

National Cultural Policy Submission

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Public

Organisation

Festival of Voices

Short submission (text box 500 words or less)

The Arts Education Pipeline: A National Crisis Hiding in Plain Sight

My name is Shaun Rennie, Artistic Director of Festival of Voices and a postgraduate student in Cultural Leadership at NIDA. I write as both a practising arts leader and as a theatre director.

A central challenge facing Australian arts organisations is audience development. Yet we are systematically dismantling the only intervention that reliably works: quality arts education in primary school.

Research is unambiguous - early, regular exposure to music, drama, and visual arts is the single strongest predictor of adult arts participation. A child who passes through thirteen years of schooling with no meaningful arts education is unlikely to become the audience member, subscriber, or donor our sector needs. No amount of marketing in adulthood can replace what was never cultivated.

ATAR enrolments in arts subjects have fallen 21% nationally since 2015 — a trajectory researchers have called a polycrisis. The cause is structural. The Job-Ready Graduates policy created a self-reinforcing cycle of collapse: fewer specialist teachers produce fewer students, fewer students produce fewer graduates, fewer graduates produce fewer new teachers, fewer teachers produce fewer courses. The cycle compounds. And it operates in direct contradiction to the National Cultural Policy's stated ambition. We invest in world-class creative outputs while defunding the education pipeline that makes them possible. That is not a cultural strategy - it is a contradiction.

Compounding this is a funding system that penalises the organisations most dependent on it. Small to mid-sized arts organisations - the backbone of Australia's cultural ecology - spend a disproportionate share of their limited staff capacity writing grant applications, satisfying reporting obligations, and navigating fragmented funding streams. Every hour spent on administration is an hour not spent making art. Large institutions absorb this burden through dedicated grant-writing staff. Smaller organisations cannot. The current system structurally advantages those who need it least. The cost of accessing public arts funding must not itself become a barrier to participation.

We are asking the federal government to act on five priorities:

- A National School Arts Education Strategy - with ring-fenced funding and measurable targets, equivalent in ambition to the National STEM Strategy.
- Restoration of the specialist arts teacher workforce - with priority placement in regional and low-SES schools where school is the only access point to arts education.
- Mandated minimum arts curriculum time in all Australian primary schools.
- Grant system reform - proportional application requirements, expanded multi-year funding, and streamlined acquittal for small to mid-sized organisations.
- Policy coherence - a formal mechanism ensuring arts education outcomes are embedded in both the National Cultural Policy and the Australian Curriculum.

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You cannot build a world-class creative economy on a hollowed-out classroom. Festival of Voices exists because artists were cultivated somewhere - most often, at school. I urge the government to protect that foundational space as a national priority.

Shaun Rennie

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