

My views on the new National Cultural Policy

Who am I?

My name is Dr Melissa Newton-Turner. I am a highly experienced drama education specialist and consultant based in Adelaide, South Australia working with theatre companies and artists, and primary, secondary, and tertiary drama educators. My Doctor of Education research at Queensland University of Technology investigated the influence venue-based live theatre has on generalist primary school teachers' drama pedagogy.

My work and research are driven by the significance of drama education and live theatre, and their impact on societal growth and identity. I see the education sector and theatre industry playing a vital role in this process. Balancing the roles of interpreter and translator, I guide theatre company members and teachers to create meaningful and sustained partnerships and collaborate with teachers to feel confident and excited about their drama pedagogy. In 2023 I received the Drama South Australia Meritorious Service Award for my work in this area.

What matters to me and my practice

The launch of the National Cultural Policy in 2023 clearly marked the current Australian Government's recognition of the place and value of the Arts in our society. The Arts are fundamental to Australia's economic, cultural, and social identity (Australia Council for the Arts, 2020). Fostering this identity is founded in rigorous and consistent Arts education for all Australian children across their schooling life.

However, multiple factors now see Arts education across the primary, secondary, and tertiary sectors in crisis. Inadequate pre-service teacher training has resulted in primary school teachers' limited confidence and competence to teach the Arts (Burke, 2016; Ewing, 2020), despite it being one of the Australian Curriculum's eight key learning areas. In the secondary school sector, student participation in Arts subjects has decreased substantially over the last decade, attributed to poor quality curriculum, inauthentic assessment practices, and the scaling of senior subjects resulting in students' and parents' devaluing of arts subjects (Gattenhof & Saunders, 2026). A decline in students studying secondary arts subjects compounded with the increased cost of Creative Arts degrees and the termination of arts courses, has also seen the diminished number of students engaging in tertiary arts studies (Gattenhof & Saunders, 2026). Given these cumulative outcomes across the education sectors, it is unclear how Australia aims to maintain a rich and diverse arts culture, despite the Australian federal government's initiation and review of the National Cultural Policy.

What would I like to see reflected in the new National Cultural Policy?

Undeniably, the Arts are important to the country's economic growth. However, reflecting on current global geopolitical unrest, more than ever, the Arts are imperative to maintaining an open-minded and inclusive Australian society. Extensive research shows that Arts engagement develops empathy and morality, critical and creative thinking, and builds community and tolerance (Gardner, 1994; International Drama/Theatre and Education Association, 2020; Tambling & Bacon, 2023; Wyman, 2009).

The development of such a society begins with children's engagement with rich, thoughtful and purposeful Arts experiences. While families contribute significantly to the development of children's cultural capital, factors including socio-economic status (Busby, 2019; Ramaiah, 2025) and the preconceived perception that the Arts are for the elite or reserved for extraordinary occasions (Hart & Winston, 2019; Turner-King & Kershaw, 2019) often compromises its development. Schools and subsequently, qualified arts and generalist early years, primary and secondary teachers, therefore, play a critical role in introducing and sustaining students' engagement in quality and consistent arts education.

Furthermore, the current National Cultural Policy (Australian Government, 2023) recognises that the Arts contribute to students' creative, cultural, academic, social, and emotional development, which prepares them for the fluidity of the 21st century (Anderson & O'Connor, 2019; Thomson & Hall, 2023). This recognition aligns with the United Nations General Assembly (1948) claim that everyone has the right to, "freely participate in the cultural life of the community, (and) to enjoy the Arts", and UNESCO's advocacy to prioritise compulsory and long-term school arts education (Akuno, 2015; UNESCO, 2024).

Therefore, it is imperative that the new National Cultural Policy recognises the integral role Arts education plays in the development of Australia's cultural and social identity *and* the vital preparatory role it plays in the creation of Australia's future professional artists. Therefore, I strongly recommend that the review of the National Cultural Policy includes a clearly identified sixth pillar focused on arts education. The creation of the pillar acknowledges and ensures the critical role primary, secondary, and tertiary arts education plays in students' development as current and future artists and engaged and critically aware global citizens. The pillar also recognises that such an education must be designed and delivered by qualified and skilled educators across the education sectors.

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