



National Advocates for Arts Education (NAAE)

Submission to the National Cultural Policy  
consultation

May 2026



This submission has been collaboratively developed and endorsed by the member associations of the National Advocates for Arts Education (NAAE).



Ausdance National



Australian Society for Music Education



Australian Teachers of Media, National



Drama Australia



National Association for the Visual Arts

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## Executive Summary

### **National Advocates for Arts Education (NAAE)**

#### **Submission to the National Cultural Policy, May 2026**

Arts education is fundamental to Australia's cultural, educational and economic future. It develops creativity, critical thinking, collaboration and communication, while fostering cultural understanding, identity, wellbeing, inclusion, community cohesion, and supports participation in cultural life. It underpins the development of artists, audiences and the broader creative workforce. Australia's cultural and creative sector contributes over \$67 billion to the national economy and employs more than 590,000 people, representing around 2.5% of GDP (Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development, Communications and the Arts [DITRDCA], n.d.). It is therefore essential in achieving the vision of Australia's National Cultural Policy.

However, arts education and training in Australia are in systemic decline. Participation in senior secondary Arts subjects has fallen significantly over the past decade, with national enrolments declining by approximately 21% between 2015 and 2023. At the same time, tertiary provision is contracting, with over 50 Creative Arts degree programs discontinued since 2018 and enrolments at their lowest levels in recent years. Workforce shortages are emerging across the arts and cultural sector, while access to quality arts education in schools remains uneven and inequitable, particularly in regional, rural and low socio-economic communities. This inequity is closely tied to broader patterns of disadvantage. Around one in seven Australians live in poverty (Davidson & Bradbury, 2025), and students in low socio-economic communities are significantly less likely to have access to sustained, high-quality arts education, despite evidence that these students stand to benefit the most.

These trends reflect a structural gap in national policy. While arts education is acknowledged within the National Cultural Policy *Revive*, it is not embedded as a core pillar of policy design, investment or accountability. Responsibility remains fragmented across Arts and Education portfolios, resulting in a disconnect between policy intent and implementation. Without a coordinated national approach, the foundations required to sustain Australia's arts and cultural ecosystem will continue to weaken.

Arts education is not an optional enrichment activity for young people. It is the system through which participation begins, capability is developed, and pathways into further study, careers and lifelong engagement in the Arts are established. Strengthening arts education is therefore essential to realising the ambitions of the National Cultural Policy.



### **Key Recommendation - Establish a sixth pillar within the National Cultural Policy: Arts Learning, Training and Pathways**

This pillar would recognise arts education as essential national infrastructure and a shared responsibility across the Arts and Education portfolios. It would provide the policy coherence, visibility and accountability required to align existing commitments with practice.

### **Supporting Actions**

To give effect to this pillar, the NAAE recommends:

- **Commission a National Inquiry into Arts Education and Training** to establish a coordinated, cross-portfolio evidence base and identify actions to strengthen participation, provision, equity and workforce sustainability.
- **Develop a National Arts Education Strategy** to align schooling, Initial Teacher Education, tertiary pathways and workforce development, with clear national targets, sustained investment and research.
- **Embed First Nations Leadership and Cultural Authority Across Arts Education** to ensure First Nations-led curriculum, training and clear pathways into arts and cultural sector roles.
- **Fund Arts Education in Schools to Ensure Universal Access**, including curriculum delivery, resources, arts teacher professional learning and a nationally coordinated Artist-in-Schools program.
- **Strengthen the Arts Education Workforce** through targeted investment in teacher education, professional learning and workforce development to address shortages and reduce out-of-field teaching.
- **Strengthen Tertiary Arts Education and Training Pathways** to stabilise and expand Creative Arts programs across universities and TAFEs, and strengthen pathways from education into arts careers and the creative workforce.
- **Fund Arts Professional Associations, Peak Bodies, Service Organisations and Cultural Institutions** to expand access to high-quality arts learning, partnerships and outreach, particularly for students in regional, remote and disadvantaged communities.
- **Establish a national Arts Education Working Group** jointly led by the Office of the Arts and the Department of Education, with sector representation, to ensure a coordinated and cohesive national approach to arts education. This group would support the implementation of policy and strategy and help realise the promise of arts education over the next decade.



Arts education is the foundation upon which Australia’s arts and cultural ecosystem is built. Without it, there are no future artists, no engaged audiences, and no sustainable cultural infrastructure.

Strengthening arts education is therefore not only an education priority, but a cultural policy imperative. Establishing a sixth pillar within the National Cultural Policy will ensure that Australia’s ambitions for a vibrant, inclusive and sustainable cultural future can be realised.



## Who are we

The National Advocates for Arts Education (NAAE) is a coalition of peak Arts and Arts education associations that represent approximately 10,000 Arts educators across Australia. NAAE members are Art Education Australia (AEA), Australian Dance Council – Ausdance, Australian Society for Music Education (ASME), Australian Teachers of Media (ATOM), Drama Australia, and National Association for the Visual Arts (NAVA).

NAAE advocates for every Australian student in primary and secondary schools to have access to quality Arts Education across the five discrete Arts subjects: Dance, Drama, Media Arts, Music and Visual Arts.

## Introduction

The National Advocates for Arts Education (NAAE) commends the Australian Government for restoring cultural policy to national prominence and for the progress made under the five-pillar framework established in *Revive*. As a coalition of arts educators from early childhood, school, vocational and higher education contexts, we recognise the important role *Revive* has played in developing Australia’s arts and cultural sector. We particularly acknowledge the inclusion of arts education *within Revive’s* guiding principles, including the commitment that all Australians should have the opportunity to access and participate in arts and culture, and that students should receive an education that includes culture, creativity and the arts. These are important statements of intent that require sustained policy attention and investment to support equitable implementation, including delivery of existing curriculum entitlements and access to quality arts learning across Australia.

This submission identifies a critical structural gap in the current policy framework. While arts education is recognised within *Revive*, it is not embedded as a core pillar of policy design, investment or accountability. This omission has significant consequences for access, participation, workforce development and the long-term sustainability of Australia’s cultural and creative life.

## What is Arts Education

Arts education is a core learning area in almost all education systems worldwide. Arts learning begins early in life, as children learn through play, making, creating, singing, moving, imagining and using a range of media to create and communicate meaning. In early learning settings, The Arts play a central role in children’s development and are deeply embedded within the Early Years



Learning Framework for Australia, where creative expression supports communication, identity, literacy and wellbeing.

In schools, Australian students are entitled to an arts education as part of the Australian Curriculum, where The Arts is one of eight learning areas. It includes five distinct subjects: Dance, Drama, Media Arts, Music and Visual Arts. Arts education involves both learning *about* these subjects and learning *through* them, using creative processes to explore ideas, communicate meaning, and understand the world. In Australia, students are expected to engage in the five arts subjects across their primary schooling and through to the end of Year 8. Beyond Year 8, the curriculum should be offered to allow students to experience one or more arts subjects in depth, developing their skills, knowledge and understanding within arts subjects that resonate with them.

Each subject offers a different way of learning and expressing:

**Dance** uses the body as a medium for critically examining, creative exploration and communicating ideas through higher-order thinking and movement. It is one of the five art forms identified as a curriculum entitlement for all students in the Australian Curriculum. It promotes the holistic growth of an individual, offering a way to understand oneself, others, and the world. Through dance, cultural heritage is preserved and passed down across generations, exploring global contexts and Australian contexts, including the dance of Aboriginal peoples and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

**Drama** is an educational discipline closely connected to theatre as a performing artform and to the broader cultural life of communities. Through embodied, creative and collaborative learning, drama engages participants in role-taking, storytelling, improvisation and performance to explore human experience, ideas and social issues. In education, drama functions both as an arts subject in its own right and as a powerful pedagogical (teaching) approach that develops communication, empathy, creativity, critical thinking and cultural understanding. While theatre often culminates in performance for an audience, drama education emphasises processes of inquiry, meaning-making and reflection as students create, interpret and share stories. As recognised in the Australian Curriculum: The Arts, drama enables young people to imagine, shape and communicate ideas while contributing to Australia's cultural and creative future.

**Media Arts** helps students become creative makers, critical audiences, and confident communicators in a world shaped by screen content. It builds strong media literacy, teaching students to understand how images, sound, story, and technology influence what we think and feel. By learning how media is constructed—and by creating their own—students develop the ability to question, analyse, and interpret the media they encounter every day. Media Arts



empowers young people to navigate digital culture responsibly, communicate their ideas effectively, and participate thoughtfully in a rapidly evolving media landscape.

**Music** learning enables students to develop knowledge, skills and understanding through listening, composing, improvising, singing, playing and responding to music. Engaging in music learning builds skills in creative thinking, cultural understanding, and non-verbal communication that are valuable across all areas of life. As a practice central to every human culture, music education also supports students' sense of identity and belonging, and their ability to engage meaningfully with the world around them.

**Visual Arts education** is a curriculum entitlement for all Australian students, enabling them to make and respond to images, objects and designed environments while developing visual literacy, critical and creative thinking through sustained engagement with diverse materials, techniques and visual conventions. Grounded in the understanding that the Arts are central to all cultures, Visual Arts learning foregrounds First Nations Peoples as the world's oldest continuing artists, supporting students to engage respectfully with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledges, histories and contemporary practices as living, dynamic cultural expressions. Ensuring equitable access to high-quality Visual Arts education enables all students, regardless of location or background, to participate as artists and audiences, communicate meaning, and contribute to Australia's cultural and civic life.

These subjects do not sit in isolation. They connect with and strengthen one another, and they also support learning across the other areas of the curriculum in unique and valuable ways. The Arts are forms of literacy in their own right, giving students the skills to interpret and communicate meaning through movement, image, sound and story. Through these experiences, students develop creativity, confidence, and critical thinking while deepening their understanding of themselves, others and the diverse society in which they live.

Arts learning also occurs outside of schools, through co-curricular opportunities. These experiences can enrich and extend curriculum-based experiences; however, there can also be access challenges due to financial pressures.

Beyond school, tertiary students engage in arts learning through higher education providers, including TAFEs and Universities. This can take a range of forms. Some programs are specifically designed to train artists in a particular field. Others are broader, and work to develop the skills, knowledge, understanding and experience to support students to enter the creative industries and cultural sector.



## Why Arts Education Matters: Policy, Rights and Evidence

Across international and national policy frameworks, there is a clear and consistent mandate for arts education as a core component of a high-quality education system.

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 1989) establishes that all children have the right to participate freely in cultural life and the arts, and that education must develop the whole child, including their talents, creativity and cultural identity. Arts education is therefore not an optional enrichment, but a fundamental element of children’s educational and cultural rights.

This position is reinforced in the UNESCO Framework for Culture and Arts Education (UNESCO, 2024), which affirms that culture and the arts are integral to human development, wellbeing and social cohesion. It emphasises that learning in, through and with the arts is essential to the development of creativity, critical thinking, identity and intercultural understanding, and calls for their explicit integration into curricula, teacher education and education systems, supported by equitable access and sustained investment.

At a national level, the Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration (Education Council, 2019) articulates a vision of education that depends on capabilities such as creativity, expression, cultural understanding and collaboration. While the Arts are not strongly foregrounded in the wording of the Declaration’s aims, they are explicitly recognised as one of the eight learning areas of the Australian Curriculum, underpinning their place as a core component of a well-rounded education.

This entitlement is made explicit in the Australian Curriculum itself. As ACARA stated at its inception, “The Australian Curriculum for the Arts will be based on the assumption that all young Australians are entitled to engage with the five Arts subjects and should be given an opportunity to experience the special knowledge and skills base of each” (ACARA, 2011, p. 4). This commitment was reaffirmed in Version 9.0 of the Australian Curriculum: The Arts, which states that all students will study The Arts from Foundation to the end of Year 8. Dance, Drama, Media Arts, Music and Visual Arts are discrete subjects with equal status. Together, they develop creativity, collaboration, critical thinking, communication and problem-solving, strengthening students’ capacity to interpret, analyse and communicate meaning across multiple modes and contributing directly to literacy development. The purpose of arts education in schools is not vocational training, but to enrich the education of all students and ensure equitable access to the distinctive ways of thinking, making and communicating that the Arts provide.



Australia has demonstrated international leadership through a national curriculum that recognises Dance, Drama, Media Arts, Music and Visual Arts as five discrete Arts subjects. At national, state and territory levels, Australia has established comprehensive curriculum frameworks for Arts education. These frameworks are comprehensive and internationally recognised as examples of strong curriculum design. However, the delivery of the curriculum, what is actually taught and experienced by students in classrooms, is uneven. Access varies significantly depending on location, resources, and teacher expertise, meaning that not all students receive the full benefit of the curriculum they are entitled to. These policy commitments are not simply aspirational. A substantial body of Australian and international research demonstrates that arts education delivers significant benefits across academic, social and personal domains. Students who engage in the Arts show improved outcomes in literacy, language and numeracy, alongside increased motivation, engagement and school attendance. Arts learning also contributes to student wellbeing, supporting confidence, emotional expression and a sense of belonging within school communities (Dunn et al., 2019; Ewing, 2010; Goopy & MacArthur, 2026; Martin et al., 2013; Saunders, 2021; Vasilopoulos et al., 2026).

There is also growing causal evidence of these impacts. Randomised controlled trials have demonstrated that access to arts education can reduce disciplinary incidents, improve writing achievement, and increase empathy, engagement and post-school aspirations (Bowen & Kisida, 2022). These findings reinforce a long-standing international evidence base demonstrating the broad educational and developmental value of sustained engagement in the Arts (Winner et al., 2013; Bamford, 2006; 2009).

Beyond these outcomes, arts education develops a distinct set of transferable capabilities that are increasingly recognised as essential for the future workforce. These include creativity, critical thinking, collaboration, communication and problem-solving. While many disciplines contribute to these capabilities, the Arts are unique in that creativity is not incidental to learning, but central to it. Each Arts subject develops creative thinking in different and complementary ways through processes of making, performing, responding and refining ideas.

These capabilities are consistently identified as priorities in global education and workforce frameworks. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development has positioned creativity as a core competency for future-ready learners (OECD, 2018; 2024), including its assessment in the 2022 Programme for International Student Assessment, in which Australia performed strongly. Similarly, the World Economic Forum continues to identify creativity, innovation, analytical thinking and complex problem-solving among the most important skills for the future workforce.



Arts learning also contributes to student wellbeing, supporting confidence, emotional expression, inclusion and a sense of belonging within school communities. It plays an important role in fostering social connection, community cohesion and civic and community engagement, enabling students to engage with diverse perspectives and participate meaningfully in cultural and civic life (National Endowment for the Arts, 2017). These capabilities are essential not only for individual development but for the health of a democratic and culturally diverse society.

Importantly, the value of arts education is widely recognised by the Australian public. National data indicate that 97% of Australians engage with the Arts, and 74% believe they should be an important part of education (Throsby & Petetskaya, 2024). However, this recognition is not reflected in current policy settings or levels of provision.

The Arts are not a peripheral component of education. They are central to how students learn to think, communicate, create and connect. Ensuring equitable access to high-quality arts education is therefore essential to educational excellence, cultural participation and national capability.

## The Current State of Arts Education in Australia

Arts education and training in Australia are facing a systemic and accelerating decline across the entire educational pipeline. Evidence from schools, vocational education and higher education points not to isolated challenges, but to what has been described as a “polycrisis” — a set of interconnected and mutually reinforcing disruptions reshaping participation, access and workforce pathways (Gattenhof & Saunders, 2026).

In schools, participation in Arts education is steadily decreasing. National data indicate that enrolments in senior secondary Arts subjects have declined significantly across Australia, with an overall reduction of approximately 21% between 2015 and 2023 (Gattenhof & Saunders, 2026). Nationally, between 2015 and 2023, enrolments in senior secondary Drama have declined by approximately 39% and Dance by 38%, with Media Arts declining by around 25%, Music by 16% and Visual Arts by 14% (Gattenhof & Saunders, 2026). Jurisdictional data further highlight the scale of the issue. Between 2015 and 2023, Queensland recorded a 45% decline in Year 12 Arts enrolments, while Western Australia experienced a 44% decline, with consistent decreases also observed across New South Wales, Victoria, South Australia and Tasmania of between 8 and 19% (Gattenhof & Saunders, 2026). Overall, these figures point to a sustained national downturn in participation.

At the same time, provision in primary and middle schooling remains uneven and difficult to measure, with very limited data available. National reviews have long highlighted these disparities. The *National Review of School Music Education: Augmenting the diminished* (Pascoe, Leong,



MacCallum, Mackinlay, Marsh, Smith, Church and Winterton, 2005) and *First We See: The National Review of Visual Education* (Davis, 2008) both found that access to Music and Visual Arts education is strongly associated with socio-economic advantage, and is significantly stronger in metropolitan schools than in regional, rural and remote contexts. More recently, in its 2024 report on creative thinking, the OECD found that only around one in four Australian 15-year-olds participated in visual arts (across both classroom and co-curricular contexts) at least once a week, and fewer than one in five did so in music, with rates significantly lower than the OECD average (OECD, 2024). As a result, the promise of an arts education enshrined in the Australian Curriculum has not been realised for many Australian students. Limited engagement in the arts during schooling is likely to translate into lower participation in arts and cultural life beyond school, with significant implications for the future sustainability of the sector.

These disparities reflect broader patterns of inequality across the education system. Students in low socio-economic communities are significantly less likely to have access to specialist arts teachers, dedicated programs and sustained arts learning. This is particularly concerning given the strong evidence that arts education can improve engagement, attendance, wellbeing and academic outcomes for students experiencing disadvantage. In effect, those who stand to benefit most from arts learning are often the least likely to access it. The result is a system in which access to arts education is shaped not by entitlement, but by postcode, school resourcing and socio-economic circumstance.

These structural inequities are compounded further by workforce pressures. National teacher workforce data indicates that between 18% and 26% of Arts classes are taught by out-of-field teachers (AITSL, 2023), reflecting ongoing shortages of specialist teachers across the arts. This has implications for the quality and consistency of arts education, as out-of-field teaching can limit subject-specific pedagogical depth and curriculum expertise, and impact student learning enormously.

These school-level trends are closely linked to post-school pathways. Since 2018, at least 54 Creative Arts degree programs have been discontinued across Australian universities, with a further number significantly reduced (NAAE, 2026). In some cases, this has resulted in the complete loss of disciplinary pathways within particular institutions, regions or states. At the same time, enrolments in Creative Arts degrees have declined from approximately 76,000 students in 2019 to around 72,000 in 2023, representing the lowest levels in recent years (Gattenhof & Saunders, 2026). These declines are not evenly distributed, with many regional and outer-metropolitan institutions experiencing the most significant reductions, further concentrating provision within a small number of metropolitan universities.



Policy settings have played a significant role in shaping these patterns. The introduction of the Job-ready Graduates (JRG) policy in 2020 substantially increased the cost of Creative Arts degrees. Fees for Creative Arts programs have risen by approximately 42% between 2020 and 2026, while some related humanities and communication degrees have increased by approximately 160% over the same time period. These changes have acted not only as financial barriers, but as powerful signals about the perceived value of different fields of study, influencing student decision-making and contributing to declining enrolments.

The effects are cumulative and self-reinforcing. As enrolments decline, universities and TAFEs reduce or discontinue programs, further limiting access and weakening the pipeline into careers in the arts and creative industries. This contraction has significant implications for workforce development. Australia's arts and cultural sector contributes approximately \$67.4 billion to the national economy, representing around 2.5% of GDP, and employs more Australians than several major industries, including finance and electricity supply (Browne, 2020; DITRDCA, n.d.); Gattenhof & Saunders, 2026). However, industry reports identify growing skills shortages across administrative, technical, production and creative roles, alongside a shrinking pool of graduates entering the sector at a crucial time where there is a retiring cohort of practitioners (Creative Australia and Service and Creative Skills Australia, 2025).

This decline is occurring despite strong public support for the Arts. National data indicate that 97% of Australians engage with the Arts, and 74% believe they should be an important part of education (Throsby & Petetskaya, 2024). The issue is not a lack of interest or value, but a growing disconnect between community expectations and policy settings.

Collectively, these trends reveal a system under significant strain. Declining school participation reduces the number of students pursuing Arts pathways. Reduced tertiary provision limits access and weakens workforce development. Policy settings further reinforce these patterns through funding and pricing signals. The result is a self-reinforcing cycle of contraction across the arts education ecosystem, with long-term implications for Australia's cultural and creative future.

**Key Recommendation: Addition of Sixth Pillar: *Arts Learning, Training and Pathways***

The National Cultural Policy should establish an additional sixth pillar: *Arts Learning, Training and Pathways*. This would strengthen the existing commitment to arts learning within *Revive*, and explicitly recognise its centrality to the arts and cultural ecosystem, particularly at this time of crisis.



## The Case for a Sixth Pillar: Arts Learning, Training and Pathways

Arts education is the foundation of Australia’s arts ecosystem. It is the primary mechanism through which skills, knowledge and participation in the Arts are developed, setting up generations to be culturally engaged and literate.

While the existing pillars of *Revive* focus on supporting artists, institutions, audiences and industries, they do not address the system that enables these to exist in the first place. Arts education provides this foundation. It is where participation begins, where capability is developed, and where pathways into further study, careers and lifelong engagement in the Arts are cultivated. Critically, a sixth pillar would ensure that socio-economic circumstances do not deter, prevent or limit access to arts learning across schooling systems. While arts education is embedded within the intended curriculum in all state and national curricula, it is not positioned as a structural priority within national policy. Responsibility remains fragmented across portfolios, with arts education falling between Arts and Education, rather than being jointly owned, and lacking clear accountability, coordinated strategy or sustained investment. This has led to a widening gap between policy intent and classroom delivery, and to the progressive weakening of arts education across Australia. This has significant consequences across the entire ecosystem. Without access to arts education in schools, students are unable to develop the foundational knowledge and skills required to pursue further study. Without strong participation in higher education and training, the pipeline of artists, educators and creative professionals is diminished.

Over time, this weakens the capacity of the broader arts sector to sustain itself. A recent scoping study by Creative Australia and Service and Creative Skills Australia (2024) identified significant workforce shortages and persistent recruitment challenges across the creative sector, particularly in production and technical roles, including digital games artists, art directors, production designers, producers, creative directors and lighting designers. Establishing a sixth pillar, *Arts Learning, Training, and Pathways*, would address this structural gap. It would recognise arts education as a core component of a high-quality education system and as essential infrastructure for the arts and cultural sector.

This pillar would deliver four key outcomes.

First, it would ensure a coordinated, whole-of-government approach to arts education. This includes clear accountability across the Arts and Education portfolios, alignment between policy settings, and sustained national investment across early childhood, schooling, vocational and higher education. It would also address entrenched inequities in access, ensuring that students in



low socio-economic, regional and remote communities are not excluded from the benefits of arts education.

Second, it would secure equitable access to quality arts education for all Australian students. Every young person should have the opportunity to learn in and through The Arts, consistent with the entitlement established in the Australian Curriculum. This includes addressing disparities in provision across schools, particularly in remote, regional and low socioeconomic communities, creating a better, fairer and more equitable education system.

Third, it would strengthen the workforce pipeline. Arts education is the primary pathway into the arts workforce, including artists, educators, creative professionals and technical roles. Sustained investment is required to support teacher education, professional learning and tertiary provision to ensure the long-term viability of the sector.

Fourth, it would reinforce the role of arts education within the broader education system. The Arts are one of the eight learning areas of the Australian Curriculum, and their contribution to student learning, engagement and development is well established. This pillar would ensure that this entitlement is realised in practice.

In an era of rapid technological change, including the rise of artificial intelligence and machine learning, arts education plays a critical role in developing media literacy, critical thinking and creative capabilities. Students need to be able not only to consume digital and media content, but to critically analyse, question and create it. Through subjects such as Media Arts, students develop the skills to understand how meaning is constructed, how technologies shape communication, and how to engage critically and ethically in increasingly complex digital environments. This aligns with emerging international priorities. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) has identified media and artificial intelligence literacy as a critical capability for future education systems, with PISA 2029 assessing students' ability to critically evaluate digital content, understand how media and AI shape meaning, and participate responsibly in digital and civic life (OECD, n.d.).

Establishing Arts Education as a sixth pillar would provide the visibility, coherence and policy authority required to align practice with existing commitments. The current challenge is not a lack of evidence, but a lack of coordinated policy response. We are seeing clear pipeline failure across schools, higher education and workforce supply, driven in part by arts education falling between the Arts and Education portfolios, rather than being jointly owned. This proposal does not seek to prioritise The Arts over other areas, but to ensure policy coherence as what the government says it values is consistently supported across both portfolios. In doing so, it would recognise Arts



Education not as optional enrichment, but as a fundamental and central entitlement for every Australian student.

## Strengthening Arts Education Across the Existing Five Pillars

The five pillars of *Revive* provide a strong foundation for Australia's cultural policy. Each pillar recognises, either explicitly or implicitly, the importance of participation, access, workforce development and sustainability within the arts and cultural sector. However, across all five pillars, there is a consistent pattern. Arts education is acknowledged as important, but is not embedded structurally, resulting in a gap between policy intent and implementation.

**First Nations First:** This pillar recognises the central place of First Nations Peoples and their stories within Australia's arts and culture. Arts education in schools can play a role in supporting this by enabling young people to encounter and engage with First Nations stories, histories, culture, knowledge, artists and artworks as part of their learning. Through engaging in Arts learning, students come to understand that First Nations cultural expressions are not historical artefacts but living, dynamic and continuously evolving practices, connected to Country, language, community and identity. This commitment requires sustained, long-term investment in First Nations-led arts education, ensuring that engagement is not episodic or extractive, but embedded, accountable, and resourced in ways that support the ongoing strengthening of community knowledge systems.

**A Place for Every Story** emphasises access, inclusion and participation in arts and culture. While this includes a commitment to young people, there is limited attention to the role of schools as the primary site of access for most Australians. Current provision of arts education remains uneven, particularly in remote, regional and low socio-economic communities, meaning that access is not equitable. Without strengthening arts education in schools, participation will continue to reflect existing inequalities rather than addressing them. This pillar should also acknowledge that the arts are created *by, with, and for* children and young people. They are not only the artists and audiences of tomorrow, but active artists and audiences of today.

**Centrality of the Artist** recognises the importance of artists and creative workers within Australia's cultural life. However, it does not adequately account for the pathways that enable individuals to become artists, arts educators and creative professionals. These pathways begin with arts education. Declining enrolments in school subjects, reduced tertiary provision and increasing barriers to study are already impacting the pipeline into the arts workforce. Without intervention at the level of education, workforce development strategies will be undermined. The centrality of the artist pillar provides an opportunity for the National Cultural Policy to also



consider children, young people, and their teachers as artists. Within Australian education, children and young people are viewed as artists, and their teachers as co-artists as they create, present/perform and respond/appreciate their own art and the artwork of others.

**Strong Cultural Infrastructure** focuses on institutions, organisations and systems that support the arts. While this includes investment in venues and organisations, it does not recognise arts education as essential infrastructure. Schools, TAFEs, universities and training institutions are critical sites for developing skills, knowledge and participation that sustain the sector over time. The absence of arts education within this pillar reflects a narrow definition of cultural infrastructure.

Arts and Cultural institutions play a critical role in the ecology of Arts education through their education, outreach, and community partnership programs. Galleries, museums, theatres, orchestras and many other arts companies provide access to high-quality artistic experiences, specialist knowledge and industry practice that cannot be replicated in classrooms alone. These programs extend and enrich school-based learning, supporting teachers, engaging students and enabling deeper participation in the Arts.

However, this work is often project-based and under-resourced. Greater recognition of cultural institutions as partners in education, and as part of Australia's arts learning infrastructure, is required. Sustained investment in education and outreach programs would strengthen access, particularly for students in regional, remote and low socio-economic communities, and support stronger connections between schools, the arts sector and possible career pathways.

**Engaging the Audience** highlights the importance of building and sustaining audiences for the arts, but it does not fully address how audiences are developed. Audience engagement is not incidental. It is built through sustained exposure, learning and participation from an early age, often facilitated by teachers, parents or carers. Too often, children and young people are positioned as the audiences of tomorrow, rather than recognised as artists, audiences and consumers of arts and cultural experiences today. This framing overlooks their right to access high-quality arts experiences.

Without strong arts education, many young people do not develop the knowledge, confidence or interest to engage with the arts, and may never visit a gallery, attend a performance or participate in live arts experiences. This limits the long-term impact of audience development initiatives.

Schools play a key role, often partnering with artists and arts organisations to deliver workshops, residences and creative learning programs. These not only enrich student learning but also provide economic opportunities for artists. Recognising arts education within the National Cultural Policy would strengthen audience development while supporting the sustainability of the sector. Across



all five pillars, there is a clear and consistent pattern. The policy relies on the outcomes of arts education, including participation, workforce development and audience engagement, but does not adequately invest in or coordinate the systems that produce these outcomes. This creates a structural gap between aspiration and implementation.

Addressing this gap requires commitment and action. It requires a coherent, system-level response. Establishing arts education as a sixth pillar would provide the necessary framework to align the ambitions of the existing pillars with the conditions required to realise them in practice.

## Key Recommendations for the next National Cultural Policy

To address the issues identified in this submission, the following recommendations outline the key actions required to strengthen arts education and align policy with practice.

### **1. Establish Arts Learning, Training and Pathways as a Sixth Pillar**

The National Cultural Policy should establish a sixth pillar, *Arts Learning, Training and Pathways*, recognising arts education as essential national infrastructure and a shared responsibility across the Arts and Education portfolios. Establishing this pillar would acknowledge the central role of arts education in realising the National Cultural Policy's vision by enabling participation, developing capability, and sustaining the artists, audiences and cultural workforce of the future.

### **2. Commission a National Inquiry into Arts Education and Training**

To realise the vision of the National Cultural Policy, and to give effect to a proposed sixth pillar, *Arts Learning, Training and Pathways*, we recommend tasking the Special Envoy for the Arts, in partnership with the Commonwealth Ministers for Education and the Arts, to lead a national, bipartisan inquiry into the state of arts education and training across Australia.

The inquiry should examine participation, provision, equity, workforce sustainability and the economic and social value of arts education. It should provide a coordinated, cross-portfolio evidence base to inform future policy and investment, and to ensure alignment between cultural and education policy settings.

Importantly, the inquiry would establish a clear national picture of how arts learning supports participation in cultural life, develops creative capacity, sustains the artists, audiences and workforce required for a thriving arts and cultural sector. It should make recommendations to strengthen and sustain arts education as a foundational component of Australia's arts and cultural ecosystem.



### **3. Develop a National Arts Education Strategy (2027–2037)**

Develop and implement a ten-year, nationally coordinated arts Education Strategy, jointly led by the Commonwealth Ministers for Education and the Arts with the Special Envoy for the Arts.

As the National STEM School Education Strategy (2016–2026) comes to an end, there is a clear opportunity to establish an equivalent national plan for arts education. This strategy should align schooling, Initial Teacher Education, tertiary pathways and workforce development, and include clear targets for participation, equity and workforce supply, supported by sustained investment and public reporting.

This recommendation would help realise the vision of the National Cultural Policy by strengthening the foundations that underpin all five existing pillars. It would reinforce the centrality of the artist through sustainable pathways and workforce development, support strong cultural infrastructure through a skilled and supported workforce, enable audience engagement through increased participation in arts learning, and ensure that diverse stories, including those of First Nations Australians, can be created, shared and sustained.

### **4. Embed First Nations Leadership and Cultural Authority Across Arts Education**

Embed First Nations leadership through sustained investment in First Nations-led curriculum design, teaching and training across schooling, vocational and higher education.

There is not enough support for First Nations students and educators, and pathways into arts education and cultural sector roles remain limited. This is reflected in low representation across teaching, as well as middle-tier and leadership positions across the creative industry and in the expectation that a small number of people carry responsibility for cultural knowledges, engagement and guidance.

Cultural authority means that First Nations people determine how their cultures, knowledge and artistic practices are taught, represented and shared across all artforms, including control over curriculum, resources, teaching materials and modes of delivery. This requires more than inclusion in content. It requires First Nations leadership in decision-making and delivery, supported by long-term funding, secure employment, and appropriate recognition of expertise. Strengthening this across education and training will support both participation and workforce development.

### **5. Fund Arts Education in Schools to Ensure Universal Access**

Provide dedicated and sustained investment in arts education across Australian schools to ensure every student can access high-quality learning in Dance, Drama, Media Arts, Music and Visual



Arts. This should include funding for curriculum delivery, resources, teacher professional learning, and student engagement programs.

As part of this investment, establish a nationally coordinated Artist-in-Schools program through Creative Australia to connect artists with schools and communities. This program should support teaching artists delivering programs in schools, enhance student participation and engagement, provide professional learning for teachers, and enable long-term partnerships between education and the arts sector. Professional learning programs for primary teachers which employ a mentorship or co-mentorship model offer an opportunity for in-classroom learning to occur. This can improve teacher confidence and capacity in delivering the arts.

This investment is necessary to address the current imbalance in national funding, including the significant disparity between Arts and STEM education initiatives, and to ensure a balanced, equitable and comprehensive curriculum for all students.

Creative Victoria's Creative Learning Partnerships program and The Australia Council for the Arts (now Creative Australia) Artists in Residence (AIR) program, along with other teaching artist and artist-in-residence models, provide strong examples of how sustained partnerships between artists, schools and cultural organisations can enrich student learning, support teachers and strengthen connections between education and the arts sector.

## **6. Strengthen Arts Education Workforce and Teacher Supply**

Implement a coordinated national strategy to strengthen the arts education workforce across Initial Teacher Education, professional learning and career pathways.

This should include:

- Mandating minimum arts education requirements within Early Childhood and Primary Initial Teacher Education (ITE) programs
- Expanding opportunities for specialisation in the Arts at primary and secondary levels
- Investing in ongoing professional learning for Early Childhood, Primary and Secondary teachers
- Addressing workforce shortages and reducing out-of-field teaching.

## **7. Secure Tertiary Arts Education and Training Pathways**

Since the introduction of JRG, enrolments have declined and many Creative Arts programs across universities and TAFEs have been reduced or closed. This has narrowed access, particularly in regional areas, and weakened the pathway from education into arts and cultural work.



Restoring and expanding tertiary provision is necessary to support entry into the arts industry. This includes strengthening studio-based learning, maintaining programs across a range of institutions, and ensuring clearer links between education, industry and employment.

### **8. Fund Arts Professional Associations, Peak Bodies, Service Organisations and Cultural Institutions**

Provide sustained, long-term funding for Arts professional teaching associations, peak bodies and service organisations to support professional learning, advocacy, sector development and connections between education and arts industry. These organisations are critical to maintaining quality, coherence and workforce capability across the Arts.

Provide dedicated investment for cultural institutions to expand access to high-quality arts and cultural experiences for students, including gallery visits, performances and engagement programs. This should prioritise equitable access for students in regional, remote and low socioeconomic communities.

### **9. Establish a National Arts Education Working Group**

Establish a national Arts Education Working Group, jointly led by the Australian Government's Office of the Arts, and the Department of Education, with representation from the arts education sector, including peak bodies, educators, arts organisations and researchers.

This group would provide ongoing coordination across portfolios to support the implementation of the National Cultural Policy and any future National Arts Education Strategy. To ensure a coherent, cohesive and sustained national approach to arts education over the next decade, helping to realise the promise of existing curriculum frameworks and policy commitments.

## **Conclusion**

Arts education builds creativity, collaboration, resilience, identity, wellbeing, inclusion, community cohesion and civic and community engagement, and contributes to national prosperity. It underpins student learning, supports wellbeing, and develops the capabilities required for a rapidly changing world. It also plays a vital role in fostering cultural understanding, enabling young people to engage with diverse perspectives and participate meaningfully in Australia's cultural life. Meaningful investment, adequate resourcing and clear policy recognition are essential to ensure that every child, young person and educator can access the full benefits of arts education. This must include a strong focus on equity, ensuring that students in low socio-economic, regional and remote communities are not excluded from access, and that those who stand to benefit most from arts education are not the least likely to receive it.



However, the current trajectory is deeply concerning. Without coordinated national action, arts education in Australian schools and higher education is at risk of systemic decline. Falling enrolments, reduced provision and a weakening workforce pipeline indicate a system under significant strain. Without intervention, this will have long-term consequences for educational outcomes, workforce capacity and the sustainability of Australia's arts and cultural sector.

This submission outlines a clear and achievable pathway forward. With the right policy settings, leadership and investment, Australia can ensure that arts education is not diminished, but strengthened as a core component of a high-quality education system and a sustainable arts and cultural ecosystem.

The opportunity now is not simply to respond to decline, but to secure the future of arts education for every Australian student.

Arts education is the foundation upon which the ambitions of the National Cultural Policy are realised. Without it, there are no future artists, no engaged audiences, and no sustainable cultural infrastructure. Strengthening arts education is therefore not only an education priority, but a cultural policy imperative for Australia's future.



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