

Australian Screen Industry Guilds - National Cultural Policy Submission

The Australian Screen Industry Guilds (**ASIG**) group consists of all the guilds, unions and professional associations that represent the Australian screen sector.

1. First Nations

The stories of Australia's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are a central part of our unique culture. In supporting the Uluru Statement from the Heart we will endeavour to give First Nations people truth and self-determination in their story telling. We want to ensure our first sovereign Nations take their rightful place in their own country, so they can shine through as a fuller expression of Australia's nationhood. Voice, Treaty and Truth should guide our national stories. These stories should not be owned by off-shore interests.

To allow Australians to see more of their stories on our screens there should be specific investment in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander stories to support their development, production, and distribution. State and federal funding agencies must emphasise the training and professional development of First Nations creatives. Government can grow the sector through increased funding for First Nations-specific initiatives, particularly funding for grassroots projects involving emerging artists, state and federal funding for mid-career artists and producers, and more accessible funding for First Nations creatives who live on country or in regions outside cities.

2. A Place for Every Story

Australians have shown they want to see quality Australian stories, in all their diversity, on their screens. In recent years, however, there has been a significant decline in investment in Australian drama, children's content, documentary and First Nations content. It is important for a National Cultural Policy to address this. A challenge that must be overcome in our small, English-dominant industry is the relative lack of opportunities in Australia (as opposed to the USA or UK) for emerging talent to get a foothold and experienced artists to maintain sustainable careers.

We have long argued that the reason for the decline in scripted Australian content is a **market failure in our current content regulation system**. A defining feature of the Australian content market that determines local production rates is that we share the same language with two of the world's largest content markets - the USA and UK. This easy-to-access content exchange is one of the main reasons why local content requirements exist and are still needed. The current era represents a unique opportunity to deliver an optimal future framework that ensures a diverse, high-quality range of homegrown content on Australian screens. A robust local industry will generate commercially successful screen products that Australia can export internationally and use to drive post-pandemic tourism. In the 2016 Screen Currency Report, Screen Australia found that the production industry contributed over \$3 billion in value to the economy and attracted around 230,000 international tourists to Australia each year, driving an estimated \$725 million in tourism expenditure.

We therefore support the swift introduction of a **20 per cent requirement** on Australian commissioned content expenditure on global technology streaming businesses, such as Netflix, Amazon and Disney+, with specific protections for critical genres. Currently, large streaming companies have an advantage over commercial free-to-air networks in not being required to produce any local content in Australia at all and Government should step in to level the playing field. Additionally, by ensuring demand for local content through steady commissions across the commercial and public broadcasters, SVODs and AVODs, the government can create more pathways to production, remove barriers of entry and stimulate a robust and sustainable local industry. A 20 per cent re-investment obligation would deliver approximately \$336 million in Australian content investment annually, this would drive an additional 10,000 industry jobs creating over 300 hours of Australian content to streaming audiences here and around the world. This should also include algorithmic prominence of these stories on Australian screens, and an agreed definition of Australian content.

Government should restore the local content obligations on the commercial broadcasters (Seven, Nine and Ten) to previous levels. The reduction of the obligation under the Morrison government's relaxation of the local quotas under a 'points system' predictably resulted in the commercial networks (Seven, Nine and Ten) halving their investment in local drama from \$107m in 2018/19 to \$54m in 2020/21, following these changes. By reducing the number of hours of drama on television, the previous government reduced employment for

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thousands of Australians in the screen sector and weakened the career trajectories of content creators and limited opportunities for emerging practitioners from all backgrounds to develop their craft.

Screen Australia's data from 2021 indicates that the number of children titles have halved, to 7 from 14, and that the number of hours for children's shows have more than halved to 39 from 87. Any re-investment scheme should include specific protections for critical genres of drama, documentary, First Nations, and children's content. Any reinvestment obligation should aim to protect vulnerable genres of scripted content such as drama, children's television and documentary. There should also be a sub-quota on hours of scripted content produced.

Support for LGBTIQ communities and those with diverse cultural and racial heritage continues to be vital. Government must still work to promote gender equity. Regional artists, artists living with disability, and older artists have fewer ways to access funding and this imbalance should also be addressed. Diversity is important across the entire workforce – including writers, producers, directors, cast, and heads of departments. Diversity needs to be measured, reported and accountable and public, production funds need to be tied to diversity goals across the sector. Government should design and implement a comprehensive industry data strategy for systemic collection, analysis, reporting and sharing of diversity data that is transparently reported to the public. Our industry is increasingly global and there is focused international attention on widespread inequality, and the representation, diversity and inclusion of equity seeking groups in the telling of screen stories. A failure to attend to key issues in the Australian labour market and workforce development risks the future potential of this knowledge-intensive, technologically-innovative, and highly-globalised sector to continue to add economic, social and cultural value to Australia.

3. The Centrality of the Artist

Screen stories are the expression of Australian culture and stories that has the broadest reach both across the nation and internationally. The screen industry supports a diverse range of occupations, creative and technical – all equally important as part of a creative team that bring Australian stories to our screens. It is important to ensure that our screen industry practitioners operate within an economic framework that enables them to create, participate and prosper within the sector.

Australian screen practitioners – from new entrants to those at all stages of their careers – rely on strong public institutions and a pipeline of private investment to support their careers. This investment and government funding should also include a commitment from government that the programs it funds deliver fair wages and conditions for all creatives as a condition of funding. Artists are workers but few artists are paid a living wage through the long development process. Creative work is often insecure, commission-based, with little job security. Government should ensure that there are market incentives for creatives to continue working in Australia. The value, time, effort, and skill required in artistic labour should be recognised through fair remuneration and the legal protection of minimum conditions.

Emerging artists, especially those from underrepresented backgrounds, need ongoing support and mentorship to develop their skills. We support government investment in the discovery and creation of capable artists, and sufficient investment to deliver a sustainable career. The pathways which will foster these talents need to be funded. Excellence in craft is developed over time, and direct investment is needed both to support emerging practitioners and to fairly remunerate the mentors who share their time and expertise.

Poor mental health continues to be a problem for the screen sector. Funding agencies should fund on-set wellbeing coordinators and support Entertainment Assist's recommended mental support services.

Screen production deals done with all platforms should be based on a fair negotiation of contracts to ensure our screen businesses and that those they employ are all able to operate sustainably and are not disadvantaged by cost pressures from global corporate interests. One of the foundations to the sustainability of independent screen businesses and high quality, diverse screen stories is independent Australian screen producers' ability to secure fair and equitable terms with commissioning platforms. There is currently a failure of the market to provide fair and equitable terms in deal making, due to the power retained by a concentration of buyers in the market, and this should be addressed.

4. Strong Institutions

The key institutions of the Australian screen sector fall into three categories: (i) training, (ii) funding and governance, and (iii) guilds and agencies. Each institution contributes to creating pathways for or facilitating the work that employs Australian artists, or advocates for the needs of each specific workforce. The Australian screen industry needs strong, stable and well-funded institutions in order to thrive. Therefore, it is important to ensure that our screen agencies and institutions are fit for purpose to enable them to achieve the best outcomes for the sector.

Government should provide increased funding for major screen training institutions around the country to cultivate an ongoing skills base in screen crafts. Additionally, to help foster the development of screen practitioners, there needs to be an increase of funding for major screen training institutions around the country (such as AFTRS, RMIT, QUT, WAAPA). Government should also invest in and support nationwide mentorship programs between emerging and established creatives – an apprenticeship program – to give emerging practitioners a foothold in the industry after their training.

We support an increase in direct funding to the ABC and SBS tied to new Australian scripted content. The deregulation of Australian content and the influx of streaming services has disadvantaged the ABC and SBS and has left them unable to fairly compete in the sector, while carrying the bulk of the load in telling exciting new Australian stories. To ensure that the funding is used for the purpose it was intended, and that it meets specified cultural and economic objectives, the public broadcasters must be accountable and transparent with the expenditure.

Our institutions need to be led by diverse and robust boards drawn from the industry. Our boards should represent creatives and practitioners from across their respective areas of practice, and there must be a balance to ensure that the boards are representative of the creative industry they are part of.

5. Reaching the Audience

Australian audiences must be able to discover and locate Australian stories on all platforms. The quotas for Australian content and critical genres are vital to achieving this. First, they guarantee investment in our stories and our world-class creative talent, they are the backbone of a sustainable and thriving local industry. Our Australian talent is as well-placed as anywhere in the world to make internationally-competitive and commercially successful hits. We have such great export and domestic product because of the legacy of our governments facilitating investment in our stories. Australian film and television has also contributed and can continue to contribute to a uniquely Australian consciousness and sense of national identity, as well as functioning as an instrument of soft power. With the introduction of sub-quotas for vulnerable genres, such as for children's content, we can ensure that Australian children are able to engage with their history and culture. Local content quotas ensure that space is held in the entertainment landscape for Australian stories to be in our cinemas and on our screens in spite of the dominance of larger foreign markets.

Regulation should be coupled with transparent transmission and promotion obligations. Both the European and Canadian models include requirements to ensure that region-specific products are promoted and given prominence across the platforms for local audiences. In the absence of a requirement on the streaming platforms to give Australian content algorithmic prominence, the content might end up being buried in a streamers' catalogue and not seen by Australians audiences.

ASIG is comprised of Australian Directors Guild (ADG), Australian Guild of Screen Composers (AGSC), Australia Screen Editors (ASE), Australian Writers Guild (AWG), Australian Cinematographers Society (ACS), Australian Production Designers Guild (APDG), Australian Screen Sound Guild (ASSG), Equity, Media Entertainment & Arts Alliance (MEAA), Screen Producers Australia (SPA), Women in Film and Television (WIFT) and the Visual Effects Society (VES).

For further information about this submission please contact 