



National Cultural Policy Submission 2026

Arts and Cultural Management Program, The University of Melbourne

The Arts and Cultural Management Program at the University of Melbourne is a postgraduate program that explores the tension between culture as an economic activity and culture as a symbolic expression through four themes – organisations, governance, identity and labour. Researchers teaching in the program have expertise spanning the creative and cultural industries, including cultural labour, policy, and organisational management in performing arts, visual arts, screen industries, music and creative workplaces.

Our submission to the National Cultural Policy review process aligns with the Policy's pillars (First Nations First; A Place for Every Story; Centrality of the Artist; Strong Cultural Infrastructure; Engaging the Audience) and is organised around three themes:

- 1) Equitable access to arts education,
- 2) Strategic development of regional cultural diplomacy, and
- 3) Support for arts participation, including sustained funding to address workforce sustainability, consideration of the role of AI, and enhancement of cultural infrastructure.

Priority 1 – Equitable Access to Arts Education

The launch of Job-Ready Graduates (JRG) fee system in 2021 has significantly increased higher education costs for those studying arts and humanities, with flow-on effects to student engagement at a secondary level (Gattenhoff, 2026; Gattenhoff and Saunders 2026). The skills of creative and critical thinking are essential professional skills and competencies (Gattenhoff, 2025).

The arts sector has already identified significant skill gaps in particular disciplines, such as screen, gaming and technical roles in the performing arts, along with shortages of arts workers in regional and rural, CALD and First Nations communities. Continuing to place significant educational burden on those wishing to enter the arts industry will hamper sector efforts to develop sustainable talent pipelines.

Additionally, the higher fees associated with arts education negatively affect diversity and inclusion within the cultural sector, with First Nations, CALD, disabled, regional, lower socio-economic and other disadvantaged/marginalised groups less likely to study in these areas and as a result, pursue careers in the cultural and creative industries. The Job Ready Graduate scheme directly contradicts Pillars 1 and 2 of the National Cultural Policy, which highlight the importance of First Nations self-determination and diverse cultural expression and representation in the Australian cultural sector.

A further consideration is the role that arts education plays as part of the professional identity and income of working artists. Education and teaching make up a substantial part of artists' income and portfolio careers in Australia (MacNeill et al., 2022), while opportunities to work within educational contexts have been shown to benefit artists in terms of both creative practices and career development (Uptis, 2005). Supporting more career opportunities and partnerships between artists and educational institutions would further enhance the professional development and financial stability of the Australian cultural workforce.

Recommended actions:

- Review the current Job Ready Graduates scheme and reduce the costs of arts and humanities degrees to ensure equitable access to arts and humanities education and development of the future creative workforce.
- Continued support and investment of arts-school partnerships and artists residency programs as a way of supporting the professional development of teaching artists.

Priority 2 – Enhance Cultural Diplomacy through Strategic Regionally Aligned Efforts

Telling Australian stories is important because it reflects the lives, histories, and aspirations of various communities. Representation, both on screen or on stage, strengthens social cohesion by addressing historical complexities, challenging stereotypes, and fostering community engagement. Diversity in storytelling also enhances Australia's capacity to promote culturally nuanced and locally grounded narratives on the international stage (Khoo et al., 2024). *Revive* offers the opportunity to support those who define and create Australian content, ensuring that a diverse range of voices, including those from marginalised, diaspora, and regional communities, are meaningfully represented in the arts.

Despite Australia's longstanding and growing geopolitical, cultural, and migratory connections with nations in Europe, Asia, and the Pacific, little has been done to leverage these ties to foster deeper, ongoing engagement with international communities. A key action is therefore to support diplomatic engagement with international communities. Building sustained international recognition through cultural exchange practices and artist collaborations will strengthen mechanisms for recognising Indigenous knowledge as intellectual property, while also producing a more coherent and culturally nuanced narrative about Australia.

However, successful cultural diplomacy operates toward mutuality, two-way engagement and long-term relationships (Ang et al., 2015 and Schneider, 2009). It goes beyond simply telling a nation's story and must focus on developing dialogue, collaborative programs, and understanding other cultures. It is most effective when conducted at arm's length and incorporates strategic frameworks and structural sustainability.

Australia's cultural diplomacy efforts have historically been poorly resourced, often treated as a response to shifting geopolitical conditions and opportunities, rather than as a proactive, strategic initiative for the future. This results in underfunded and fragmented cultural diplomacy initiatives that prevent programs from maturing and achieving lasting impacts. While the Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development, Communications

and the Arts (DITRDCSA), the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT), and Creative Australia all promote international engagement, their efforts often lack collective impact and do not form a coordinated strategic narrative. Establishing a dedicated cultural diplomacy institution, similar to those of the UK, France, Germany, and Japan, would more effectively utilise Australia's cultural resources and coordinate long-term international exchanges.

Australia has the opportunity to use cultural policy to deepen international partnerships with our Pacific Island neighbours and build cross-cultural understanding between the broader Australian public and Pacific Island diasporic communities living in Australia. As a full member of the Pacific Islands Forum and a signatory to the 2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent, Australia has a strategic interest in supporting the sustainable development of Pacific Island creative industries and preservation of traditional arts and cultural practices.

Recommended actions:

- Provide infrastructure and funding support for stronger partnerships between diaspora-led community organisations, arts institutions, Indigenous communities, and independent artists to shape cultural diplomacy programs, authentic narrative frameworks, programming and international distribution channels for Australian content.
- Establish a dedicated cultural diplomacy institution to build Australia's international artistic reputation and pursue long-term engagement strategies through arts, culture, and educational programs.
- Introduce scholarships and support programs for Pacific Island artists and arts managers to study at the tertiary level in Australia as a way of fostering cross-cultural exchange and stronger diplomatic ties.

Priority 3 – Support for Arts Participation

Revive has made progress in changing the conversation about working in the arts, reframing arts work as *work* and focusing on developing jobs and opportunities for industry. However cultural policy should look beyond the arts as economic contributor, just as participation in the arts should be considered beyond the instrumental and industrial.

The increasing corporatisation and instrumentalisation of the arts and cultural systems often lead us to forget a fundamental principle: art is made by people, for people (Araújo, 2019; Rentschler, 2015). The arts are cultural spaces created, sustained, and experienced through human participation at every level of their ecosystem. Participation reflects active engagement across artistic, educational, organisational, societal and community life (Araújo et al., 2020; Evans, 2016).

Jobs and economic activity are important, but without sustained support for non-commercial cultural activity and measures to foster participation at every level, Australia's arts and culture ecosystem will be limited to commercial imperatives, undermining our capacity to pursue art and culture as a public good and sustain a world-leading cultural presence. To

move beyond funding structures, operational systems or institutional outputs alone, we need to consider how people remain embedded in cultural processes: the artists who create, the workers who sustain organisations, the educators who develop future workforces, the communities who participate, and the diverse audiences who seek meaning, connection, and recognition through cultural life.

Acknowledging that cultural systems ultimately seek to speak to people, they cannot progressively exclude people from their own ecology. The precarity of labour, the erosion of public cultural spaces, declining access to arts education, workforce instability, and the increasing outsourcing of cultural labour through technological systems risk weakening not only artistic production but also public participation itself.

This is particularly evident in contemporary debates surrounding AI and automation. While digital technologies are reshaping operational processes within cultural organisations, the growing replacement of human creative labour risks producing cultural systems that are progressively detached from human experience and relational life. When participation is reduced, representation weakens and recognition declines. Consequently, people no longer recognise themselves within cultural systems and cultural relevance itself becomes fragile.

Recommended actions:

- Establish a long-term, nationally recognised public campaign for arts participation that positions creativity and cultural engagement (both participation and consumption) as essential to health and wellbeing, belonging, and connection, in the same way public health campaigns have normalised sport and physical activity.
- Fund and resource the cultural ecology that nurtures audiences and arts participation – including criticism, public discourse, festivals, community networks, and recognition mechanisms – alongside production investment, to strengthen appreciation, civic engagement and sustained support for Australian creativity and storytelling.
- Adequately resource arts organisations to make informed, ethical decisions about their use of AI, safeguard intellectual property, build and retain core knowledge across the sector, and avoid outsourcing this expertise to Large Language Models/Generative AI tools.

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