

National Cultural Policy Submission

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Submitted: As an artist
As an individual

What challenges and opportunities do you see in the pillar or pillars most relevant to you? Feel free to respond to any or all pillars:

First Nations

Recognising and celebrating the centrality of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture, stories and practitioners was one of the only priorities all parties and pre-policy papers agreed upon prior to the 2022 election, and the first recommendation of Creative Australia nine years ago.

National cultural think-tank A New Approach suggests the updated policy should “draw from Indigenous ways of knowing and experiencing, acknowledging the need for closer links between arts and culture and other aspects of our lives.”

The Australia Council also articulates the importance of **self-determination** in achieving this goal: “This needs to be done the ‘right way’: with self-determined, First Nations-led approaches that support artists, communities, organisations and sustainable practice and ensure that recognition, rights and revenues flow back to the creators of the works.”

A commitment to First Nations-led practice is long overdue and presents an extraordinary opportunity to increase the visibility of First Nations culture and creators, learn from and embed First Nations ways of working, and begin to decolonise our sector’s prevailing monoculture.

However, we also need to recognise that growing appetites and expectations around First Nations leadership means First Nations Elders, Board members, consultants and practitioners are being called on more often by more organisations (particularly when so many are starting from a deficit position) – and are often either asked to share their time and wisdom for free.

We need to **reconsider our current inflexible governance models in order to pay First Nations and independent Board members**, and be able to access a **centralised First Nations arts advisory resource and/or new funding** to ensure this vital cultural labour doesn’t become something only well-resourced organisations are able to benefit from.

A Place for Every Story

It’s not news that many Australians don’t have equal access to arts and culture. Addressing this inequity will require the strategic removal of barriers to ensure everyone has the opportunity to take part in all areas and at all levels: from who can participate and what stories they can tell, to where they’re from, what they do, and what roles or art forms they choose.

However, equity doesn’t come from treating everybody equally, it comes from providing whatever is needed to make everyone equal. This includes **equity of access for all locations, all art forms, types and sizes, and all points of engagement with the arts.**

A new national Cultural Policy needs to **work in concert with State, Territory and Local Governments** in order to impact and be accessible for all Australians, regardless of where we live.

This includes initiatives and investment to address the ongoing disparities between cities and regional areas, and between Sydney/Melbourne and everywhere else.

It must also be applicable across all **traditional, contemporary and increasingly hybrid art forms, across community and professional practice, and across all scales – including directing more investment toward independent practitioners and the small-to-medium (S2M) sector** that outperforms its bigger and better-funded counterparts at every level other than operating budgets.

Existing initiatives to increase diversity still tend to approach the issue from an audience perspective, but the current monoculture will persist until we **improve access and representation for all points of arts engagement – from audiences and participants, to artists and arts workers, leaders and members of our governing Boards.**

Self-determination is also important in this context, and we are finally seeing increased appetite and expectations around ‘community-led’ and ‘community-engaged practice,’ as well as for Australian work that depicts the authentic, lived experiences of people from marginalised and under-represented groups.

These terms are emerging as contemporary alternatives to ‘community arts and cultural development’ (CACD). This reflects the corresponding change that has taken place across the sector over the last decade, which moves us away from a 40-year legacy of predominantly white practitioners leading activities for diverse participants **towards self-determined practice led by practitioners who share lived experiences with the communities and stories they represent** (‘nothing about us, without us’).

The Centrality of the Artist

Arts participation is often talked about as a human right, but less is said about the rights of the people making that art. More than ever, we need a national Cultural Policy that **addresses practitioners’ precarious and subsistence living conditions** (which have worsened during the pandemic, even as we relied more heavily on their work).

A new national Cultural Policy needs to **recognise artists and cultural workers as essential workers, with the same rights as those in other industries** – be that through a minimum basic income scheme, wage standards, job guarantees, fellowships, public employment opportunities, other forms of income support, or following international examples to support those who are out of work without our current ‘mutual obligation’ requirements.

“All public funding for arts and cultural projects should be contingent on fair pay for the people who make the work,” Mills writes. “Alongside the current project-based model, arts funding should investigate and trial better ways of employing artists in more secure forms of work.”

We also need **policy settings around arts education and training, protection of copyright and intellectual property (including new protections for digital creation and distribution), support for mobility and export, innovative business models, fit-for-purpose legislative, regulatory, tax and investment incentives, expanded collective bargaining rights, removal of tax on prizes and grants, and changes to superannuation and tax legislation to ensure artists receive superannuation on all their client income.** ANA adds that we also need to “balance legal protections for creative works, in terms of protecting creators’ rights to recognition, compensation and expression, with the potential impacts of the exercise of those rights on vulnerable communities and individuals.”

Without doing so, we risk homogenising the types of artists who can afford to work for so little return, and making creative practice something only the wealthy and privileged can afford.

Strong Institutions

Governments often measure their legacy in bricks and mortar. Everyone wants the shiny new thing, but a **coordinated national approach that maintains and expands existing arts infrastructure and invests in new capital in the areas that need it the most** would be both more strategic and more cost-effective.

Strong institutions require significant and stable investment. We need to **reverse the “slow strangulation” of the Australia Council and ABC** and resist the recent Parliamentary Inquiry recommendation that the Productivity Commission should consider “arrangements which govern funding of artistic programs”, **reverse the trend for Governmental overreach interference in these agencies, and return (and ambitiously increase) their operating, commissioning and devolved funding budgets.**

Our sector needs the **independence and transparency of the Australia Council**. We need the expertise that only a room full of **knowledgeable, representative peers** can provide. And we need to stop wasting limited resources on duplicating unnecessary decision-making processes (often with confusing, inconsistent or inferior results, as the Catalyst and RISE funding models have revealed).

With such low expectations and belief in anything more than Governmental disinterest or disdain, simply stopping the annual haemorrhaging of Federal arts funding may appear like a win. But the sector needs a **strategic and significant increase in arts funding – at all levels, but particularly multi-year operational, administrative and capacity-building support.**

The benefits which flow from a healthy arts industry have never been needed more keenly than right now, as Australia emerges from living with the COVID-19 public health emergency,” the Parliamentary Inquiry said. This builds the case for **multi-agency support of arts and culture**. ANA proposed a plan informed by existing 2030 plans for agriculture, sport, innovation and tourism based on 21st Century priorities for Australian arts and cultural policy. This includes “using arts and cultural activities in existing and new initiatives across all relevant portfolios, especially in placemaking and community-building, to mitigate loneliness, social exclusion and isolation.”

However, this cross-departmental commitment to arts and culture comes with a caveat. The appetite and tolerance for ‘art-washing’ is on a rapid decline (as demonstrated by the annual Artwash Award from WA’s pvi collective). Corporate sponsors from the resources, mining, defence technology and immigration detention sectors and international governments have made recent headlines for attempting to improve their corporate reputations by association with the arts organisations they support – resulting in protests, boycotts, loss of artistic and organisational income.

A Cultural Policy that centres First Nations culture, free speech and artistic integrity alongside diversity, human rights and responses to the climate crisis must distance itself from the ‘all funding is good funding’ rhetoric and not disadvantage organisations who approach fundraising from an ethical or environmental perspective.

Reaching the Audience

A new national Cultural Policy needs to address the stop-start funding of arts research and data agencies, which have meant we now lack a single repository that captures Australia-wide data on arts funding and programs. It won't even need to reinvent the wheel, simply **reinstate census questions about arts involvement, ABS Cultural and Creative Satellite Accounts and the biannual Meeting of Cultural Ministers.**

Audience development and diversification initiatives will also need to address the **growing online audiences** that have benefited from the sector's paradigm-shifting COVID-pivots into digital and hybrid creation and delivery mechanisms.

Almost overnight, artists and organisations could reach more (and more significant) markets, including non-traditional arts audiences. Those audiences found more ways to engage than ever before. Importantly, those previously denied access to our programs and services were suddenly only a mouse-click away.

Now that the panic and pivots of COVID-19 have depleted our sector and left us all exhausted. For those returning to our venues and offices, it's tempting to go back to the way things used to be. As artists and organisations move towards a new-new-normal, however, we have an opportunity to draw from the best of this recent experience, improve the parts that caused us problems in the past, and **reimagine how we make art work onsite and online – in ways that are more flexible, accessible and better for everyone involved.**

But the need to address digital inequality was also brought into sharp focus by COVID-19. Digital platforms may have made our work more accessible and affordable, but we can't assume users have the devices, bandwidth or knowledge to access them or that our teams have the skills and equipment they need to deliver our programs online.

There's a digital divide between our organisations too, with those who already had digital infrastructure in place over this recent period faring much better than those without existing resources, capacity or skills. All of which means that **we can't ditch the digital and need to avoid returning to 'the way things have always been done.'**

Please tell us how each of the 5 pillars are important to you and your practice and why. Feel free to respond to any or all that are applicable to you:

First Nations

As a non-Indigenous Aussie-Brit, I am never more aware than when talking or writing about culture that I do so from the unceded lands of the oldest living continuing culture in the world. I understand this extraordinary privilege comes with individual and collective responsibilities that go beyond respect and into allyship and paying the rent.

A commitment to First Nations creators and cultural practice can't just be about the stories our artists and arts organisations tell, but also **who tells those stories (and who should not).**

It can't just support First Nations artists and arts workers to work in First Nations organisations, projects or contexts, but needs to **embed First Nations people and perspectives across all of our organisations, boards and teams** (and pay for it appropriately, as above).

It can't capitalise on the First Nations arts and cultural economy without **enforcing Indigenous Cultural and Intellectual Property (ICIP) consumer protection frameworks, laws and protocols.**

And it can't expect First Nations-led organisations to submit to arbitrary deadlines and frameworks, but should rather – following the leadership of Magabala Books, for example – allow those organisations to **bend 'mainstream' expectations and share Indigenous ways of working that decolonise and build the capacity of the broader sector.**

A Place for Every Story

Arts and culture thrive with diversity, but my recent survey into Australian arts governance confirmed the failures of arts Boards and organisations in the areas of access and diversity – both in terms of Board representation and within the organisations they oversee. In spite of increasing rhetoric, changing community and funder expectations, our sector isn't yet **walking the talk about cultural safety, representation and centering First Nations peoples and culture.**

As an arts, cultural and not-for-profit consultant with a national remit and client base, I have witnessed all the ways in which community-led organisations outpace those with monocultural leadership, who often hide behind Reconciliation Action Plans, Disability Access and Inclusion Plans, Diversity and Engagement Policies without ever changing who gets a seat at the table.

Those organisations that demonstrate a commitment to community-led practice at both governance and executive levels should be supported and adequately compensated for their valuable cultural labour and best-practice example.

Those that don't should be required to deliver improvements in these areas as a condition of their funding, such as Chairs and CEOs who lack relevant lived experience replacing themselves with leaders that do. We have a growing body of practice to draw from in this area (such as my own succession from Arts Access Australia and Veronica Pardo's from Arts Access Victoria), but also examples of organisations taking a step away from their community-led status (demonstrated by recent grumblings around WA's Community Arts Network Board choosing not to replace their outgoing CEO (one of the few women of colour in Australia 'at the arts and culture leadership table') with someone else with shared lived experience.

In order to lead by example, this includes **looking at the diversity and representation of Office of the Arts and Australia Council leadership and staff.** The Australia Council increased its diversity focus in its last Strategic Plan, and now requires funded organisation to report on how their teams and programs respond the how "our arts reflect us." But the Morrison Government stacked the Australia Council Board just before the 2022 election, including controversial former NSW arts minister Don Harwin. And the Australia Council's Executive Team only reflects cultural diversity in its one Aboriginal-identified role.

Australian literary sector leaders and editors remain persistently monocultural. The trend to publish more diverse Australian voices and stories has outpaced the growth and development of editors, publishers and sensitivity readers with similar or comparable experiences. This can be seen in manuscripts being rushed into print without adequate support, or in writers being subjected to culturally insensitive (and damaging) editorial processes. **We need to support more diverse publishers, editors and literary sector leaders, as well as writers.**

Any discussion about community-led and cultural leadership also needs to extend into the disability space. More commonly used in discussions about ethnicity, the term 'cultural safety' is defined by The Relationship is the Project as: "an approach we can all use to look at how our behaviours, opinions and actions can negatively affect the cultural identity and wellbeing of the people we work with." But little currently exists about what cultural safety means in a disability

context, even though Deaf and Disabled people make up at least 20% of the Australian population and the experience of disability cuts across all other identities and demographics.

A few of the community-led organisations already demonstrating leadership in this area include ActNow Theatre Company (SA), All the Queens Men (VIC), Arts Access Australia (national), Arts Access Victoria (VIC), Arts and Cultural Exchange (NSW), Bangarra (NSW), Blak & Bright Festival (VIC), Centre for Stories (WA), Diversity Arts Australia (national), Djed Press (VIC), Encounter Theatre (WA), Ilbijerri Theatre Company (VIC), Koorie Heritage Trust (VIC), Liminal (VIC), Magabala Books (WA), Marrugeku (WA), Mascara Literary Review (NSW), Moogahlin Performing Arts (NSW), Multicultural Arts Victoria (VIC), Peril (VIC), Regional Arts Australia (national), Subbed In (VIC), Sweatshop Western Sydney Literacy Movement (NSW) and Tutti Arts (SA).

Interestingly, only two of these (Ilbijerri and Marrugeku) currently sit within Australia's most secure funding cohort, the Australia Council's National Performing Arts Partnership Framework (NPAPF). It is to be hoped the program's transition from the Major Performing Arts Framework in 2018 signals an **ongoing broadening of the NPAPF**. The inclusion of multidisciplinary organisation Artback NT within the cohort is a particularly good sign for a future NPAPF to drop 'performing' from its framework entirely and release its historic quarantine on the majority of the Australia Council funds. **Reallocating this funding to more open grant opportunities** would require organisations to be more accountable and competitive with S2M sector, which reaches more than double NPAPF audiences on less than half the investment (with S2M funding equating to a subsidy of \$5.68 per person, compared to the MPA's \$33.06).

The future of Australian arts and culture should be diverse, inclusive and innovative. It's long past time to dismantle the inaccessible systems that restrict this from being so. It's time to be bold. It's time to evolve.

The Centrality of the Artist

As a reader and writer, I am proud that reading comes second only to listening to recorded music as the most common way Australians engage with the arts. Nearly nine out of ten Australians are regular readers, making reading a more popular pastime than watching TV or going online. Participation in literary activities is growing faster than in either visual arts or music and the number of Australian writers continues to grow.

However, literature receives the smallest proportion of Federal arts funding – a figure that has more than halved over the past two decades. Successful authors can aspire to an average of less than \$13,000/year from our creative work (or just under \$5,000/year for poets). As a result, only 20% of us are able to write full-time, and only 5% earn Australia's average income. Our fellow literary professionals are similarly underpaid, and members of marginalised groups further disadvantaged within this already challenging environment. We need to **reverse the value, funding and support systems that put writers and literary professionals amongst the sector's lowest income earners and funding recipients**.

Writers are one-person businesses. The small and precarious income we receive from writing can include article fees (often less than \$200 per piece) or – for the lucky few – publishing advances (often no more than \$5,000, though my own was closer to \$200), festival appearances (usually around \$250), royalties (which are often negligible and can take years to acquire), grants, prizes, fellowships or awards. Public lending and copyright payments are also an essential source of income for writers, which is why Mills writes that "it is vital that the **PLR/ELR scheme be expanded to include digital lending rights**, as recommended by the Australian Society of Authors."

Fellowships that give writers time and space to write are just (if not more) important as awards for already-published (or already-written) books. I have never felt as held, seen and valued as a writer as during my recent Bundanon residency. However, these competitive processes can also privilege those with submission-writing skills, general-sector savviness or time, and can even be damaging – particularly for initiatives targeted at people who have traditionally been left out.

Strong Institutions

Australia's arts boards are broken. The very ground on which our arts organisations and institutions are built is unpredictable, unsteady and (increasingly) unsafe.

But if our Boards and board members are failing, it's because they're being set up to fail. In most cases, the causes of this board dysfunction can be linked to the failings of the governance model itself. The primary reason our arts orgs have arts boards is because the law requires them to, but the strictures and hoops of The Corporations Act and Incorporated Associations Acts shouldn't be the self-fulfilling prophecies they have become. **Arts governance needs a radical rethink.**

Australia's governance training and consultancy industry (myself included) makes its living by asking organisations who can barely afford it to invest again and again for each new generation of Board members. But now more than ever, ours is a sector that doesn't have resources to spare: either to support this perpetual cycle of governance training or address the damage poor boards can leave in their wake.

Yes, it's been a difficult few years for everybody, including Board members. But at a time when most organisations needed more from our Boards, we saw many step back instead of up, or ask more of their staff as if oblivious to their operating context – perhaps forgetting that duty of care is enhanced during times of crisis, not diminished.

Australian's artists and arts workers are at breaking point, with sector-wide burnout, staff shortages and 'post'-COVID exhaustion. With the pandemic joining floods, bushfires and nearly a decade of arts funding cuts, the arts industry has never been more vulnerable.

In a sector that relies on individuals' passion (and usually takes it for granted), we didn't have a strong record for team safety, wellbeing and culture even prior to the pandemic. But the ongoing impact of COVID-19 has made it impossible to overlook our former pressure points and bandaid-solutions. Now they're exposed, ignoring them would be nothing short of negligence, a total failure of our duty of care. So, in spite of a more competitive funding landscape than most of us have ever experienced, this means we need to **resist the panic to invent more ambitious programs, and instead focus our gaze inwards** – or risk there being no-one left to make sure the show can go on.

Those organisations that re-emerge in a post-pandemic world will need to rebuild stronger than ever, including **fit-for-purpose governance models and wellbeing strategies** that give us what we really need: time to heal, time to reimagine, and time to redefine what success means outside of exponential growth.

Reaching the Audience

Telling Australian stories is crucial for our national identity and culture, and the individual wellbeing that comes from seeing ourselves reflected on stage, page and screen. However, then Shadow Minister for the Arts Tony Burke noted at Reset that “under the cover of the pandemic, Mr Morrison's government suspended quotas, particularly for genres of Australian-made television.”

A new national Cultural Policy should **not just reinstate what's been lost, but prioritise authentic stories told by those who have lived the experiences those stories contain (across all art forms), particularly from those whose voices have been ignored or marginalised in the past.**

In doing so, it will need to **be wary of the language of othering, such as outdated uses of 'diversity' and 'inclusion' (or former Arts Minister Simon Crean's infamous use of 'tolerance' in Creative Australia),** which work from a deficit position to imply a static point of comparison to be diverse from or included into.

Are there any other things that you would like to see in a National Cultural Policy?

Australia has a problem with its peaks. Unlike other industries, we have multiple, often contradictory representative organisations but lack a single membership-based equivalent to the Farmers' Federation and a history of identifying and lobbying on shared priorities. While some have called for a new cultural sector peak to professionalise collective arts advocacy efforts, consultant John Daley noted that "such a peak body would need to show it is acting for all of them. And it is only likely to be effective if it has substantial dedicated resources of its own." Others have argued that diverting limited resources into a new peak body "would be a big mistake – in effect the privatisation of public policy".

Instead, I believe we need a national Cultural Policy brave enough to let the Australia Council do its democratically-mandated job – not just to free it from current critique and overreach, but empower it to speak to power without fear of governmental retribution (in the same way the Federal Government supports Sport Australia to undertake advocacy work).

A national Cultural Policy is also a practical way for the Commonwealth to support the sector to recover from the pandemic, lead and leverage investment across all three levels of government, meet National Cabinet and Commonwealth Budget priorities and, as cultural sector advocate Esther Anatolitis writes, "set out strategies that promote a flourishing industry for a nation confident in its own culture."

"All states and territories have a current strategy or plan or roadmap [and] the Australian Local Government Association have signed up all their members to a national policy position on arts and culture," ANA's Kate Fielding notes. "This is a pretty incredible moment where we could have all three levels of government having a coherent policy approach to this area."

However, Daly reminds us that "**arts and culture policy is only sustainable if it is bipartisan.**" Particularly given, as Anatolitis writes, "no national arts and culture approach has ever survived a change in government in Australia."

Read more at : <https://larsenkeys.com.au/2022/08/03/have-your-say-on-the-new-national-cultural-policy/>