

National Cultural Policy Submission

AFTRS



Submission from

Australian Film Television & Radio School

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INTRODUCTION

The Australian Film, Television and Radio School (AFTRS) wholly endorses the need for a new National Cultural policy that builds on the ambition of the original Creative Australia Cultural Policy (2013) to enshrine the value of culture to Australia.

AFTRS is Australia's national screen and broadcast School. It was founded in 1973 by the AFTRS Act, a bold, bipartisan cultural intervention that recognised the importance of Australian stories "of a high degree of creativeness and of high technical and artistic standards" to Australia and, crucially, the role of formal education and training to support the thriving industries needed to create these stories.

Since the *Creative Australia* policy was published in 2013, the world has changed. Australia has experienced floods, droughts, bushfires, a global pandemic and the necessary centering of questions of access, whiteness and equity. The Australian screen and broadcast sectors have also experienced tremendous growth. Digital platforms have transformed how we make and consume content. We have never made or watched more; and this content, whether it's a cat video, a Fortnite game or an epic action movie, retains the persuasive power that all great stories have: to shape ideas, intentions, actions, lives – and our culture itself. This power must be considered, recognised, celebrated and supported. We need skilled, imaginatively audacious storytellers and discerning, wise storytellers to keep making stories that, regardless of platform or length of budget, guide us to understand ourselves and the Australian narratives.

Times of great change call for dreams and bold actions and a new Cultural Policy is an opportunity for Australia to reconceive how it understands the power of its culture and its creativity in this changed world. The original 2013 policy held that 'A creative nation is a productive nation'; a creative nation is also a powerful nation. Through its 50 years of supporting creative excellence and artists whose work has impacted and shaped Australian culture, AFTRS understands how critical creativity is to a thriving Australian culture and, in turn, how important a strong culture is to a thriving country.

THE IMPORTANCE OF THE 5 PILLARS TO AFTRS

In response to this new world, AFTRS has launched a new 5 Year Corporate Strategy, *Creating the Future*, with a redrawn mission to offer its world-leading, creative education across Australia. The strategy's 3 pillars of national reach, excellence and sustainability are very much aligned with the 5 pillars of the new cultural policy in a shared ambition to make the lifelong pursuit of creative excellence available to all Australians.

First Nations First

AFTRS recognises and respects the crucial place of First Nations stories at the centre of Australian arts and culture. Under the leadership of AFTRS Director, First Nations & Outreach, Dr Romaine Moreton, the School has a new First Nations Strategic Plan that is embedding First Nations values and knowledges in all of the School's activities.

First Nations peoples have unique, sophisticated relationships to place which is articulated as 'Country'. Country is made up of systems of knowledges that informs contemporary First Nations community

governance, with each community having since ancient times developed forms of governance that respond specifically to their own needs such as management and decision making, and is foundational to community economic development. For this purpose, we understand First Nations storytelling and storying within an *ecosystem* that responds to cultural, economic and social needs that are specific to Country, are environmentally supported and culturally relevant. This modelling and understanding are distinct from the often-used metaphor of the '*pipeline*', which directs energies, resources and peoples away from Country, rather than supporting local, community determined media-making capacities.

AFTRS First Nations Strategic Plan advocates a collaborative approach that emphasises co-design of workshop curricula, pedagogy and training models that importantly take into consideration the training needs and skills gaps identified by First Nations communities and First Nations media organisations. The approach we are recommending is committed to respecting community First Nations people's governance, knowledge systems and storytelling, while recognising the importance of supporting place-based approaches to teaching and learning. This strategy requires time, effort, and resources in building relationships and partnerships with First Nations communities, peoples and Countries, and seeks to promote and deepen the relationships between AFTRS and First Nations peoples and communities.

A Place For Every Story

AFTRS celebrates the unique contribution of communities, place and Country to Australian culture and is committed to providing culturally safe environments for such storytelling voices to flourish.

The School advocates for the new National Cultural Policy to consider a 'knowledge pluralism' that recognises the values, stories and knowledges from those marginalized peoples and communities throughout Australia and seeks to create spaces of safe engagement so that all peoples contribute to national stories not only in content, but also form, structure, audiences and platforms.

AFTRS has formed important relationships with community arts organisations using a valued approach that recognises the unceded lands, laws and sovereignty of First Nations peoples. This valued approach continues to build relationships around responsibility to Country and place and is a framework that recognises the stories and contribution of all peoples whether settler, refugee, asylum seeker, or immigrant.

AFTRS *Belonging and Inclusion Strategy* articulates a pluralistic approach to promoting inclusion, visibility and disciplinary and interdisciplinary skills for First Nations, CALD, POC, gender diverse and non-binary people and people living with disabilities to the Australian screen and media industry. Through the work of the Outreach Programs such as National Talent Camp, Media Lab and the network of broadcasters, screen funding agencies, business associations, guilds and industry aligned education and training organisations, the *Belonging and Inclusion Strategy* is designed to have an impact on Australian media making industries, audiences and contribute to national identity in a meaningful way. We recognize that the growth of screen culture within these communities may be less about economic imperatives, but more about the need to support communities in the representation of their own experiences that impact mental health, economic security and wellbeing. In testing dominant ideas of industry, we explore what it means to participate in the creation of screen culture within, for example, immigrant, refugee and asylum seeker communities and the resources and support mechanisms required to support the growth of screen culture within these communities.

The Centrality Of The Artist

The key question for AFTRS and the training and cultural institutions that support Australian creative talent is how to support creative talent in this new world.

As the national school, AFTRS mission is to support people across Australia to understand the creative possibilities of a career in screen and to provide them with access to training pathways to lead them into highly fulfilling lives of professionalised creativity. But, as a sector, we have an image problem – and a work culture problem. A recent BFI study found that for 13-15 years olds, a career in the screen industries seems an inaccessible dream. But access is not the only issue with the ‘dream’ – these respondents also identified very long work hours and inconsistent employment as reasons not to enter the screen sector. And it’s hard to argue with these young people’s concerns. In AFTRS 2021 Career Pathways research, the highest measure of career success, across age groups, demographics and skills levels, was creative fulfilment and close after this were financial security and consistency of employment. We have a workforce highly motivated by their creativity, and very concerned about how they are going to make a living.

And, more concerningly but perhaps not surprisingly, this same Career Pathways survey found that over 40% of its 570 participants had experienced burnout. This was supported by the recent Australian Cinematographers Society research *A Wider Lens*, that paints a picture of a problematic work culture that needs radical overhauling if it is to support our talent in the pursuit of creative excellence.

Creativity is one of the most mysterious and complex of human capacities, and one that is integral to our collective success. We engage delicate, ineffable processes, high levels of artistry, deep knowledges of practice and cultures, within highly structured and collaborative environments, to reimagine social structures, organise workforces and create audience captivating and transforming screen work. We need new structures, processes and frameworks that support the artistic risk and daring necessary for great work, and that support the professionalised creativity that affords our artist workers the economic and psychological comfort of consistent employment and safe respectful working conditions.

Strong Institutions

As the new Cultural Policy proposes, strong institutions – and, in AFTRS’ case, strong educational institutions - are vital to a flourishing creative ecosystem. In AFTRS’ recent *Career Pathways* research, over 75% of the 560 participants had taken part in training and over 41% of participants cited formal training as the most significant contributor to their career progression.

AFTRS seeks the recognition of the central importance of education and learning to cultural and creative excellence. While the pursuit of excellence is a lifelong, highly individual enterprise, formal training and education have a particular proven success in accelerating the skills, the thinking, the artistry required to create high-level output. Schools are uniquely placed to provide creative talent with the resources to make work in a low-stakes environment: testing, failing, experimenting are vital to hone craft skills and the application of these skills to make stories that captivate and move people.

This is a challenging time for the screen education sector. The need for skills and talent is fast outpacing institutions’ capacity to grow, particularly in this climate of diminishing funding. Currently, there is a line of argument that places the onus on educational institutions to deliver ‘job-ready’ graduates – however this must be a partnered enterprise. AFTRS proposes as new model of integrated training: combining the

best of on-the-job training with formal education; blending real-world learning driven by leading industry experts, with the critical thinking and adaptive creative skillsets vital to thrive in today's digital world. AFTRS has partnered with industry leaders including Matchbox and Industrial Light & Magic who have shown a deep willingness in working together to equip new talent with the skills they need in this new cultural landscape.

Reaching The Audience

The growth of digital technologies is completely transforming how screen stories engage audiences. But there are paradoxes here that must be considered in how we navigate this next phase of Australian culture. There have never been more opportunities to reach audiences, and it has never been harder to find an audience. The means by which we engage audiences are changing as fast as they are standing still: we need to understand algorithms and audience metrics; we need to hold onto the fundamental story skills that allow us to craft culturally specific stories that engage the peoples, cultures and groups that make up Australia.

Critical thinking is one of the key skills of this age – and it can be taught, with skilled teachers and the time, space and quiet that structured education allows. In these complex times, our creatives, our cultural leaders need discernment, the capacity to cut through narrative orthodoxies, challenge models and modes of thinking and articulate nuance. As a cultural sector we are facing big questions around ethics, representation and how they embody our values: what are the ethics of artificial intelligence in cinema; how do we meaningfully engage with Indigenous Intellectual Cultural Property in the virtual space? This is the role of strong cultural institutions and strong educational institutions – we can do the thinking, reflect on the big thorny questions that are coming fast upon us as we grapple with the joys and complexities of this new digital world.

RECOMMENDATIONS

AFTRS would like to offer the following recommendations to be addressed by the new National Cultural Policy:

- **Resourced & Stable Cultural Institutions**
 - Recognition of the integral role of cultural institutions to cultural excellence.
 - Recognition of the resourcing duress Australian cultural institutions are experiencing – jeopardizing hard-won reputations as creative world leaders.

- **A Reflection On How Culture, Creativity And Industries Intersect In A New World**

AFTRS advocates the new cultural policy recognises that Australian culture, like Australia itself, is made up of multiple cultures, knowledge systems and values. Creativity is the binding, vitalising life force of culture, but our cultural ecosystem must recognise the many peoples and knowledge systems of Australia. We request a deep reflection on:

 - The ideas and buried assumptions we use to articulate and understand the cultural sectors.
 - What it means to participate in the creation of screen culture within, for example, immigrant, refugee and asylum seeker communities.

- How we resource the support mechanisms required to support the growth of screen culture within all communities so Australian culture is enriched by all Australians, for the good of all Australians.
- **Federally Coordinated Approach To Attracting And Retaining Talent**

The sector and screen education sectors must continue to work together to articulate pathways in and through the screen sectors and to work on the culture of screen production in Australia. AFTRS supports the creation of a national skills body that can:

 - Coordinate work-integrated-learning between screen education institutions and the industry.
 - Manage a sector-wide skills badging standard to ensure Australian screen production working environments, including production sets and offices, support creative excellence. Badged training modules could include cultural competency, anti-bullying and harassment training and management training for heads of department.
 - Set standards and models for flexible working and job-share arrangements for crew and screen sector workers.