

National Cultural Policy Submission

1471871

Public

Individual

Chris Cheers



Short submission (text box 500 words or less)

I support Australian dancers as a psychologist. What I observe clinically is not ordinary occupational stress. It is the sustained psychological consequence of a workforce held in structural precarity. A 2025 Victoria University study of 1,031 Australian performing artists (including 325 dancers) found substantial mental health vulnerabilities across all measures, with suicidality predicted by compounding depression, anxiety, and low perceived social support. Support Act's national survey found over half of performing arts workers (53.5%) report high or very high psychological distress; more than three times the general population rate of 15% recorded by the ABS in 2021.

For dancers, income precarity carries a specific clinical dimension that other professions do not share: the body is the instrument. A project gap does not just mean lost income and eroded networks, it means physical deconditioning that can take months to reverse, if it reverses at all. 59% of Australian artists now work on a freelance or self-employed basis, up from 40%. In 2021–22, artists spent an average of 73% of their artistic income on production expenses. For dancers, those expenses include the training, conditioning, and physiotherapy required simply to remain employable between engagements. The financial and physical traps compound each other in ways that produce the chronic stress presentations I see regularly in my consulting room.

The case for dedicated First Nations Contemporary Dance funding carries an additional clinical dimension that must be named. Minority stress theory predicts that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples face unique stressors rooted in prejudice which drive adverse health outcomes. The 2014–15 National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Survey found nearly 33% of Aboriginal people aged over 15 reported high to very high psychological distress; more than twice the rate for other Australians. For many First Nations people, wellbeing is grounded in cultural identity, belonging, and a sense of purpose. A First Nations dancer working in an under-resourced sector, navigating project gaps, inadequate commissioning, and a funding architecture not designed around their cultural governance needs, carries the distress risk documented for all artists, compounded by population-level minority stress.

Stable arts income is a primary prevention measure. Ireland's Basic Income for the Arts pilot returned €1.39 in social and economic value per €1 spent and is now permanent. An Australian equivalent would reduce chronic stress load and downstream demand on mental health services.

I urge the National Cultural Policy to:

- Substantially increase recurrent investment in Contemporary Dance and First Nations Contemporary Dance, recognising decades of real-terms funding contraction in the small-to-medium sector.
- Pilot an Australian Basic Income for the Arts.
- Establish a dedicated funding stream for choreographer-led Contemporary Dance companies to employ permanent ensembles, explicitly including First Nations-led companies such as Joel Bray Dance, ending the project-gap cycle that is clinically harmful to dancers specifically.
- Build a properly resourced First Nations Contemporary Dance sector with embedded cultural governance, consistent commissioning pathways, and clear organisational sustainability.

The mental health case and the arts funding case are the same case. The evidence supports acting on both.