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acd-engine.org

██████████@██████████

The University of Melbourne  
Parkville, 3010

The Honourable Tony Burke,  
Minister for the Arts, Employment and Workplace Relations

**RE: The Importance of Cultural Data in enabling National Cultural Policy**

22 August 2022

Dear Minister,

Having attended the launch of the Cultural Policy consultation in Melbourne, we write to you as the **Australian Cultural Data Engine (ACD-E)** <https://www.acd-engine.org/>, a consortium of Australian Cultural databases,<sup>1</sup> disciplinary experts and data scientists funded by the Australian Research Council, but representing a collective long history based on decades of creative, professional and academic engagement with the arts industry and research sectors in Australia and internationally. Building on the vision of *Creative Australia*, and your ambitions for this National Cultural Policy (NCP) to enact substantive change in the understanding of the role and future of arts and cultural diversity in the national story, our submission is informed by current and innovative research in the arts and digital humanities.

Importantly, our expertise spans artistic disciplines including theatre, visual arts, architecture, performing arts and design and engages with the socio-political contexts and issues that shape the reach and significance of cultural production. *For example, the ACD-Engine is currently examining biographical data on over 150,000 artists, architects and performers, and studying the rise and fall of arts organisations since 1945.* Our cultural data networks extend globally to the arts and cultural challenges shaping Europe, the UK and Asia, and we share your conviction about the importance of the arts to communities in Australia.

In general, we endorse the five pillars and recognise their priority in providing a framework for a NCP. However, we believe these will only be achieved through robust cultural data and so we have responded to the more open question: *Are there any other things that you would like to see in a NCP?*

**Cultural Data**

*Background*

Cultural data is information related to art and culture as well as its meaningful interpretation. A variety of cultural data (textual, image and video, sound, numeric, and spatial) is produced all the time by artists, arts organisations, government bodies, researchers and social media. Structured and linked cultural data can tell stories about the value of the arts, and measure its dissemination and impact in communities and internationally. In order to tell Australian stories the collection, storage and interpretation of robust cultural data is essential.

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<sup>1</sup> [AusStage](#), [Australian Women's Register](#), Circus Oz Living [Archive](#), [Data Co-Op](#) for Social Impact and Well-Being, Design and Arts Australia [Online](#), [Digital Archive](#) of Queensland Architecture, King's Digital [Lab](#), Theatre and Dance [Platform](#), Time-Layered Cultural [Map](#), Western Australian Folklore [Archive](#) and Curtin University [Library](#) (Architecture). Further project info is available: <https://pursuit.unimelb.edu.au/articles/the-hidden-stories-in-australia-s-cultural-data>

**Any Cultural Policy needs to be underpinned by an independent model of open-source data collecting about arts and cultural activity across the nation. Robust, interoperable data that can document, curate, analyse, and deliver insights is essential to inform government, industry and researchers and monitor the success of a cultural policy. Cultural data can also share and tell the stories of Australian culture to the world in new and original ways.**

### *Issues*

*Creative Australia* recognised the importance of tracking and targeting cultural objectives to ensure the successful implementation of the policy – but the mechanisms for doing so need to be clear and sustainable. We also note that the pandemic revealed the need for accurate and consistent data able to track artistic employment, venues and cultural activity, and that a range of ad hoc and interim measures were adopted by government and community advocates to document cultural production and impact.

From the ACD-Engine research we have identified that the available Cultural Data and related statistics in Australia are scattered, incomplete, fragmentary and rarely meets international standards or FAIR principles.<sup>2</sup> The government portal, Cultural Data Online,<sup>3</sup> provides access to data from different government agencies, however it is often inconsistent (varying in methodology), politically motivated towards government narratives, and silo-ed from other useful data sources such as ABS or Trove. Such data therefore lacks the longitudinal and independent robustness required for independent analysis and scrutiny. We also note the trend of Government Agencies to utilise private sector consultancies for research. We find it troubling that this often results in the data and research methodologies not being available for public scrutiny, or wider use.

Small arts organisations often lack the resources to collect and interpret data relevant to their sector or operations. And we note that a variety of industry bodies have sought to conduct surveys or reporting mechanisms which collect digital and data outputs but these are often limited and short-term. We acknowledge that messy cultural data speaks to the lived reality of artists and arts workers in this country, and that cultural data initiatives need to have capacity to interpret information contextually.

National collecting institutions and Trove play important roles in providing access to some kinds of cultural data e.g. newspapers or catalogues, but more needs to be done to provide robust guidance on how cultural data can be collected, curated and disseminated.<sup>4</sup> Without a more open information architecture for data collection, aggregation, curation and analysis, it becomes difficult for any government or the arts sector to defend and monitor the complex and interrelated ecologies that are the arts and culture in Australia.

As well as these general issues, we suggest cultural data also has a range of important implications for the five pillars, we respond briefly against each.

**Pillar 1: First Nations:** Existing collections, such as the DAAO and AusStage, hold unique documentation of Indigenous artists, an invaluable cultural asset and could open up understanding of the contribution of indigenous artists to our national collections and performing arts. Engagement with First Nations artists and communities to enhance data should be a priority while acknowledging the work of the Indigenous Data Sovereignty network to ensure appropriate protocols.

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<sup>2</sup> The FAIR Principles were established in 2016 and prioritise the following: Findable, Accessible, Interoperable and Reusable, for more information: <https://ardc.edu.au/resources/aboutdata/fair-data/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.arts.gov.au/cultural-data-online>

<sup>4</sup> Such as, *Australia's Data-enabled Research Future: Humanities* (ARDC, ACOLA, Australian Academy of Humanities, 2022).

**Pillar 2: A Place for Every Story:** Information on Australian artists and art forms is poorly represented in global publishing and academic literature. Just as health and environmental scientists depend upon data, it is vital that Australian artists and communities have the infrastructure to store and archive the cultural stories which are essential in educating the next generations. Digital infrastructure enables a network of storytelling and digital tools, such as the Circus Oz Living Archive, to emerge that includes artists, curators, institutions as well as broader publics. Accurate storage and standardised systems for reporting cultural production and reception allows multiple stories to be told and reach new audiences around the world.

**Pillar 3: The Centrality of the Artist:** The Creative Sector employs 645,303 people or 6.0% of the workforce contributing B\$111.7, 6.4% of the whole economy.<sup>5</sup> Such macro data is available from ABS collection, what is less accessible is information and material on the objects and forms of cultural and creative production, artists' career paths, the structures and ecosystems that enable artists or their aspirations. Supporting our artists as workers in the economy can only be possible with robust and nuanced cultural data.

**Pillar 4: Strong Institutions:** While *Creative Australia* recognised the changing technological landscape, this has only accelerated in the intervening decade. The COVID-19 Pandemic required many arts institutions and artists to pivot to digital delivery. As a partner to funding or government service delivery, Universities are stable and strong institutions that endure from one government cycle to the next and can provide the expertise to build long-term collaborations with the creative arts industry. We suggest the UK's *Culture is Digital* as an exemplar of policy which recognises the importance of the Digital Economy.<sup>6</sup>

**Pillar 5: Reaching the Audience:** In order to develop audiences, cultural data needs to be linked with broader socio-economic and demographic data and with international best practice.<sup>7</sup> Reliable data enables individual organisations and practitioners to understand trends and predict patterns. Technology can support access to cultural resources and activities across the nation, including regionally<sup>8</sup>, and ensure industry is more responsive and better able to serve their audiences.

We have witnessed the decline and neglect of the cultural sector without a guiding National vision and commend the new government on their commitment to engaging the sector. Cultural data has a vital role to play in the implementation, acceptance, and evidence of success of Government action in this area.

#### *General Recommendations*

1. A national cultural data research laboratory (or similar) should be established in partnership with the Tertiary sector to ensure data collection, distribution and interpretation is not politically determined but is for the public good. Data from government institutions and agencies as well as the arts sector should be aggregated and made publicly available (Open Access) to ensure accountability and underpin policy formation and evaluation.
2. Government agencies should be encouraged to collaborate with Australian researchers and experts on research and evaluation in the Arts Sector. The interdisciplinary team of the Australian Cultural Data Engine provides an innovative model of how this work could advance the value and uses of cultural data.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide input into the new Cultural Policy. We are happy to be contacted for further comment.

  
Prof Rachel Fensham  
University of Melbourne

  
Dr Scott East  
University of New South Wales

  
Professor John Macarthur  
University of Queensland

<sup>5</sup> *Australia's Cultural and Creative Economy in the Spotlight*, Australian Academy of Humanities. (2020).

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/culture-is-digital>

<sup>7</sup> In Europe, for instance, <https://www.europeana.eu/en>

<sup>8</sup> see CIRCUIT for digital mapping of regional theatre touring: <https://circuit.unimelb.edu.au/#!/map>