

Submission to Public Consultation on Australia's National Cultural Policy

About Us:

Joblink Plus is a not-for-profit organisation delivering services in over 100 communities across New South Wales. It connects individuals with education and employment opportunities while supporting community-led initiatives, including arts and cultural programmes. Joblink Plus is committed to Reconciliation and embeds Trauma-Informed Practice and Ethical Decision-Making frameworks into its operations to ensure culturally safe service delivery.

Each year, Joblink Plus supports more than 8,000 people into employment and enrolls over 5,000 students in vocational training. The organisation also contributes to community development through direct investments, social enterprises, and volunteering programmes. Joblink Plus collaborates with a wide range of organisations that align with its values, including local sporting teams, arts initiatives, health programmes, and various youth and First Nations Australian projects.

A prominent initiative is the biennial First Nations Art Competition & Exhibition (FNAC), which provides a platform for artists identifying as First Nations Australians or New Zealand First Nations peoples, to showcase cultural expression and earn income through the creative industries. Joblink Plus established this competition to address the lack of opportunities within its service areas for First Nations artists, across a broad range of skills levels and ages, to exhibit and sell their work.

As noted by **Melanie Byrnes, Executive Leader First Nations Engagement:**

As a not-for-profit, non-ACCO organisation, Joblink Plus recognises that Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations are best placed to lead cultural authority and decision-making. Our role is to support, facilitate, and create pathways that enable First Nations artists and creatives to access opportunities, build skills, and participate in the broader economy in culturally safe ways.

Alignment with the Key Pillars of the Present National Cultural Policy

1. **First Nations First:** Joblink Plus ensures that First Nations voices are central to all cultural programming within its remit. Initiatives such as FNAC are designed to amplify Indigenous narratives while offering skills development and recognition for Aboriginal artists. By integrating ethical frameworks and cultural safety measures, FNAC showcases the leadership that First Nations artists rightfully embody.
2. **A Place for Every Story:** Regional communities are custodians of unique cultural histories yet face systemic barriers to participation. Through FNAC and associated outreach programmes, Joblink Plus connects regional artists to wider Australian audiences. These efforts align strongly with the pillar's emphasis on diversity across geographic and social contexts.

3. **Centrality of the Artist:** Recognising that rural artists often lack access to opportunities available to urban counterparts, Joblink Plus prioritises creating pathways from artistic practice to sustained economic activity. FNAC specifically nurtures regional Aboriginal artists, who often encounter challenges of exposure and income creation.
4. **Strong Cultural Infrastructure:** Joblink Plus advocates for transformative investment in regional arts infrastructure. Resources must span training opportunities, locally administered grants, and physical spaces that enable creatives to grow within their communities. FNAC serves as a blueprint for how small-scale regional projects can scaffold broader cultural ecosystems.
5. **Engaging the Audience:** By promoting inclusive engagement, programmes like FNAC introduce First Nations art and regional narratives to broader audiences. Beyond showcasing cultural works, such initiatives foster dialogue and enhance interconnections between communities, solidifying the role of regional arts as part of Australia's cultural identity.

Challenges for Organisations Like JLP

- **Funding Restrictions:** Organisations like Joblink Plus face significant challenges in accessing funding. Many funding criteria exclude them, creating barriers to sustainability. Joblink Plus also refrains from competing with Aboriginal Community-Controlled Organisations (ACCOS) for limited resources, prioritising collaboration over competition. However, this approach limits access to funding streams that could enable Joblink Plus to complement ACCO activities effectively. But as Melanie Byrnes has noted:

Investment in First Nations arts and culture should extend beyond participation and visibility to include pathways into sustainable employment, enterprise, and economic participation.

- **Structural Barriers in Regional Areas:** Geographical isolation exacerbates challenges for artists in regional areas. Limited access to networks, mentorship and audiences restricts opportunities for growth and collaboration. This structural divide increases the costs of delivering services and programmes, making it harder for organisations like Joblink Plus to sustain creative initiatives. This impedes the development and longevity of creative industries, leaving artists and organisations disconnected from broader cultural ecosystems. These barriers contribute to a cycle of disadvantage, in which regional artists struggle to achieve visibility and financial stability, further entrenching inequities within the creative sector.

Opportunities and Necessary Actions to Develop Regional Creative Industries in the New National Cultural Policy

- **Inclusive Funding Frameworks:** Adjusting eligibility criteria would enable not-for-profits like Joblink Plus to collaborate strategically with ACCOs. Such reforms would ensure equitable growth across rural and urban cultures, addressing systemic barriers that currently limit collaboration. This approach would also enhance the capacity of ACCOs to deliver employment services and targeted programmes for creative industries.
- **Skill Development Initiatives:** Increased focus on vocational training and mentorship for rural creatives would facilitate smoother transitions into entrepreneurship and employment, mitigating barriers specific to rural contexts. These initiatives should prioritise culturally safe environments and address the acute skills shortages in First Nations performing arts and other creative sectors.
- **Investment in Culturally Safe Opportunities:** Expanding FNAC into a multi-year festival format would elevate its impact, creating a sustainable arts event showcasing First Nations

creativity nationwide. This evolution would require increased federal and state support to ensure its success and longevity. A festival format could serve as a platform for cultural exchange, fostering deeper connections between First Nations artists and broader audiences.

Case Study: First Nations Art Competition (FNAC)



The Joblink Plus First Nations Art Competition has achieved measurable outcomes in advancing Aboriginal art, cultural leadership, and employment opportunities within Indigenous communities. Since 2017, FNAC has demonstrated significant growth in participation and impact:

- **Participation Growth:** FNAC began with 36 entries from 21 artists in 2017. By 2026, submissions had grown to 411 artworks from 221 artists, marking an increase of more than elevenfold over nine years.
- **Geographic Reach:** Representation has increased from 12 communities into 2017 to 47 communities across New South Wales in 2026; showcasing the growing diversity and broadening reach of Indigenous talent and cultural expression across the state.
- **Employment and Economic Opportunities:** FNAC does not charge entry fees or commissions on art sales. Artists retain 100% of profits, generating more than \$115,000 in community income from sales and prizes to-date. This model enhances economic development within Indigenous communities while providing professional exposure and career advancement opportunities for participants.
- **Youth Engagement:** Junior and youth categories were introduced to encourage participation among younger Indigenous creatives. This supports early career development and fosters cultural expression among emerging artists.

These outcomes demonstrate the FNAC's contribution to cultural leadership and economic empowerment, aligning with broader efforts to preserve and promote First Nations arts and culture. Joblink Plus CEO, Emily Roy says:

In times of high-stress and even anxiety, or when your value in society is seen through an economic lens in terms of how much tax you pay or houses you own, an event like this carries proudly the message that art and expression and creativity is worth it. It's worth your time, your effort, and your labour – both as an artist and as a member of a community. Australia is privileged to be the land of the world's oldest continuous, living, evolving culture, and in Kamilaroi country the expression of that culture is rich - and worth celebrating through meaningful investment.

Closing Recommendations

Australia's regional creative industries are vital to the nation's cultural and economic fabric, contributing significantly to employment, tourism and community cohesion. However, these industries face challenges such as limited access to resources, career pathways and infrastructure. Solutions do exist, but can only be achieved if the new National Cultural Policy offers greater scope for cross-sector collaboration by:

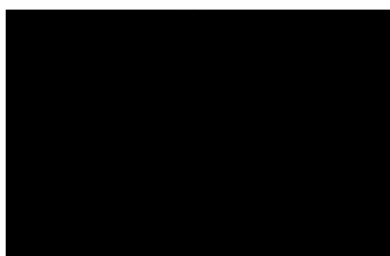
- Recognising the contributions of regional creatives and the services that support them
- Reforming funding processes to stimulate broader collaboration
- Prioritising culturally inclusive policies in jobs and skills development.

As Joblink Plus CEO, Emily Roy, has noted:

If provided with equitable frameworks for support and collaboration across sectors, Australia's rural and regional creative industries are uniquely positioned to grow in culturally meaningful ways. Investing in organisations such as Joblink Plus to facilitate First Nations creatives in this process guarantees that no voice is left unheard or unseen within the cultural landscape.

With broader partnership and support, initiatives such as the FNAC exemplify an opportunity to achieve scaled-up impact and amplify outcomes, for the benefit of communities and artists of all ages. The new National Cultural Policy can unlock the full potential of regional creative industries, ensuring they thrive in ways that are economically impactful and culturally inclusive.

Joblink Plus thank the Government for the opportunity to share our experience as they consider the pathway forward for our National Cultural Policy. We welcome the opportunity to engage further with the Department and are happy to answer any questions.



Emily Roy

Chief Executive Officer

Tamworth

Joblink Plus

