

Blak Futures Collective and First Nations Performing Arts Companies Network submission

National Cultural Policy 2026

Submission summary

First Nations performing arts are essential cultural and social infrastructure, contributing to wellbeing, cultural identity, employment, knowledge transmission and community connection across Australia.

This submission brings together First Nations performing arts organisations, First Nations-governed intercultural practice and non-Indigenous organisations led by First Nations Artistic Directors working across dance and theatre. Together, these models reflect a national ecology of cultural leadership, governance and practice operating nationally and internationally.

Evidence consistently demonstrates that connection to culture contributes to improved social and emotional wellbeing for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and is recognised as a national priority under [Closing the Gap](#). However, there remains limited national data capturing the

scale and contribution of the First Nations cultural workforce, despite its significant role within Australia's cultural, social and economic life.

Current policy settings continue to frame culture primarily as an industry. While economic contribution is important, this framing is insufficient. First Nations performing arts operate as civic, social and cultural infrastructure. They sustain wellbeing, language, identity, intergenerational knowledge transmission, community cohesion and cultural continuity.

There is currently a growing misalignment between how First Nations performing arts operate in practice and how policy systems support the sector. Workforce frameworks do not adequately recognise cultural labour. Commissioning and touring are not supported as employment systems. International exchange and market development remain structurally under supported. Cultural governance and Indigenous Cultural and Intellectual Property (ICIP) are not consistently embedded across funding systems.

This is not a workforce shortage. It is a failure to recognise and structure the workforce and systems already sustaining the sector.

First Nations performing arts are also increasingly operating within global cultural networks through touring, Indigenous-to-Indigenous exchange, commissioning, co-creation and cultural diplomacy. This work is not solely export activity. It is also reciprocal exchange, international relationship development and Indigenous diplomacy.

The Tri-Nations Indigenous-to-Indigenous transnational exchange, export and commissioning strategy between Indigenous artists and organisations across Australia, Canada and Aotearoa New Zealand has already been developed over more than twenty years through Indigenous-led organisations, festivals and cultural leaders. The strategy already exists. What is now required is implementation and long-term resourcing.

We call for:

- a First Nations performing arts workforce system
- dedicated commissioning pathways
- full resourcing of cultural governance and ICIP
- equitable touring and international exchange systems
- dedicated First Nations-led market development infrastructure
- implementation support for the Tri-Nations strategy
- pathways to long-term sustainability and organisational growth.

First Nations cultural governance, workforce development, international exchange and cultural continuity must operate as integrated principles across all pillars of the next National Cultural Policy.

First Nations performing arts organisations are not solely arts producers. They are systems of governance, employment, diplomacy, knowledge transmission and community infrastructure.

This submission should be read in conjunction with the following other submissions:

- Self-determined First Nations performing arts organisations submission
- Indigenous intercultural practice submission
- First Nations leadership of non-Indigenous dance companies submission
- First Nations dance submission
- First Nations theatre submission.

Submission

Introduction

This submission brings together First Nations performing arts organisations, intercultural practice and organisations led by First Nations Artistic Directors working across dance and theatre. Together, these models reflect a national ecology of cultural leadership, governance and practice across the Australian performing arts sector. These different models demonstrate the breadth of First Nations creative leadership, cultural governance and collaboration currently operating nationally and internationally.

Self-determined organisations

- Bangarra Dance Theatre
- BlakDance
- ILBIJERRI Theatre Company
- Joel Bray Dance
- Karul Projects Dance Theatre
- Moogahlin Performing Arts
- Yirra Yaakin Theatre Company
- Gary Lang NT Dance Company
- Jacob Boehme and Narungga Elders
- Na Djaingnag Circus

National Training Organisation

- NAISDA

Indigenous intercultural practice

- Marrugeku

Non-Indigenous organisations led by First Nations Artistic Directors

- Australian Dance Theatre
- Dance Makers Collective



Context

First Nations performing arts are essential cultural and social infrastructure, contributing to:

- wellbeing
- cultural identity
- employment
- community connection
- knowledge transmission
- cultural continuity.

Evidence consistently demonstrates that connection to culture

contributes to improved social and emotional wellbeing for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and is recognised as a national priority under Closing the Gap.

However, there remains limited national data capturing the scale and contribution of the First Nations cultural workforce, despite its significant role within Australia's cultural, social and economic life.

To deliver on *Revive* and Closing the Gap, policy must now move beyond symbolic recognition toward structural implementation by investing in:

- workforce systems
- commissioning systems
- cultural governance
- touring infrastructure
- international exchange
- long-term sustainability.

Culture as civic infrastructure

Current policy settings continue to frame culture primarily as an industry. While economic contribution is important, this framing is insufficient.

First Nations performing arts operate as civic, social and cultural infrastructure.

They sustain:

- wellbeing
- identity

- community cohesion
- knowledge transmission
- language revitalisation
- cultural continuity
- intergenerational exchange
- international cultural relationships.

Like health, education and community services, culture is foundational to a functioning society.

First Nations performing arts also align with Australia's commitments under the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), including the rights of Indigenous peoples to:

- maintain cultural institutions
- protect and develop cultural knowledge
- maintain relationships between Indigenous peoples globally
- exercise self-determination in cultural development.

The system gap

There is a growing misalignment between how First Nations performing arts operate in practice and how policy systems currently support the sector.

This misalignment is reflected across the system:

- investment has not kept pace with population growth or workforce demand
- funding is increasingly directed toward buildings rather than people, governance and practice
- workforce frameworks do not adequately recognise cultural labour
- commissioning and touring are not supported as employment systems
- policy remains fragmented across portfolios
- international exchange and market development systems remain structurally under supported
- cultural governance and ICIP are not consistently embedded across funding systems.

There is also limited national data capturing the First Nations cultural workforce, despite its clear contribution to community, cultural and economic life.


This is not a workforce shortage. It is a failure to recognise and structure the workforce and systems already sustaining the sector.

International exchange and market development

First Nations performing arts are increasingly operating within global cultural networks through:

- touring
- Indigenous-to-Indigenous exchange
- co-creation
- commissioning
- cultural diplomacy
- long-term international relationship building.

This work is not solely export activity. It is also:

- cultural exchange
 - Indigenous diplomacy
 - reciprocal relationship development
 - international cultural relations.
- 

These priorities align with broader sector recommendations emerging through the Australian Live Performance Export Alliance regarding:

- touring feasibility
- producer capacity
- cultural diplomacy
- coordinated export infrastructure
- long term international relationship development.

The current international environment is increasingly difficult, with escalating touring costs, freight, visas and workforce pressures impacting the ability of artists and organisations to sustain international engagement.

At the same time, there has not been sustained dedicated First Nations-led international market development infrastructure embedded within Creative Australia or its predecessor agencies.

Despite First Nations arts and international engagement both being identified as national priorities, there has been no long term structural mechanism supporting this work in a coordinated way since the removal of the last dedicated bridging role between market development and First Nations arts.

This has had significant implications for:

- continuity of international relationships
- producer and cultural brokerage capacity
- long-term market development
- Indigenous-led touring systems
- international cultural exchange.

There is already substantial sector leadership in this area. The Tri-Nations Indigenous-to-Indigenous transnational exchange, export and commissioning strategy between Indigenous artists and organisations across Australia, Canada and Aotearoa New Zealand has been developed over more than twenty years through Indigenous-led festivals, organisations, producers and cultural leaders.

This strategy already provides a framework for:

- reciprocal exchange
- commissioning
- touring
- market development
- Indigenous diplomacy.

Climate, Country and cultural continuity

Country is not separate from culture. Land, water, sky and environment hold story, knowledge, ceremony and cultural responsibility.

Climate change, environmental degradation and extractive industries therefore directly impact First Nations cultural continuity and cultural practice.

First Nations performing arts organisations carry significant responsibility in maintaining and transmitting cultural knowledge connected to Country, community and environmental stewardship.

Culture must be recognised as part of Australia's resilience infrastructure.

This includes:

- sustaining cultural knowledge systems
- supporting community resilience
- maintaining intergenerational knowledge transmission
- supporting regenerative cultural practice
- enabling place-based cultural relationships and exchange.

Climate adaptation and cultural adaptation cannot be separated within First Nations cultural practice.

Integrated system principles

First Nations cultural governance, workforce development, international exchange and cultural continuity should operate as integrated principles across all pillars of the National Cultural Policy rather than isolated initiatives.

This includes:

- commissioning
- touring
- infrastructure
- international engagement
- market development
- workforce systems
- audience development
- cultural governance
- climate resilience
- education and knowledge transmission.

First Nations performing arts organisations are not solely arts producers. They are systems of:

- governance
- employment
- diplomacy
- knowledge transmission
- community infrastructure.

Policy priorities

To fully realise Revive and Closing the Gap commitments, we call for:

1. A First Nations performing arts workforce system

Including:

- workforce development across producing, technical, touring and leadership roles
- recognition of cultural labour within workforce frameworks
- long term workforce sustainability pathways
- funding for a national First Nations performing arts workforce feasibility study and data framework
- support for First Nations-led training infrastructure, including NAISDA as the national First Nations training organisation
- investment in emerging technical and production workforce pathways including the introduction of the Certificate IV in Live Production and Technical Services from 2027.

2. A First Nations performing arts commissioning system

Including:

- dedicated commissioning pathways for works of audience scale and cultural scale
- investment in long-term creation and development processes
- support for independent artists and emerging companies
- support for writers, dramaturgs, choreographers and producers.

3. Cultural governance and ICIP infrastructure

Including:

- full resourcing of cultural governance and protocol processes
- embedded ICIP frameworks across all funding systems
- recognition of governance and cultural labour as core infrastructure.

4. National touring and international exchange systems

Including:

- equitable and culturally grounded touring systems
- investment in touring feasibility and audience development
- producer and cultural brokerage capacity
- dedicated First Nations-led market development infrastructure
- implementation support for the Tri-Nations Indigenous-to-Indigenous transnational exchange, export and commissioning strategy
- support for Indigenous diplomacy and reciprocal exchange.

5. Pathways to long-term sustainability

Including:

- pathways from project funding to multi year operational support
- support for organisational stability and institutional growth
- leadership sustainability and succession planning
- infrastructure investment focused on people and practice, not just buildings.

6. Alignment across government systems

Including:

- stronger coordination between arts, education, foreign affairs, tourism and employment systems
- embedding First Nations leadership across international cultural policy and export structures
- aligning cultural policy implementation with Closing the Gap and UNDRIP commitments.

Alignment with national commitments

This submission aligns with:

- Pillar 1: First Nations First in *Revive*
- Closing the Gap Priority Reform 4
- Australia's commitments under the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP)
- emerging national conversations regarding culture as civic and social infrastructure
- broader sector calls for coordinated international cultural engagement and export systems.

Conclusion

First Nations performing arts are central to Australia's cultural life, international reputation and future cultural sustainability.

The work is already happening nationally and internationally.

First Nations organisations, artists and leaders are already sustaining:

- workforce systems
- cultural governance
- international exchange
- community relationships
- audience development
- artistic innovation
- cultural continuity.

The challenge for the next National Cultural Policy is whether Australia's systems evolve to properly sustain, recognise and resource the work already occurring.