

National Cultural Policy Submission

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Individual

Dianna Nixon

Short submission (text box 500 words or less)

Submission: National Cultural Policy Focus: The Performing Arts Ecosystem

What's blocking progress?

Weak media coverage: Arts and culture remain systematically underreported. Without substantive critical and analytical coverage, public understanding of the sector's complexity and value stays shallow. Policy follows perception.

The wrong people at the policy table: Diversity of identity matters, but it is not a substitute for strategic expertise. Experienced professional artists and arts business leaders must have meaningful seats at national policy tables. Currently, the subsidised sector is overrepresented. Commercial and independent voices need far greater airtime.

Tertiary training is effectively means-tested: High fees for performing arts training create a de facto socioeconomic barrier. The profession is being quietly restricted to those who can afford the entry cost — an equity failure and a talent pipeline problem.

Funding structures that punish excellence: Much arts funding is structurally biased toward amateur participation over professional development.

Artists are routinely required to justify their work through social metrics: community benefit, access outcomes, diversity targets. These are not illegitimate, but when they become the only metrics, they suppress originality, risk, and artistic excellence. Professional practice is being defunded by design.

Cross-border friction: Funding, touring and contracting across state lines remains unnecessarily complicated, stunting the national market and making it harder to sustain professional careers.

A structural misreading of why people engage with the arts: A recent audience survey from a local theatre asked respondents why they attend. The options centred on wellbeing, entertainment and distraction — valid, but partial.

Missing entirely: intellectual engagement, cultural curiosity, professional development, and the pursuit of artistic challenge. When the sector defines its own value through a wellness-and-leisure frame, it inadvertently undermines the case for treating the arts as serious human endeavour — and professional practice within it as serious work.

The deeper problem: celebrating the amateur while abandoning the professional Australia has invested in participation and community arts — worthwhile — but the corollary has been a slow withdrawal of support for professional artists and rigorous training. As Ben Quilty recently noted, the broader population neither particularly likes nor respects artists, or regards what they do as work. That cultural attitude is reflected in policy. The performing arts need a framework that treats professional artists as skilled practitioners in a serious industry — not hobbyists seeking grants.

What this submission asks for:

- Professional artists and commercial sector leaders meaningfully included in policy design

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- Funding criteria that explicitly value artistic excellence alongside social outcomes
- Fee reform that opens performing arts training to lower-SES students
- Harmonised cross-jurisdictional frameworks for touring and contracting
- Investment in substantive arts journalism and media coverage as a public good

The performing arts sector is a skilled industry. Policy should treat it as one.