

National Cultural Policy Submission

Shopfront Arts Co. op.

Submitted: On behalf of a not-for-profit arts organisation

As a worker/professional in an industry who uses arts (e.g. art therapist, tour guide)

As an artist

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:

A Place for Every Story

Australian federal arts funding is failing more than 4.9 million young Australians aged between 4 and 25. The federal government arts investment has systematically defunded the areas of the professional industry focussed on children and young people – from the youth orchestras, youth dance companies, and over the past decade, youth theatre companies. Arts has been removed as a focus of secondary education, replaced at the expense of Science, Technology, Engineering, and Maths.

"It is now widely documented in the United States of America, Canada and Europe, including the United Kingdom, that those young people whose learning is embedded in the Arts achieve better grades and overall test scores, are less likely to leave school early, rarely report boredom and have a more positive self-concept than those that are deprived of arts experiences. In addition, interestingly, they are more likely to become involved in community service."

Professor Robyn Ewing – Australian Education Review

An Australian pilot study of 1,000 students, including 155 ATSI students, found that CAIPE, an arts-based educational intervention, 'closed the gap' in Indigenous students' NAPLAN scores by more than 20% in reading, 17% in writing and 12% in mathematics.

There is an opportunity to embed the arts in the lives of all young Australians by making Youth Engagement a priority of the National Cultural Policy.

The evidence for the beneficial impacts of participation in Youth Arts is unequivocal. This includes the preventative benefits against mental illness, a vital intervention considering half of serious mental health issues begin before the age of 14.

There is an extensive body of research both within Australia and internationally that demonstrates that engaging young people in the performing arts delivers:

- An increase in wellbeing including resilience and the ability to overcome challenges;
- An improvement in self-esteem and sense of self-worth;
- A greater connection to community and enhanced sense of belonging;
- An improvement across all areas of curriculum learning;
- The development in creative thinking, problem solving and working collaboratively; and
- An increased willingness to participate in community activities such as volunteering and voting.

There is a clear opportunity to leverage the arts, and in particular young people and the community's engagement in the arts, as a component of Australia's post COVID-19 recovery.

Data research specialists Patternmakers conducted a study of over 1,200 people in 2017 to investigate whether or not participating in the performing arts had any impact on the mental health and wellbeing of young Australians, and if so, was it positive or negative? The results found:

- 91% said it had a positive impact on their wellbeing
- 89% identified a positive impact on their self-confidence
- 85% were more likely to empathise with another person's perspective
- 52% said it helped reduce their general level of anxiety

An Australian systematic review of 56 studies conducted by Vic Health found evidence that performing arts programs and interventions support mental wellbeing and social health.

For every \$1 invested in Youth Performing Arts, \$7 is potentially saved in mental health investment, according to a study of the Social Return on Investment of a youth circus program conducted by Cirkidz and the University of South Australia.

"Confidence is the starting point for a lot of things. It builds resilience; the ability to get back up after something hasn't gone right at home."

Evaluation participant

An investment in Australia's Youth Arts industry doesn't only benefit young Australians. These companies employ professional artists who have borne the brunt of COVID restrictions. Engaging professional artists to create work with and for young people doesn't just improve the lives of young Australians, it helps support professional artists who are struggling to recover from the most difficult financial period in their industry's history.

Strong Institutions

Australia is recognised for producing some of the most respected work with and for young people in the world. Indeed, the current Chair of the International Association of Theatre for Children and Young People, ASSITEJ International, the global peak body for the youth theatre industry, is renown Australian arts leader Sue Giles AM, Artistic Director of Polyglot Theatre based in Melbourne.

Ironically, Polyglot was one of five leading youth theatre companies defunded by the Australia Council in 2020. The reason given: "There was not enough funding to go around". Over the past ten years the Australia Council has withdrawn funding from:

Arena Theatre Company (Vic); Backbone Youth Arts (Qld); Barking Gecko Theatre (WA); Canberra Youth Theatre (ACT); Cirkidz (SA); Jigsaw Theatre Company (ACT); La Mama Theatre (Vic); Lowdown (national); Monkey Baa Theatre Company (NSW); Outback Theatre for Young People (NSW); PACT (NSW); Platform Youth Arts (Vic); Polyglot Theatre (Vic); Riverland Youth Theatre (SA); Shopfront Arts Co-op (NSW); Slingsby (SA); St Martins Youth Arts Centre (Vic); Tantrum Youth Theatre (NSW); The Blue Room (WA); Urban Myth Theatre of Youth (SA); Southern Edge Youth Theatre (SA); and Young People and the Arts Australia (national).

In 2022, the Australian Theatre for Young People has joined this list, in the same year that the NSW State Government invested over \$100 million in the ATYP premises to provide a long-term home for them.

There is an opportunity and urgent need to strengthen the nation's institutions that specialise in connecting professional artists and creative practice with young people.

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

The Youth Arts industry uses a rights-based approach to interacting with young people. These companies specialise in giving young Australians a personal voice in a world that is increasingly international and online. Their work brokers relationships within communities and starts conversations that connect them with each other, with service organisations, and with adults in their lives. Research conducted in Australia and across the world demonstrates the significant beneficial impact this has on educational outcomes, on community-building, and the improvement in mental health and resilience.

“One thing we do at Jopuka is survey our young people every year. We ask them 30 questions: what topics do you want to share on stage, what topics are irrelevant, what shows/musicals would you like us to do. We also have Rocket Fuel, a 3-year project here we interview hundreds of young people. We’re going to give that data to 7 theatre makers. This year we had teen pregnancy crop up. Teen pregnancy is a really big issue on the coast. We’re talking about toxic masculinity, teen pregnancy, sexual identity. Then with Brown Paper Bag Canteen by Alexander Lee-Rekers it is all about food inequality, class inequality.”

Joshua Maxwell – Artistic Director of Jopuka Productions

Youth Theatre companies in Australia share an understanding that improving the lives of young people can change a generation of Australians. The youth theatre sector specialises in facilitating opportunities for young people to be and feel seen and heard. This rights-based approach to program development and delivery actively prioritises the needs and empowerment of First Nations, culturally and linguistically diverse, regional and remote, socially disadvantaged, and differently abled young people.

“Sidney and the team can give them the tools and facilitate, but the community have to own it. Every community is different in terms of the stories they want to share.”

Frances Rings – Artistic Director of Bangarra Dance Theatre

Prior to the arrival of COVID-19 in 2020, Australia was facing a mental health crisis amongst young people. The past two years have exacerbated this issue. The 2021 Annual Mission Australia Youth Survey which gathers responses from over 20,000 young Australians again saw Mental Health at the top of concerns for young people aged between 15 and 19. The top three personal issues identified by young people were:

1. Coping with stress
2. Mental health
3. School and study problems

This was also one of the findings of the Australia Talks survey that received feedback from over 60,000 Australians. According to data from the Australia Talks National Survey, 1 in 5 young people say they're struggling with their mental health. Across almost every mental-health-related question in the 2021 survey, young people came off worse.

This decline reflects a range of factors including isolation and increase in time spent on screens, a loss of employment opportunities due to COVID in a casualised workforce, increasing costs of education and pressures associated with achievement at school and university. The Mission Australia survey found 77% of young people spend more than 5 hours on screens per day and 67.4% engaged in less than 7 hours of exercise per week.

There is a need to invest in initiatives that get young people interacting with each other and the wider community. Young people need to be recognised within Australian society, with opportunities to share their own stories, listen to others, and build relationships across generations.

An investment in Australia's youth arts industry should be included amongst the initiatives to address the nation's deteriorating mental health and for the community-building that has to take place as part of the COVID recovery.

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

We call on the Federal Government to enact four key recommendations within the National Cultural Plan:

1. **Include "Young People's Engagement with the Arts" as a priority of the National Cultural Plan;**
2. **Establish an ongoing, dedicated funding stream for Young People's Engagement with the Arts for companies whose core business is young people's engagement, administered by the Australia Council for the Arts;**
3. **Establish targeted, cross-department streams of funding for Young People's Engagement in the Arts to work with Health and Mental Health, Employment, Youth Justice, Regional Youth, and Education – co-managed by the Australia Council;**
4. **Establish Advisory Boards that represent the diversity of young Australians, managed independently, as ongoing standing committees for the Australia Council for the Arts and the Minister for the Arts.**