

# National Cultural Policy Submission



School of Culture and Communication  
John Medley Building  
The University of Melbourne  
Parkville, 3010:

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

22 August 2022

**Re: The Value and Impact of Regional and Youth Performing Arts**

Dear Minister,

We make this submission to the National Cultural Policy consultation based on decades of professional and academic engagement with the arts industry in Australia and internationally (UK and Singapore). In particular, we are informed by current research on “Creative Convergence” (<https://blogs.unimelb.edu.au/creative-convergence/the-project/>), an Australian Research Council project that seeks to understand the regional impact of the Theatre sector in Australia and its role in support for creative production, community engagement and transformative cultural experiences.

Working with industry partners from national organisations (Bell Shakespeare and Theatre Network Australia), to state-level (Creative Victoria, Regional Arts Victoria and Melbourne Theatre Company) to the specifically regional (HotHouse Theatre, Geelong Arts Centre, Arena Theatre Company and ARTHUR), we have been investigating the *personal and social impact of theatre on youth audiences*. We have been particularly interested in the opportunities that theatre provides to enhance community and social well-being.

In support of these partners, we endorse the call for the development of a National Cultural Policy responsive to the changed conditions facing arts organisations. These include the rapid shifts in the digital environment in Australia, the growth of regional centres and the need for a better and more coordinated approach to creative innovation and infrastructure development. In addition, such a policy will need to address the issue of cultural exports and the place of Australia’s creative economy in the region and the world. Let us not forget that our dynamic cultural producers are the face of Australia across the globe.

**A strong Australian cultural sector requires a National Cultural Policy in which funding does not leave whole tranches of the arts vulnerable. Our research in the performing arts landscape across regional Australia shows that a robust creative sector involves a rich ecosystem of cultural organisations and supporting businesses and infrastructure. Any effective National Cultural Policy needs to strengthen peak bodies, align regional and touring networks, and support organisations to create opportunities for young people to experience and participate in the performing arts.**

So, while our research enables us to speak broadly across the full terms of the Creative Australia framework, the focus of our submission is on **Pillar 3: Artists** and **Pillar 5: Audiences**.

Issues: We note that Australian theatre companies that create work specifically for and with young people and tour extensively into regional areas across the nation, have been severely affected by recent government

funding cuts to the sector, the devastation of bushfires and most recently, the impact of COVID-19 on the cultural economy threatening their viability and their work with young people across the nation.

We are particularly concerned with the loss of funding for companies who work in non-traditional modes of theatre, and our research shows that these companies often work at the nexus of theatrical innovation and community outreach, addressing the concerns of young people in numerous ways. In addition, we have been alerted to the impact of the pandemic on the viability of smaller regional touring networks that take performing arts work into regional towns on a regular basis but that depend upon each other across a geographical area to remain viable.

It is clear that a more nuanced funding model and policy settings are required. Without this, the sector as a whole runs the very real risk of reinforcing out-dated and centralised arts models that do little to address the needs of regional Australia, or the growing expectations and opportunities for creativity in the lives of young people. This in turn will have negative economic impacts on regional Australia as a result of loss of income and employment through the touring ecology.

Our research has included an evaluation of the terms “value” and “benefit” and an attempt to better understand how different measures are applied within cultural organisations and how they are understood by their audiences.

In the more detailed discussion below, we draw on the range of our research, which has taken a number of different approaches to understanding how the arts enhances community and social wellbeing. This includes the study of a wide range of touring practices and constraints and community building efforts in regional Victoria.

## Summary and Recommendations

A strong Australian cultural policy requires funding that does not leave whole tranches of the sector at risk of simply disappearing. The performing arts is not simply a series of competing organisations, but rather a rich ecosystem of cultural organisations and supporting businesses and infrastructure. Any effective response needs to be attuned to this.

Our research suggests a number of important strategic challenges for the Federal Government and we would like to make the following recommendations that could be more fully fleshed out in a National Cultural Policy for the creative and cultural industries in Australia.

1. *Funding models must recognise that ‘value’ and ‘benefit’ are not easily articulated in the performing arts and should avoid reductive metrics and instead **recognise the complex and longer-term benefits that exposure to the arts generates.** This involves everything from a lifetime of enjoyment to enhanced confidence; the creation of community support networks and the defining of alternative career paths.*
2. *Policy settings need to **consider the non-economic and economic benefits of arts organisations’ capabilities in community building,** particularly in regional areas. We recommend further investigation in this important area and how participation in the arts can enhance individual and community resilience and cohesion.*
3. *It is important to **recognise that the creative and cultural industries exist in a complex hierarchy of small to medium to larger (or national) enterprises;** and that diversity of scale is essential to provide the trialling, creating, producing and disseminating of cultural production.*

*We recommend **investment in cultural infrastructure across regional Australia** should include networks that coordinate arts organisations, regional infrastructure, communication networks and*

*technologies, as well as the venues and local government structures that will ensure high quality outcomes that serve local communities the best.*

4. *Greater attention needs to be paid to **equality of access**. Current funding models both within the arts sector and the educational sector mean that students who attend public schools or who live in regional and remote Australia are already underserved. Policy must recognise that cultural capital also plays a role in people's educational and future employment outcomes.*
5. A National Cultural Policy could **involve regional centres as the hubs of diverse kinds of performing arts concentration**, that could be resourced in partnership with local or regional governments over an extended period of time.

If regional hubs were less constrained by the commercial considerations that prevent them from developing new work, they could develop and maintain educational or outreach programs as well as support local talent which in turn might generate a thriving and distinctive local arts scene (for instance, with diverse specialisms rather than being dependent on imported product). Examples here might be the evolution of a regional comedy festival, or a contemporary dance network, or a string orchestra season, that can curate original content as well as fund partnership programs. The non-economic benefits would be growth in tourism, employment opportunities, civic pride and night-life activities.

One of the key features of our research has been to produce a mapping tool called **CIRCUIT** <http://circuit.unimelb.edu.au/#!/map> that depicts important features of the theatre landscape across Australia in particular:

- mapping the diversity and volume of theatre activity across the nation (the map includes Australia-wide data) and its reach into regional areas;
- co-relating theatre activity in relation to local government areas with key social demographics such as population density, economic status, concentrations of young people and ethnic diversity (from Australian Bureau of Statistics);
- identifying how closely schools align with access to theatre whether through touring or at regional centres.

CIRCUIT is available as a key tool to analyse questions about Audiences in regional Australia benefit from theatre touring or theatre in local and regional centres. It also enables government and industry to compare and contrast one company with another; one venue with another and one part of the country with another; and to ask questions about the kinds of resources that are required to produce a sustainable model of theatrical activity that can benefit the greatest number of Australians.

**In summary**, the provision of theatre in regional Australia over time produces significant benefits not only to individuals, but also to communities who may be exposed to it. The interlocking relationships that the theatre sector supports and nurtures therefore support the nation and its cultural stories.

We welcome the opportunity to contribute to the National Cultural Policy and look forward to hearing about the next phase of its development.

From: Associate Professor Paul Rae, Professor Rachel Fensham and Dr Jennifer Beckett, School of Culture and Communication. Contact: [REDACTED]

*Permission granted for publication. Please attribute this submission to Creative Convergence: Rae, Beckett, Fensham, University of Melbourne*