

May 2026

Submission to Office for the Arts on a New National Cultural Policy

My name is Cheralyn Lim. I am a non-Indigenous conservator and PhD candidate with the Robert Cripps Institute for Cultural Conservation, University of Melbourne. My work focuses on factors impacting the preservation of community collections held within remote Indigenous art centres. Specifically, I am concerned with Indigenous arts worker training and job pathways. This submission concerns Pillar 1: First Nations First, Pillar 3: Centrality of the Artist and Pillar 4: Strong Cultural Infrastructure.

Priority 1: Securing long-term Indigenous leadership in remote Indigenous art centre operations

Challenge

Under Pillar 1: First Nations First, the National Cultural Policy affirms that ‘First Nations arts and culture are First Nations led’ (Commonwealth of Australia, 2023, p. 19). It also commits to the development of a First Nations Creative Workforce Development Strategy (2023, p. 28). However, current workforce development initiatives funded by Creative Australia – for example, the *First Nations Performing Arts Workforce Development Framework 2025-2030* – do not include remote arts organisations and their workers (Miles, 2025; Victorian Public Sector Commission, 2025). This reflects a broader, longstanding imbalance of funding distribution relative to need in remote contexts (Meredith et al., 2019).

Building the Indigenous workforce within remote Indigenous art centres, particularly in operational and managerial roles, is critical to supporting First Peoples’ autonomy and self-determination. It also supports the long-term sustainability of the sector. While Indigenous leadership in art centres does often exist at the Board level, salaried leadership positions such as art centre managers are primarily filled by non-Indigenous staff. Most non-Indigenous arts workers are outsiders to the sector and the communities they work in. Combined with the complexity of the Indigenous art market and culture shock, this contributes to high staff turnover, with art centre managers rarely staying in their positions for longer than two years (Seet et al., 2015, p. 763). This instability can stall organisational development, disrupt long-term planning and succession processes, as well as lead to abandoned projects and fractured relationships. This can have significant impact on community wellbeing and trust.

Importantly, the issue is not a lack of capability or aspiration among Indigenous arts workers. Indigenous arts workers are actively pursuing professional development opportunities. This is evidenced through participation in programs such as the Arnhem Northern & Kimberley Artists Aboriginal Corporation (ANKA) Arts Worker Extension Program (AWEP). Many AWEP graduates go on to become mentors, and take on governance and community leadership roles.

Opportunity

There is an opportunity to develop and invest in a dedicated First Nations Creative Workforce Framework tailored to remote arts organisations and their workers. The framework could prioritise leadership pathways, paid traineeships, succession planning and long-term capacity building.

Priority 2: Strengthen workforce training to maintain culturally and economically strong remote Indigenous art centres

Challenge

Within the National Cultural Policy's ten principles, the objective that 'Artists and arts workers have career structures that are long-term and sustainable, supported by vocational pathways' (2023, p. 19) is difficult to achieve in remote Indigenous arts contexts.

There is a shortage of appropriately trained Indigenous staff in remote art centres. Arts workers vary greatly in age, formal educational attainment and digital literacy (*Art Worker Program - Desart*, 2018; Rigney, 2011). This can limit career progression. The demand for training and peak body investment is evident in professional development programs such as Desart's Aboriginal Art Worker and ANKA's Arts Worker Extension Programs – running since 2008 and 2010, respectively. These programs play an important role in providing vocational education, industry exposure and network building opportunities. However, despite peak bodies and educational providers' commitment to building strong Indigenous workforces embedded in communities, training outcomes are mixed (Seet et al., 2021).

A key barrier is the lack of on-the-job learning – a practical, observational and informal style of learning linked to Indigenous artists' apprenticeship systems. This has long been recognised as an effective training approach for Indigenous arts workers (Aboriginal Arts and Crafts Industry Review Committee, 1989, pp. 256–283). The importance of place-based training was reflected in ANKA's AWEP program from 2010 to 2016, where staff complemented classroom training with visits to participants' communities and art centres. The later shift to virtual visits, accelerated by COVID-19 restrictions, may have reduced the effectiveness of some training programs.

There is also limited Indigenous representation among arts instructors and experts. This requires arts workers to rely primarily on non-Indigenous educators. This is particularly true in specialist areas such as cultural conservation, where there are very few Indigenous conservators who also teach (Bloomfield, 2013). Indigenous representation in arts education would strengthen culturally responsive training and support more sustainable pathways for Indigenous arts workers.

Opportunity

There is an opportunity to support new training and delivery models that better connect education with practical application and long-term career development. This includes post-training initiatives and relationship-based approaches that consider technical skills in cultural and community contexts. Effective models may include community-based mentorships with visiting experts over extended periods. For example, a mentor returning regularly over a year, or resident teacher that provides sustained on-site training.

Priority 3: Developing better understanding of individual and community impacts of arts worker training

Challenge

The National Cultural Policy recognises that a strong arts sector contributes to social, cultural, economic and community wellbeing. However, the success of arts worker training is still measured primarily through employment outcomes and job retention (NCVER, 2023). This provides only a partial picture of the value of specialised training for arts workers and their communities.

Adult education, under which arts worker training sits, often delivers outcomes beyond formal qualifications or direct employment. This includes increased confidence, cultural connection, community participation, leadership development, and building more positive relationships with education (Goodall et al., 2022). Informal learning and the ‘hidden curriculum’ – the social, relational and cultural learning that happens as a student – are especially important among Indigenous learners.

Anecdotal evidence and community feedback point to these wider benefits – see AWEPP participant statements in program booklets (ANKA, 2025, 2024). However, there is little formal research that has measured these positive effects. As a result, the full impact of arts worker training remains undervalued in policy and funding decisions.

Opportunity

A stronger evidence base is needed to better understand how training can improve individual and community wellbeing, cultural continuity and long-term participation in the arts sector. This applies regardless of whether outcomes translate directly to employment or career progression. Improved research and evaluation methods would translate to more informed policy, as well as strengthening the case for government investment in adult arts education in remote contexts. There is an opportunity to develop culturally responsive research frameworks to capture wider social, cultural and community impacts of arts worker training, alongside employment outcomes.

Priority 4: Building resourcing capacity of remote art centres to respond to climate-related disasters

Challenge

Climate change is increasing the frequency and severity of floods, cyclones and extreme heat across Australia. While disaster preparedness is a growing priority with the Galleries, Libraries, Archives and Museums sector, planning and investment is focused on public collection institutions.

Remote Indigenous art centres are critically under resourced and underprepared for climate-related disasters. Recent events, including the 2026 flooding at Merrepen Arts in Nauiyu (Barrett Peters, 2026), the 2023 West Kimberley flood at Mangkaja Arts in Fitzroy Crossing (Pickup, 2023) and the 2011 flood at Warmun Art Centre in Warmun (Browning, 2013) demonstrate the growing vulnerability of remote art centres. These disasters caused extensive damage to the art centres, their resources, and the collections they held. This highlights the urgent need for climate-resilient infrastructure and disaster preparedness support.

Many remote art centres lack the infrastructure, staffing, training and networks needed to plan for, and respond to, potential disasters (Scott, 2017). At present, there is limited capacity for evacuation planning or recovery coordination. Without targeted support, climate-related events will continue to place cultural materials, and the knowledge embedded within them, at risk. This will have devastating impacts on community wellbeing and cultural health.

Opportunity

There is an opportunity for the government to back a coordinated, regionally based disaster preparedness and response network for remote art and cultural organisations. This could include funding for emergency planning, training, collection care, recovery support and mutual assistance networks. A useful model may be Disaster Response Canberra (DISACT), a consortium established by collecting institutions in Canberra to improve disaster preparedness and provide help during emergencies (DISACT Disaster Response Canberra, n.d.). Adapting a similar model for remote Indigenous art centres would strengthen sector resilience as well as safeguard against the impact of climate change on collections.

Thank you for your time. [REDACTED]

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