

Blak Futures – First Nations dance submission

National Cultural Policy 2026

Submission summary

First Nations dance is essential cultural and social infrastructure, contributing to wellbeing, cultural identity, employment, cultural continuity and community connection across Australia. 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](#).

First Nations dance is both a contemporary artform and a living cultural practice that sustains the world's oldest continuing cultures through ceremony, cultural governance, intergenerational knowledge transmission and Indigenous Cultural and Intellectual Property (ICIP) frameworks.

Dance also demonstrates clearly how employment within the sector is generated through commissioning, development and touring systems rather than fixed or traditional employment models. These systems operate as interconnected pathways for artists, producers, technicians and cultural workers across independent practice, commissioning, touring and international exchange.

First Nations dance already operates nationally and internationally as a connected ecosystem linking cultural practice, workforce development, audience engagement, community connection and cultural diplomacy. This work is not solely export activity. It is also cultural exchange, Indigenous diplomacy and reciprocal international relationship building.

However, current policy settings do not align with how First Nations dance operates in practice.

Key gaps include:

- underinvestment in commissioning, touring and audience development
- inconsistent commissioning pathways for First Nations choreographers
- limited commissioning of First Nations choreographers within non-Indigenous-led organisations
- inadequate embedding of cultural governance, ICIP and culturally safe processes within commissioning systems
- insufficient support for technical, production and touring workforce development
- fragmented international touring and market development systems
- lack of dedicated First Nations-led market development infrastructure
- limited producer and cultural brokerage capacity supporting long-term exchange and touring relationships.

The sector also lacks clear organisational pathways. Despite the scale and maturity of First Nations dance practice nationally and internationally, there remains no properly resourced federally funded small-to-medium First Nations dance sector. This creates a major structural gap between independent practice and large-scale institutional models.

Importantly, cultural governance and ICIP should not be weaponised against First Nations choreographers in ways that restrict artistic mobility or create discriminatory touring conditions. First Nations artists must be able to tour work nationally and internationally without being subjected to additional barriers not experienced by non-Indigenous peers.

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 already been developed through Indigenous-led organisations and cultural leaders over more than twenty years. What is now required is implementation and long-term resourcing.

We call for:

- consistent commissioning pathways for First Nations choreographers
- investment in touring, audience development and market development infrastructure
- investment in producer, technical and touring workforce pathways
- dedicated First Nations-led international market development infrastructure
- support for organisational sustainability pathways
- implementation support for the Tri-Nations strategy
- embedding cultural governance and ICIP across commissioning and touring systems.

First Nations dance is not solely artistic output. It is cultural infrastructure, workforce infrastructure, diplomatic infrastructure and community infrastructure.

The work is already happening.

The systems must now match it.

Submission

Introduction

First Nations performing arts are essential cultural and social infrastructure, contributing to wellbeing, cultural identity and employment across Australia. Evidence shows that connection to culture is linked to improved social and emotional wellbeing and is recognised as a national priority under Closing the Gap.

First Nations dance plays a critical role within this system and relies on a thriving and culturally safe broader dance ecology. It is both a contemporary artform and a living cultural practice that sustains the world's oldest continuing cultures through cultural governance, ceremony, intergenerational knowledge transmission and Indigenous Cultural and Intellectual Property (ICIP) frameworks.

Importantly, cultural governance and ICIP should not be weaponised against First Nations choreographers in ways that restrict artistic mobility or create discriminatory touring conditions. First Nations artists must not be forced into systems where only localised or geo-specific work is considered culturally appropriate for presentation by non-Indigenous presenters who fundamentally misunderstand protocol and governance frameworks. Like non-Indigenous peers, First Nations choreographers must be able to tour work interstate and internationally without being forced into false distinctions between local and non-local First Nations cultural authority.

Dance also demonstrates clearly how employment in the sector is generated through commissioning, development and touring systems rather than fixed or traditional employment models.

As outlined in the overarching Blak Futures and FNPAC submission, the next phase of *Revive* must move beyond symbolic recognition toward structural implementation and long-term sustainability.

The logo for BLAKDANCE, featuring the word "BLAK" in a bold, black, sans-serif font, followed by "DANCE" in a lighter, grey, sans-serif font. A thin black horizontal line is drawn across the middle of the letters.The logo for bangarra DANCE THEATRE. "bangarra" is written in a lowercase, black, sans-serif font with a stylized, curved line above the 'a'. Below it, "DANCE THEATRE" is written in a smaller, uppercase, black, sans-serif font.The logo for ADT, consisting of the letters "A", "D", and "T" in a bold, black, sans-serif font. The letters are composed of a grid of dots, with some dots missing to create a dotted effect.The logo for Dance Makers Collective. It features a cluster of small, grey circles of varying sizes on the left, followed by the text "Dance Makers Collective" in a grey, sans-serif font.The logo for KARUL PROJECTS DANCE THEATRE. It features a stylized, red and black graphic of a hand or a bird's foot on the left, followed by the word "KARUL" in a bold, black, sans-serif font. Below it, "PROJECTS DANCE THEATRE" is written in a smaller, uppercase, black, sans-serif font.The logo for JOEL BRAY, featuring the name "JOEL BRAY" in a bold, black, sans-serif font. A small red dot is placed between "JOEL" and "BRAY".The logo for NT DANCE COMPANY. It features a stylized, green and black graphic of a tree or plant on the left, followed by the text "NT DANCE COMPANY" in a black, sans-serif font.

First Nations dance is already operating nationally and internationally as a system of:

- cultural production
- workforce development
- audience engagement
- cultural diplomacy
- international exchange
- community infrastructure.

Policy settings and investment structures must now align with how this work operates in practice.

The role of dance

First Nations dance is:

- highly mobile across metropolitan, regional and remote contexts
- internationally engaged and a key contributor to cultural diplomacy
- workforce intensive, supporting artists, producers, technicians, cultural advisors and touring personnel
- deeply connected to Country, community and cultural governance systems
- central to cultural continuity, storytelling and intergenerational exchange.

Dance is often the first point of cultural engagement for young First Nations people entering the performing arts ecology.

Dance operates as a connected ecosystem linking:

- cultural practice
- employment
- touring
- commissioning
- audiences
- community engagement
- international exchange.

First Nations dance also operates as a significant form of international cultural exchange and Indigenous diplomacy, with long-standing touring and exchange relationships developed across global Indigenous and contemporary dance networks.

First Nations dance is not solely artistic output. It is also:

- cultural infrastructure
- workforce infrastructure
- community infrastructure
- diplomatic infrastructure.

The policy gap

Current policy settings do not align with how First Nations dance operates in practice.

Key gaps include:

- underinvestment in touring, audience development and market development
- inconsistent and limited commissioning pathways for First Nations choreographers
- limited commissioning of First Nations choreographers within non- Indigenous-led organisations
- inadequate embedding of cultural governance, ICIP and culturally safe process within commissioning and production models
- insufficient support for technical, production and touring workforce development
- limited investment in rehearsal, development and long- term creation infrastructure
- fragmented international touring and exchange support systems
- lack of dedicated First Nations-led market development infrastructure within national touring and export systems
- insufficient producer and cultural brokerage capacity supporting long- term exchange and touring relationships.

These gaps constrain the sector's ability to sustain artists, workforce, touring systems and cultural practice nationally and internationally.

This is not a shortage of artistic excellence or international demand. It is a structural failure to adequately resource the systems sustaining the work.

Pathways and workforce sustainability

First Nations dance operates through interconnected pathways spanning:

- cultural practice
- independent creation
- commissioning
- development

- producing
- technical and touring workforce development
- national presentation
- international exchange and touring.

These pathways are interdependent and include both artist and organisational development pathways across the sector.

Emerging artists require access to:

- development opportunities
- commissioning
- rehearsal infrastructure
- producers
- touring systems
- cultural mentorship
- international exchange opportunities.



Mid-career and established artists require:

- sustainable commissioning systems
- touring continuity
- producer and technical workforce support
- long- term audience development
- international market development infrastructure.

The sector also requires clear organisational pathways.

And it also requires sustained training and vocational pathways. NAISDA, as the national First Nations training organisation, is already contributing significantly to this ecology, including through the planned introduction of the Certificate IV in Live Production and Technical Services from 2027 to support technical, production and touring workforce development across the sector.

Despite the scale and maturity of First Nations dance practice nationally and internationally, there remains no properly resourced federally funded small-to-medium First Nations dance sector. This creates a significant structural gap between independent practice and large-scale institutional models.

Many First Nations artists and producers are therefore forced to sustain nationally and internationally significant practice through unstable project funding without long- term organisational infrastructure, workforce continuity or operational sustainability.

Without clear organisational pathways, the sector risks:

- workforce instability
- burnout
- loss of producing capacity
- reduced touring sustainability
- reduced international engagement capacity
- loss of long- term cultural and artistic development.

First Nations dance organisations already operate as pathway infrastructure nationally and internationally for:

- artists
- producers
- technicians
- cultural workers
- emerging companies
- independent choreographers.

However, these systems remain structurally under- resourced.

Long- term policy settings must recognise pathways not as isolated training initiatives, but as interconnected systems linking:

- workforce development
- organisational sustainability
- cultural governance
- commissioning
- touring
- international engagement
- market development.

A sustainable First Nations dance ecology requires pathways for both people and organisations across all stages of practice and development.

Policy priorities

To fully realise *Revive* and Closing the Gap commitments, policy implementation should prioritise:

- the establishment of consistent commissioning pathways for First Nations choreographers across the broader dance sector
- embedding expectations for regular First Nations commissioning within publicly funded organisations
- ensuring commissioning processes are grounded in cultural governance, ICIP and culturally safe practice
- supporting organisations to build the capability and relationships required to undertake this work appropriately
- investment in commissioning systems that generate employment and sustain cultural practice
- coordinated national touring infrastructure including audience and market development
- investment in producer, technical and touring workforce pathways
- investment in rehearsal, development and production infrastructure
- dedicated First Nations-led market development and international touring infrastructure

- investment in producer and cultural brokerage capacity supporting international touring and exchange
- implementation support for the Tri-Nations Indigenous-to-Indigenous transnational exchange, export and commissioning strategy
- support for Indigenous diplomacy, reciprocal exchange and long- term international relationship development
- support for partnerships between First Nations choreographers, companies and training organisations to create expanded pathways for creative development, rehearsal, presentation and workforce training.

Strengthening First Nations dance supports:

- cultural continuity
- culturally relevant employment pathways
- community connection
- international cultural exchange
- artistic innovation
- workforce sustainability.

First Nations dance demonstrates how performing arts operate as cultural and social infrastructure in 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
- climate resilience
- cultural governance.

First Nations dance organisations and artists are not solely creating performances. They are sustaining systems of:

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

Alignment with the broader submission

This submission should be read alongside:

- Overarching Blak Futures and FNPAC submission
- Self-determined First Nations performing arts organisations submission
- Indigenous intercultural practice submission
- First Nations leadership submission
- First Nations theatre submission
- broader sector recommendations emerging through the Australian Live Performance Export Alliance regarding touring feasibility, market development and international cultural engagement.

Together, these submissions articulate interconnected systems of First Nations cultural leadership, governance, touring and artistic practice across the performing arts sector.

Conclusion

First Nations dance is central to Australia's cultural life, international cultural presence and future cultural sustainability.

The work is already happening nationally and internationally.

The work is already happening.

The systems must now match it.

On behalf of Blak Futures

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