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# The CREATE Centre

*Creativity in research, engaging the arts and transforming education, health and wellbeing*

## Submission to the National Cultural Policy

### Consultation 2026

May 2026

## Evidence basis

This submission is grounded in four sources of evidence:

- (i) the unequivocal international and national evidence about the role the Arts can and should play intergenerationally in enabling mental health and wellbeing and nurturing engagement in learning;
- (ii) the CREATE Centre's ongoing research, professional practice and longitudinal engagement with arts education and arts health practice;
- (iii) the discussion, breakout-room data and survey responses from the NAAE and CREATE National Cultural Policy Roundtable co-convened in late April 2026, which brought together approximately 80 sector leaders from across Australia; and
- (iv) the structured deliberation of CREATE Centre members in shaping the positions advanced in this submission.

## Executive summary

The CREATE Centre at the University of Sydney welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the development of a renewed National Cultural Policy. We commend the Government for the progress made under Revive (Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development, Communications and the Arts [DITRDCA], 2023) and for restoring cultural policy to national prominence.

CREATE's submission is shaped by a core observation. The most consequential weakness in the current cultural policy framework is not a lack of recognition for arts education, arts and health, or community arts. It is the absence of a structural mechanism that enables responsibility to be exercised across, rather than between, Commonwealth portfolios.

The success of the next policy hinges on its ability to heal that fracture.

We make five core recommendations:

1. **Adopt a sixth pillar for arts education, engagement and pathways, with a pragmatic alternative.** CREATE's preferred position is that the National Cultural Policy be expanded to include a sixth pillar focused on arts education, engagement and pathways. We are alert to suggestions that this expansion will not be considered. If this is the case, the same outcome must be pursued through a differentiated, named and adequately funded focus on arts learning within Pillar 5, and through the explicit recognition of arts education infrastructure within Pillar 4. These are the same arguments expressed at two levels of policy ambition.
2. **Build practical mechanisms for cross-sector integration, rather than aspirational language.** The policy should commit to specific structures, processes and funding rules that lower the cost of working across the Arts, Education, and Health portfolios. In a constrained funding environment, structural change is the most valuable contribution the Commonwealth can make.
3. **Name the portfolio fracture explicitly.** Arts in education (school-based provision), education through the arts (community and practice-led learning), arts health and community arts have all been allowed to fall between siloed portfolios for successive cycles of policy. The next National Cultural Policy is the appropriate place to name that publicly and to take responsibility for addressing this anomaly.
4. **Connect cultural and creative workforce evidence to education.** Recent Commonwealth-commissioned workforce evidence has documented shortages without tracing them back to the

schools, vocational and tertiary contexts that produce the pipeline. Future workforce strategies for the sector must be developed jointly with Education and explicitly linked to the points in the pipeline that produce, or fail to produce, the workforce in question.

5. **Recognise the differentiated contributions of art forms.** Different art forms support human development, wellbeing and participation in distinct and complementary ways. Policy settings should avoid treating “the arts” as a uniform category, while also ensuring that no single art form is structurally privileged over others in funding, education provision or policy attention.

We recognise that the arts empower all Australians to grow and flourish, even though different art forms achieve this in different ways.

## About the CREATE Centre

The CREATE Centre, Creativity in Research, Engaging the Arts and Transforming Education, Health and Wellbeing, is a research centre based in the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences at the University of Sydney. The CREATE Centre aims to transform lives and learning through creativity and the Arts. Its membership includes researchers, arts educators, artists, teachers, health practitioners, school leaders, arts and cultural organisations and peak bodies, all engaged in evidence-based work on the role of the arts in education, health, wellbeing and civic participation.

## The structural problem: a fractured portfolio

Across schooling, vocational and higher education, and across the cultural and creative sector, Australia has accumulated a clear, well-evidenced pattern. Arts education, and arts and culture more broadly, are recognised across multiple portfolios but lack clear, coordinated ownership. Responsibility is distributed but not aligned, particularly at the interface between the Arts and Education portfolios, where no portfolio is clearly mandated to lead. The result is a policy environment in which good intentions, rhetoric and rich evidence routinely fail to translate into coordinated action.

This can be demonstrated in concrete ways:

- Arts education in Revive sits, marginally, within community access provisions and is folded into framings around the role of the artist. It is structurally absent from cultural infrastructure, an omission that is hard to defend when schools, TAFEs, universities, professional teaching associations and the education and outreach functions of arts and cultural organisations are, on any reading, the foundational infrastructure of the sector. The dedicated investment for arts in schools under Revive sat at \$2.6 million over four years from 2023–24, a figure that is several orders of magnitude smaller than comparable Commonwealth investment in STEM education over the same period, and which serves as a clear signal of where arts education currently sits as a national policy priority.
- It also shows up in evidence streams that do not connect. Recent Commonwealth-commissioned work on the cultural and creative workforce has documented growing skills shortages across creative, technical and production roles (Creative Australia & Service and Creative Skills Australia, 2025). That evidence has been published, debated and widely recognised as an authoritative industry document. It has not, however, been converted into education policy action. The shortages identified in those reports are produced, in part, by the ‘Jobs Ready’ policy, senior secondary subject decline (Gattenhof & Saunders, in press), the closure of more than fifty Creative Arts degree programs since 2018 (National Advocates for Arts Education [NAAE], 2026), and the contraction of TAFE-based pathways. The absence of a structural mechanism to

connect that work is a systematic policy failure CREATE asks the next National Cultural Policy to address.

CREATE's view is that this fracture has been consistently identified across consultation processes and by sector stakeholders over an extended period, but not yet resolved. The next policy is the appropriate place to name it publicly and take responsibility for addressing it.

## **Recommendation 1: A sixth pillar, with a pragmatic alternative**

### **Best outcome: arts education, engagement and pathways as a sixth pillar**

CREATE's preferred position is that the National Cultural Policy be expanded to include a sixth pillar focused on arts education, engagement and pathways. A standalone pillar is the most direct way to recognise that arts education is the foundation on which the other commitments of the policy depend. It is where participation begins, where capability is developed, and where pathways into careers, audiences and lifelong cultural engagement emerge. Without it, the other pillars are commitments without a foundation.

A sixth pillar would also carry the policy authority required to resolve the portfolio fracture described above. By naming arts education explicitly in the cultural policy, the Commonwealth would establish a basis for joint stewardship between the Office for the Arts and the Department of Education, and a basis for Commonwealth–state alignment through Education Ministers.

### **The pragmatic alternative if a sixth pillar is not adopted**

CREATE is aware of indications that the addition of a sixth pillar may not be available within the architecture the Government is willing to adopt. If that is the case, the same policy outcome must be secured within the existing five-pillar framework. Doing so is not a retreat from the sixth-pillar argument; it is the same argument expressed at a more moderate level of ambition.

Within a five-pillar framework, CREATE recommends that the next National Cultural Policy:

- Names arts education, engagement and pathways as an explicit, differentiated focus of Pillar 5 (A Place for Every Story), rather than allowing it to remain a secondary inclusion under community access language.
- Recognises the arts education infrastructure of Australia, schools, TAFEs, universities, professional teaching associations and the education and outreach functions of arts and cultural organisations, within Pillar 4 (Strong Cultural Infrastructure), where it is currently absent.
- Allocates dedicated, identifiable funding for arts education that is broadly comparable in order of magnitude to other long-running educational priorities of national significance.
- Makes the relationships between pillars visible. Arts learning intersects with First Nations First, the Centrality of the Artist, Strong Cultural Infrastructure and Engaging the Audience, and a transdisciplinary framing across pillars is essential to making any of those commitments deliverable.

CREATE notes that the transdisciplinary framing recommended above must be approached carefully. Embedding arts education across all five pillars is not an alternative to recognising it in its own right; if it is treated as everywhere it risks being delivered nowhere. The relationships between pillars should be made explicit in addition to, not instead of, the named focus described above.

## **Recommendation 2: Mechanisms for cross-sector integration, not words on a page**

A central plank of the CREATE Centre's submission, and one shared with our partners in arts and arts-health practice, is that the next National Cultural Policy is unlikely to be funded at the level Revive was. That makes structural change more important, not less. The most valuable thing the Commonwealth can commit to in the next policy is the set of structures, processes and funding rules that lower the cost of cross-portfolio collaboration and remove the active barriers that currently prevent it.

The CREATE Centre recommends that the policy commit to the following specific mechanisms:

- A standing cross-portfolio coordination function jointly resourced by the Office for the Arts and the Department of Education, with formal involvement of the Department of Health and Aged Care, Creative Australia and Service and Creative Skills Australia. Its remit would be aligning workforce, education, health and cultural participation strategies that currently sit in different lanes.
- Joint funding instruments between the Arts and Education portfolios for cross-portfolio programs, including a dedicated stream for school, artist and arts and cultural organisation partnerships.
- Shared evaluation frameworks so that initiatives commissioned by one portfolio are designed, from the outset, to inform the other portfolios with related responsibilities.
- A review of conditions in current Commonwealth grants programs that exclude or de-prioritise schools, Initial Teacher Education providers and arts education associations as eligible partners, with a commitment to remove those barriers.
- Public, transparent reporting on cross-portfolio outcomes through a single annual statement consolidating progress against the National Cultural Policy and its education and health-facing commitments.

These mechanisms answer a question the consultation paper does not yet pose clearly: what does the Commonwealth structurally do, day to day, to ensure that cultural policy and its adjacent portfolios do not continue to remain siloed. Without mechanisms of this kind, the next cultural policy can affirm the value of arts education, arts health and community arts indefinitely without ever altering the conditions that produce their decline.

## **Recommendation 3: Name the portfolio fracture explicitly**

CREATE recommends that the next National Cultural Policy explicitly name the portfolio fracture between the Arts and Education portfolios, publicly acknowledge that this fracture is a documented, structural policy failure, and commit to the cross-portfolio mechanisms described in Recommendation 2 as the primary vehicle for addressing it. The mandate for that work should be stated clearly in the cultural policy, not embedded as an assumption in program guidelines.

## **Recommendation 4: Connect cultural and creative workforce evidence to education**

Recent workforce evidence commissioned by Commonwealth agencies has documented real and growing shortages across the cultural and creative workforce, including in technical, production and creative roles (Creative Australia & Service and Creative Skills Australia, 2025). The evidence base is

robust. Its limitation, consistent with the structural problem this submission identifies, is that it has been read primarily as an industry document. While it has informed some activity within vocational training and workforce pathways, it has not been translated into coordinated education policy action across the full pipeline of schools, vocational and higher education that produces the workforce in question.

The CREATE Centre recommends that the National Cultural Policy require future workforce strategies for the cultural and creative sector to:

- Be developed jointly with the Department of Education and relevant tertiary education and training agencies.
- Trace identified shortages back to specific points in the school, vocational and tertiary pipeline, including subject participation, Initial Teacher Education supply, regional access, course costs and program closures.
- Inform the design of education-facing investments, not as an afterthought, but as the planned downstream use of the evidence.

## **Recommendation 5: Recognise the differentiated contributions of art forms**

The National Cultural Policy should explicitly recognise that while the arts collectively support human development, wellbeing and participation, different art forms do so in distinct and complementary ways (Lomas, 2022; Creative Australia, 2023). Policy settings should therefore avoid treating “the arts” as a uniform category, while also ensuring that no single art form is structurally privileged over others in funding, education provision or policy attention (Ewing, 2023; DITRDCA, 2023).

A balanced ecosystem should be supported in which diverse practices, including drama, literature, music, visual arts, dance, media arts and emerging forms, are enabled to contribute according to their distinct and complementary contributions. This includes ensuring that funding, education provision — noting that many schools are currently unable to meet the requirements of the Australian Curriculum: The Arts — and evaluation frameworks are sensitive to the specific modes of engagement, developmental benefits and participation pathways associated with different art forms (Tay et al., 2024; Creative Australia, 2025).

Such an approach strengthens both equity and effectiveness by allowing individuals and communities to encounter the forms of practice most meaningful to them, while ensuring that the full range of outcomes associated with arts engagement can be realised across the population.

## **The arts, health and wellbeing**

The CREATE Centre's name reflects an institutional commitment to the role of the arts in transforming education, health, and wellbeing. The intersection between arts and health is one of the most active areas of contemporary research and practice, and the CREATE Centre works directly with health-sector colleagues, including through Australia's Arts Health Networks, on the structural conditions that allow this work to be sustained.

We do not propose, in this submission, a separate set of recommendations specifically for arts health. We do, however, ask the Government to note the following points, which inform the recommendations above:

- Arts education and health practice both depend on the same cross-portfolio structures. The mechanisms outlined in Recommendation 2 are the appropriate vehicle for arts health to be supported through the National Cultural Policy.
- Arts and health work is currently sustained largely by individual practitioners, project-based grants and the goodwill of cultural and health organisations. Any National Cultural Policy commitment to wellbeing as a benefit of arts engagement must be matched by structural support for the practices that produce those wellbeing outcomes.
- The wellbeing benefits of sustained arts education are themselves part of the case for arts education in early childhood contexts and schools, particularly for children and young people in communities experiencing disadvantage (Catterall et al., 2012; Catterall, 2009; Ewing, 2011, 2019; Martin et al., 2013). Arts education, arts and health practice, and community arts participation are aspects of the same integrated argument.

## **Sector context: themes from the CREATE Centre and NAAE National Cultural Policy Roundtable**

On 28 April 2026, the CREATE Centre co-convened a National Cultural Policy Roundtable with the National Advocates for Arts Education (NAAE), bringing together approximately 80 leaders from across the arts and arts education sector, including school and university educators, peak bodies, arts and cultural organisations, industry organisations, researchers and First Nations practitioners. The Roundtable was structured around facilitated breakout discussion. Six themes emerged consistently across breakouts and post-event survey responses, and underpin the recommendations in this submission.

### **A sixth pillar is the best solution, provided the relationships between pillars are also made visible**

There was strong support across the Roundtable for a dedicated sixth pillar focused on arts education, engagement and pathways. Participants were also clear that a standalone pillar must not be allowed to silo arts education. The relationships between pillars need to be made explicit in either case.

### **The Australian Curriculum: The Arts rhetoric is strong; delivery is uneven**

Participants repeatedly affirmed that the Australian Curriculum: The Arts (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority [ACARA], 2022) is, by international standards, strong. The structural problem is delivery: out-of-field teaching, inadequate Initial Teacher Education in the arts for early childhood educators and primary teachers, regional and low-socio-economic inequity, and an over-reliance on co-curricular rather than curriculum-based provision.

### **Equity is non-negotiable**

With approximately one in seven Australians living in poverty (Davidson & Bradbury, 2025), the Roundtable was clear that arts education in this country is currently shaped by postcode and school resourcing rather than by the curriculum entitlement. The students most likely to benefit from sustained arts education are the least likely to receive it.

## The 1990s policy frame no longer fits

Multiple breakout groups observed that the architecture of cultural policy in Australia still carries assumptions from Creative Nation (Keating, 1994). AI and media literacy (OECD, n.d.), the documented polycrisis in arts workforce supply (Gattenhof & Saunders, in press), and the rise of cultural participation outside formal institutions are features of the current context that the next policy must explicitly address.

## Arts and cultural organisations are arts education infrastructure

Galleries, museums, theatres, orchestras and other arts and cultural organisations are already delivering substantial arts education through education and outreach programs, often under-resourced and project-based. Participants strongly endorsed naming this work as cultural infrastructure within the policy.

## Mechanisms over rhetoric

Across the Roundtable, the most consistent message was that, in a constrained funding environment, the most valuable contribution the next policy can make is structural. Participants asked the CREATE Centre to advocate, specifically, for mechanisms that enable cross-portfolio collaboration in practice.

## Conclusion

Australia's cultural and creative sector contributes approximately \$67 billion to the national economy and supports more than 590,000 jobs (DITRDCA, n.d.). It cannot be sustained on a foundation that is being eroded. The next National Cultural Policy is the appropriate place to acknowledge that arts education is the foundation, to name the structural fracture between the Arts and Education portfolios, and to put in place the mechanisms that finally close it.


The CREATE Centre's recommendation is therefore simple: aim high, and design for the structural change required regardless of which level of ambition the Government adopts. Recognise arts education, engagement and pathways as a sixth pillar. If that is not possible, secure the same outcome through a named, differentiated, and funded focus across the existing five. In either case, build the cross-portfolio mechanisms, coordination, joint funding, shared evidence and shared evaluation, that make the next decade of cultural policy practically deliverable across arts, education, health and community.


We welcome the opportunity to contribute further to the consultation and discussion, including by participating in any cross-portfolio working group or expert advisory process established to support implementation.

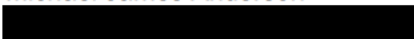
## Contact Section

CREATE is a network of professional teaching artists and arts education advocates working across Australia. We welcome enquiries about this submission. For questions about this submission, please contact:

  
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