

National Cultural Policy Submission

General Remarks

We commend the government in undertaking this consultation process. It is an overdue exercise and we hope it provides rich and insightful feedback for a new National Cultural Policy (NCP).

Creative Australia in 2013 was a milestone for Australia in developing a meaningful, inclusive and effective federal government cultural policy. However, it is nearly ten years since it was launched. The “five pillars” drawn from this document and put forward as points of address for the consultation do not exist separately from each other. They exist in combination, to provide a framework for supporting Australian arts and culture as a holistic set of living practices.

The centrality of First Nations’ cultures, the challenge of Australia’s social diversity, and the crucial relationship between the cultural sector and the broader community, must be three central and over-riding goals for a new NCP.

By contrast, the sector’s contribution to the economy and its digital capacity are not goals in the same way. They are resource choices of a particular kind, expressed in priorities and programs derived from those choices.

What emerges from these three goals and two choices *in combination* is: a commitment to the democratic provision of cultural goods and services to all Australians and the right for them to participate in cultural activities; an acknowledgement of the history of the violent settlement of the country and the primary place of First Nations’ cultures, its traditional custodians; and respect for the key role cultural practitioners and cultural organisations play in creating new creative work, reaching new audiences, and challenging artist-audience and performer-audience distinctions.

Specific points

In developing a new NCP, there are a number of points the government should carefully consider. First, *it is important to consult with, and listen to, those working in the cultural field*. This is already happening – but it must continue in a more robust and ongoing way. The Covid-19 pandemic did (and continues to do) considerable economic and psychological damage. In policy terms, the field has been neglected or mishandled for almost a decade.

Patience will be required to manage the resulting disarray. Arts and culture do not stand apart from other challenges Australia faces. Social diversity, environmental sustainability, equitable resourcing and public accessibility are topics on the minds of many Australians. They are sizeable problems that relate to many parts of the arts and cultural sector. But how to prioritise and pursue them in cultural policy terms is not a straight forward matter.

For example, like other parts of Australian life, the role of technology during the Covid-19 pandemic has radically changed creative processes and practices in the arts and cultural sector. It has ushered in new models of collaboration, art making, producing, and dissemination. We should acknowledge this change in our policy rhetoric, and embrace a focus on accessibility, hybridity, and flexibility in how communities come together around art-making. However, it is not clear which innovations are substitutes for existing goods and services, and which are complements. Book publishing did not die out because of Kindle and vinyl records have made a come-back. Digital drama production is a

wonderful new form. But it is unlikely to replace live drama any more than Spotify has replaced live music.

Second, it is important to avoid both the appearance and negative consequences of a bitter intra-sector argument about 'who deserves to get what'. Federal investment in the cultural sector is neither deep nor extensive. *There are no more efficiency dividends to be had, nor will divesting one type of cultural institution to channel funds to another produce an equitable, sustainable and effective sector.* Investment in the cultural sector needs to lift as a whole. As more is expected from it, this should be matched by increased resources going into it. *Real results demand real dollar investment.*

A re-examination of workforce conditions for cultural practitioners is crucial for a new NCP. Australian artists combine arts and non-arts work in highly productive ways. But they are predominantly self-employed or employed on precarious contracts, making them vulnerable to shocks like those resulting from the Covid-19 pandemic. *This precarity could be addressed by a cultural wage for artists and legislated rates of pay awards and conditions for the sector.* Tax reform—like tax offsets for artists; better tax incentives for attending events and buying Australian craft and artworks; raising the tax-free threshold for artists; a more transparent, fairer insurance system for sole-traders; and superannuation for artists, would make a significant difference to the sector overall.

Third, strong First Nations leadership and governance is required to support the process of centring the primary place of First Nations' cultures. This could be an independent peak body for First Nations' Arts and Culture, which is First Nations led and controlled, enabling First Nations Peoples to assert their fundamental right to freely determine their cultural, social, political, and economic sovereignty. Other measures might include the development of a nationwide First Nations' Cultural Framework to guide the sector's First Nations' cultural engagement (www.arts.qld.gov.au/cef) and support reconciliation action plans or local First Nations' policies. These should include accountable KPIs and mandate cultural capability training for everyone working in the sector.

Fourth, existing notions of *reaching* audiences need to be challenged if this is to be a central pillar of the NCP. While the artist-audience or performer-audience distinction applies in certain settings and for certain (typically Western) cultural artforms, this is not the case for others, including diverse community cultural groups across Australia. An NCP should reflect this, in both its language and its substance. It should be attentive to the risk of narrow conceptions of artistic and cultural practices. For example, it is useful to append 'the centrality of artistry' to the goal of 'the centrality of the artist' to acknowledge that every human being has deep artistic potential.

Fifth, *there is a clear need for policy alignment across federal, state and territory governments in respect of arts and culture programs.* It is not necessary for the federal and state governments to be thinking exactly in the same way in the cultural domain, or pursuing exactly the same goals. But *some* degree of policy coordination is extremely important so that any differences work for the cultural sector and not against it. *In practice, this means using the Cultural Ministers Council better, and agreeing on long-term goals for an NCP and related documents that can be pursued in a broad and bipartisan way.*

Sixth, there is a clear need in a new NCP document, to talk about arts and culture in cultural terms. *The activities of the sector have significant economic and social benefits. But their primary purpose is artistic and cultural, and this is particularly true of First Nations' artists and cultural practitioners.* It is important that the NCP does not simply treat cultural institutions as if they are merely a source of instrumental spill-over. The sector is not unprofitable. Commercial firms are an important

component. But one component is all they are, and even for them, profit-making is usually only one of their aims, and their primary reason for being is cultural.

In keeping with this, there would be great benefits to arts and cultural expressions in Australia – and to human rights, the economy, and the social inclusion agenda – if the government would ratify the 2003 UNESCO Convention to the Urgent Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage, thereby joining 180 States Parties and implementing the [2008 recommendation](#) of the Australian Human Rights Commission. It is imperative for Australia to engage with regional, transnational and international mechanisms and debates around sustaining and promoting tangible and intangible cultural heritage and expressions, particularly given the rising regional and global threats posed by climate change, diplomatic tensions, and spreading political instability.

Though concerned about the over-instrumentalisation of the value of the arts, we see significant potential in cross-sector initiatives, connecting arts activities to health and wellbeing, education, regional development, and the social services sector. The arts have the potential to address major societal issues. Artists are effective connectors between sectors and portfolios, and have the capacity to bring distinctively creative approaches to their contributions. Too often they are left out of combined policy initiatives. They should be factored into major government investments and projects linking different sectors.

Finally, an NCP should recognise the arts are not singular. Cultural issues are different for First Nations' artists, regional musicians, film makers and performance artists. Moreover, there is great diversity within First Nations' communities. It is important for cultural policy to value and support the whole spectrum of cultural practice, including that of First Nations' communities, Australians born overseas, non-Australian residents (on temporary visas), as well as of people with disability, LGBTIQ+ people, and other groups with distinct cultural identities.

A maximal degree of vision, consultation and inclusion is required when considering the future of Australian arts and culture.

This response was prepared by Professor Julian Meyrick and Professor Brydie-Leigh Bartleet from Griffith University's Arts, Education, Law Group and the Creative Arts Research Institute. Input from Professor Vanessa Tomlinson, Professor Bernard Lanskey, Professor Herman Van Eyken, Dr Bianca Beetson and Dr Catherine Grant has been included.