how are these practices being used and why?
- How can we better define and measure 'progress' or 'success' with contemplative practices?
- How can we make contemplative practices more accessible to those who could benefit?
- How can we make contemplative practices more effective for different user groups?

Challenges and opportunities

The CSC's first flagship research program focuses on the question of how much people need to meditate to experience benefits. This work is critical as not all individuals are willing or able to commit to a lifetime of practice, and to date there is essentially no credible evidence regarding how long people may need to practise meditation to experience meaningful benefit from it.

As part of a multi-billion-dollar global industry, we also need to understand how well meditation apps work as they are the dominant way most people engage in meditation practice today. To understand the extent to which these apps work and whether they are cost-effective, we will undertake a large scale randomised controlled trial of popular commercially available meditation apps.

Moreover, while there is reason to believe that more people are taking up contemplative practices worldwide, we have little to no idea of whether this trend is reflected in the Australian population. We need to understand what proportion of our population is interested in contemplative practice, what they are doing, and why they are doing it.

We also need to understand attitudes towards contemplative practices among the public more generally. To this end, we are conducting a nationally representative survey of Australians and New Zealanders.

We additionally need to understand changes in contemplative practices over time. What are practitioners doing? How can we best understand the nature and goals of their practices? How can we provide guidance and advice for these individuals, ensuring what we are offering meets the needs of the practitioners? To this end, we will be conducting a 'trends in meditation' study among active, regular meditators. We will also be undertaking a second flagship research program to look at experiences of active practitioners over time.

Actions

Action 1: Establish a research program focused on contemplative practice and methodology

- Develop a flagship research program focused on how people become interested in, start, and engage with meditation practices, to develop an evidence base and guidelines for best practice among those wanting to learning contemplative practices (especially via smartphone-based applications).
- Establish a second research program looking at how people advance their meditation practice, what obstacles they experience and how we might help them to overcome them.
- Develop a 'State of Meditation' survey aimed at estimating the prevalence of different types and contexts of contemplative practices in Australia.

Action 2: Facilitate and foster truly interdisciplinary, evidence-based research into contemplative practice and methodology, and build the capacity of staff involved in contemplative research

- Foster and support Research Fellow positions.
- Initiate a multidisciplinary Reference Group.
- Build capacity for exceptional interdisciplinary academic work in contemplative studies through the awarding of seed funding for projects.
- Build on our foundation of existing research to grow our impact in research income and outputs, in terms of scale, focus, quality and quantity.
- Organise and participate in research-focused conferences.

Indicators of impact

- Increased number of academic publications and citations generated by the Centre.
- Number of interdisciplinary collaborations established as a result of the Centre.
- Number of new projects developed and scaled as a result of capacity building. Also measured by the number of co-contributor applications received for seed funding.
- Sustainability via further philanthropic and external research funding.

EDUCATION

Strategic objective 2: Transform student and community lives through the establishment of an outstanding education program in contemplative studies

The Centre will develop and lead the delivery of outstanding education and lifelong learning to encourage the pursuit of knowledge for the wellbeing and flourishing of society. The Centre will provide opportunities for students, researchers, and the community to learn about contemplative practices and their intersection with science, and to explore contemplative experience directly through practice.

The education program will include formal courses, evaluation of contemplative practice programs in the educational setting, professional development for those wanting to use and/or implement contemplative practices, as well as the development of a distinctive model for contemplative pedagogy.

What critical gaps are we addressing through our education program?

- There is a large emphasis on ‘wellness’ rather than a genuine opportunity to engage and have meaningful discussions around the broader purposes and significance of contemplative practices.
- Many educational programs in schools and other institutions (even some Universities) are not evidence-based and do not have a lasting impact.
- Commonly available resources, instructions and training around contemplative practice are diverse, overwhelming in volume and largely unregulated. Because of this, many students do not know where to start when it comes to contemplative practices, and resources are not supportive of the Australian context.
- While contemplative studies programs, and associated contemplative approaches to education, are well established in other international contexts, there currently is no hub for these approaches within Australia.

Challenges and opportunities

The CSC will develop an undergraduate subject available to most students across the University of Melbourne that will provide an educational and experiential insight into a range of contemplative practices, historic and contemporary, informed by the traditions and contexts with which they are connected. This subject will give students the opportunity to think critically about these practices and try them out for themselves. Once this core subject is developed and established, the Centre will look to develop further undergraduate and post graduate education offerings.

It is crucial that all students and community members have equitable access to the delivery of evidence-based contemplative programs that support their wellbeing, and it is imperative that the University’s wellbeing service providers come together to ensure this happens. The CSC will work with the University’s network of wellbeing service providers responsible for sharing and applying research in service settings. It will also work to ensure that evidence informs workforce training and practice across the system. To that end, the CSC will consider the value of short courses and postgraduate study options alongside our undergraduate offerings.

Actions

Action 1: Establish an education program that provides opportunities for students, researchers and the community to learn about contemplative practice and its intersection with science.

- Establish undergraduate subject to launch in 2023.
- Consider the development of professional development offerings for meditation facilitators to support their continued growth and development.
- Consider the development of professional development and/or a framework for contemplative pedagogy to underlie the design of educational offerings.
- Consider the development of a short course, Graduate Certificate in Contemplative Studies, or a Master of Contemplative Studies.

Action 2: Develop resources to support the community in navigating contemplative offerings.

- Expand on science communications initiatives such as cartoon explainer videos for beginner meditators.
- Continue to develop new, evidence-based resources and expand on the Contemplative Resources Hub page on our website.
- Partner with evidence-based organisations (e.g. Cheetah House) to provide resources and explore potential for support group for Australians.

Action 3: Establish a consulting program to evaluate and uplift existing contemplative programs.

- Use research to apply rigorous evaluation of mindfulness and meditation policy and programs to ensure authentic and efficacious contemplation-based offerings in Australia and beyond.
- Facilitate evaluation of contemplative training programs (including apps, online programs, one-on-one and group offerings).
- Consider consultation work for specific individuals or groups within the community, government, healthcare, education, or contemplative communities (either secular or spiritual).

Indicators of impact

- Student enrolment numbers
- Subject Experience Survey (SES)
- Number of faculties that access the course
- Involvement of interdisciplinary and external guest lecturers
- Formal involvement of multiple faculties across the University

PRACTICE

Strategic objective 3: Foster engaged communities through accessible guided meditation practice

The Centre will support diverse communities to try, learn about, and sustain a meditation practice through free guided meditation sessions presented by expert teachers from varied spiritual, faith, Indigenous and secular traditions. Offerings will be available for beginner, intermediate and advanced meditators.

What critical gaps are we addressing through our practice program?

- It is difficult for many people, particularly those who are new to meditation, to know how and where to safely access and try a broad range of guided meditation sessions with teachers representing many faith, Indigenous, wisdom and religious traditions.

Challenges and opportunities

Ideally, University prepares students for meaningful professional and personal lives, however, in tertiary institutions academic development is often prioritised over a student's personal growth. In order to help address this, the Centre will expand on its highly successful guided meditation sessions to empower students of all backgrounds to engage with the intellectual and practical study of contemplative approaches from the sciences, arts and humanities, while simultaneously exploring and developing their own values and capacities through powerful experiential practices.

Actions

Action 1: Expose people to various types of meditation practice and traditions

- Develop guided drop-in and meditation series to expose meditators to different types of meditation and provide opportunities to meet teachers and understand what tradition they may wish to pursue for a personal practice.

- Provide a forum for meditators to share reflections of their practice and ask questions of expert teachers.
- Host 'Tradition Deep Dives' to provide a platform for teachers from a range of faith and wisdom traditions to explore a single concept within a wisdom tradition, an overview of less well-known traditions, or a presentation on a method of meditation.

Action 2: Provide a safe space to practice meditation

- Partner with evidence-based support organisations (e.g., Cheetah House) to provide support for those experiencing meditation-related adversities.
- Provide virtual and physical spaces dedicated to engaging with and discussing meditation practice and experience.
- Ensure CSC highlights the risks involved with meditation and supports people to make informed decisions about whether to pursue a practice.

Indicators of impact

- Wide range of faith and wisdom traditions represented in all activities
- Registration rates
- Attendee satisfaction surveys and Net Promotor Scores (NPS)
- Number of social media mentions and engagement
- Retention of attendees
- Mailing list growth and retention





ENGAGEMENT

Strategic objective 4: Create profound impact through an innovative and creative engagement program and connections that support the Centre's research, education and practice programs.

The Centre will deliver a world-class engagement program and forum for the transfer of knowledge, new ideas and discussion, and provide a space for interdisciplinary discussion of traditional, contemporary, and academic/scientific understanding of contemplative practice and experiences. The Centre will develop engagement offerings that support its research, education and practice programs using specialist science communications.

What critical gaps are we addressing through our engagement program?

- Universities have historically neglected to include Indigenous, faith, wisdom and religious communities as a critical part of conversations around the future of contemplative practices, thus losing crucial trust.
- Decision-making around government-funded mindfulness and meditation programs lacks rigour and evidence-base.
- There is pervasive misinformation and hype around contemplative practices in our media and community.
- There is currently no contemplative-focused academic or student society to support collaboration and networking in the scholarly community.

Challenges and opportunities

The CSC will provide a forum for interdisciplinary discussion of traditional, contemporary, and academic/scientific understanding of contemplative practice and experiences. It is important that communities and individuals that undertake religious contemplative practices can contribute to contemplative research and practice in Australia today.

To engage multiple sociocultural and faith communities, we must undo certain damage that has been done, meeting them in a place of true curiosity and openness. Such qualities do not entail a default deference but a willingness to listen and to try to understand. The way in which we partner also has critical implications as we must first outline our own positions, generated along with our clear stipulation of our values and goals and ensure that those organisations with whom we work closely exhibit meaningful alignment with our own values and goals.

Crucially, the Centre wishes to contribute to and affect public policy to ensure the necessary evidence-base for decision-making. This will have important outcomes for the teaching of meditation, curriculum development, for-profit meditation organisations and the use of meditation in institutions such as prisons, clinical-care settings and education providers.

Actions

Action 1: Develop a dynamic public engagement program to enhance the public's understanding of contemplative studies

- Develop programming that is responsive to current issues and supports informed and safe conversations about contemplative practices.
- Ensure programming is consumer-led and centres voices of those with lived experience.
- Establish and grow the 'Contemplation Conversations' series aimed at promoting contemplative studies to a public audience by partnering with relevant organisations, institutions and individuals.
- Access opportunities in the media to highlight and promote the work of the Centre and develop a brief document for the media on how to interrogate claims made about contemplative practices.
- Ensure the website, social media and other engagement-related outputs are accessible and elevate the CSC's profile to that of a unique cultural institution that passionately fosters discussion and ideas to consolidate its reputation as a world-leader in contemplative engagement.

Action 2: Develop an academic-focused engagement series aimed at advancing the field of contemplative studies

- Continue to facilitate and develop the 'Wise Words' series for academics and students. The series will see local and international academics share the latest findings in their related research field.
- Foster a student society for the engagement in and promotion of contemplative studies.

Action 3: Foster relationships with sociocultural and faith communities to help inform contemplative research, education and practice for the future

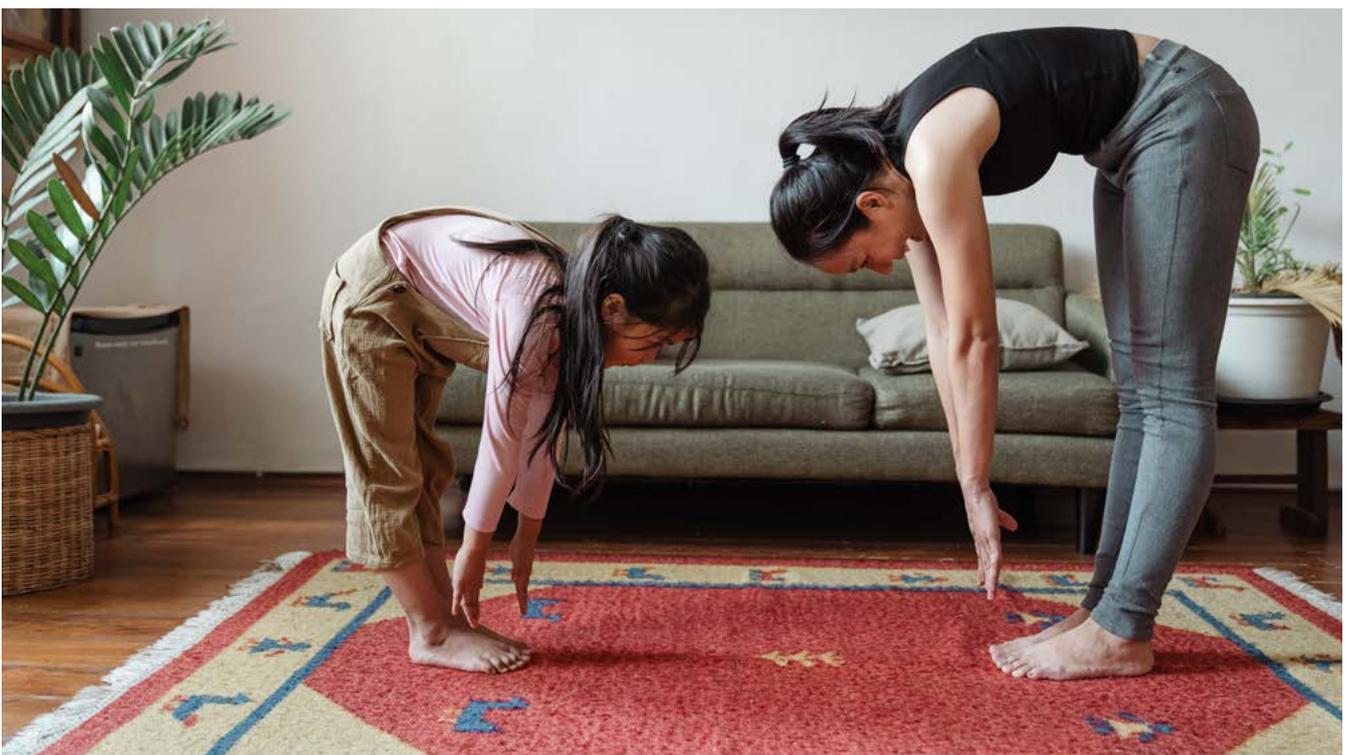
- Facilitate a range of 'Contemplative Salon' events aimed at bringing together faith representatives, thought leaders, teachers and people with lived experience to discuss the big issues facing contemplative practices.
- Build trust between communities through regular engagement, focus groups and surveys.
- Provide cultural competency training for CSC staff.

Action 4: Partner with organisations and individuals to support collaboration and impact

- Develop a partnership framework that establishes a model for informal and formal partnerships.
- Meet with potential partners to assess whether a formal or informal partnership is the right mechanism for building and sustaining a relationship. Review the purpose and value-add of possible partnership.
- Assess risks and challenges of possible partnership.
- Monitor, maintain and strengthen partnerships.

Action 5: Affect public policy decision regarding contemplative practices

- Inform government and other decision-making bodies of the evidence-base for secular and for-profit mindfulness and meditation programs being funded through the development of a white paper.





WHAT DOES SUCCESS LOOK LIKE?

In five years, the CSC will have achieved global recognition in research and engagement, sustained by relationships with international collaborators and advocates.

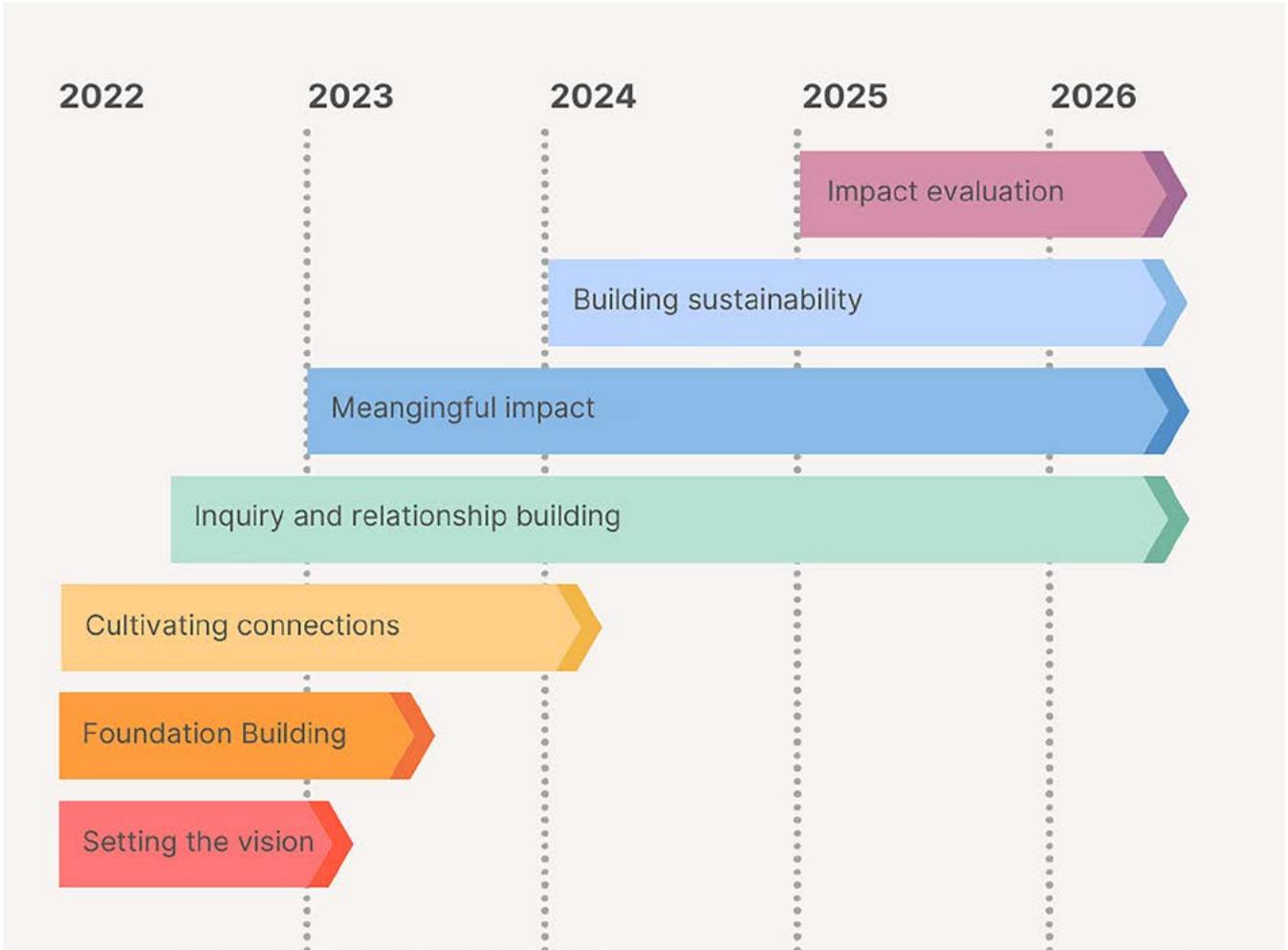
Our connections to faith, wisdom, Indigenous and secular communities will be strong and founded in trust, and these networks will be essential for knowledge sharing and driving the research of contemplative practices forward.

Our comprehensive education program will offer interdisciplinary programs across the academic cycle and will be celebrated as enriching student lives. Our practice program will expose thousands in our community to different faith, wisdom, Indigenous and secular traditions, thus enhancing the landscape of contemplative practice and providing a gateway to furthering personal practice.

The CSC will be recognised for providing accessible expert advice in the public interest on the evidence-base for contemplative programs, and in so doing will help lift the quality of media reporting on contemplative practices.

We will have developed and enacted a sustainable business and operations model to see the CSC continue and thrive beyond the initial five-year investment from the Donor.

TIMELINE





▶ mdhs.unimelb.edu.au/CSC

CONTACT US

📍 Level 1, Melbourne Connect
700 Swanston Street
The University of Melbourne
Victoria 3010 Australia

✉ contemplate-csc@unimelb.edu.au

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