

National Cultural Policy Submission

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Public

Organisation

Melbourne UNESCO City of Literature Office c/o The Wheeler Centre



Short submission (text box 500 words or less)

Distance is not neutral. For Australia, remoteness from the world's major centres of power has always carried a cost — in visibility, in influence, and in the sheer effort required simply to be known. That distance is experienced not only in kilometres but in perception: we are the country at the edge of the map, easy to admire and easier still to forget. It is precisely because of this that cultural diplomacy cannot be peripheral to Australia's new National Cultural Policy. It must be central to it.

Stories travel where politicians and trade delegations cannot. A novel published in Melbourne and read in Ljubljana, a writer-in-residence hosted in Heidelberg, a literary festival connection forged with Quebec City — these are not soft outcomes on the margins of serious policy. They are the patient, foundational work of being known, being trusted, and being valued by the world. None of this happens quickly. For a country whose distance is felt as much as it is measured, that work is not optional. It is strategic.

Australia is falling behind. Among the fifteen largest world economies, Australia and Canada are the only countries without a dedicated international cultural relations institution — and Canada is now actively exploring establishing one (ANA, Pathways to becoming a cultural powerhouse, 2024). Peer nations are not only maintaining investment in cultural diplomacy; they are deepening it. South Korea's commitment to international cultural relations has demonstrably opened that nation to the world. Australia is moving in the opposite direction. This, at precisely the moment, matters most.

As the Melbourne UNESCO City of Literature Office, we operate within the UNESCO Creative Cities Network — a framework of over 350 cities exchanging knowledge, building literary partnerships, and creating the sustained people-to-people connections that formal diplomacy cannot manufacture. In practice, this means a librarian in Bogotá knowing to reach out to Melbourne before anywhere else. Within this network, geographic distance is irrelevant. What determines a nation's presence is consistency, credibility, and the quality of the stories it brings. Melbourne has all three. What we lack is federal recognition that this international work serves Australia's strategic cultural interest, rather than functioning as pleasant but peripheral cultural exchange.

Our geographic position also confers something genuinely rare. Australia sits as the natural literary bridge between the Western world and the Indo-Pacific — a position no other country occupies in quite the same way. Our First Nations storytelling traditions are among the oldest living literary cultures on earth. Our multicultural present means Australian literature reflects the languages, memories and imaginations of communities drawn from across the very region we most need to engage. This is not incidental to our diplomatic circumstances. It is one of our most profound and underutilised assets.

Effective cultural diplomacy functions as a two-way conversation, and the most credible national approaches combine clear government ambition with deep sector expertise. This is the model we represent. The Melbourne UNESCO City of Literature Office is not asking the government to build something new. We are asking it to recognise, resource, and invest in what already works.

Distance has shaped how the world sees Australia for long enough. Culture is how we change that.