

SUBMISSION TO THE REVIEW OF REVIVE – AUSTRALIA'S NATIONAL CULTURAL POLICY

Background

I am responding from the lived experience of a **multidisciplinary artist**, arts educator and community advocate. As a first-generation Malaysian migrant who arrived as an international student in the 90s, I have benefited deeply from Australia's tertiary education and creative sector opportunities. Now a naturalised Australian, I work across creative practice and cultural sector development to help ensure the opportunities that shaped my career continue to reach the next generation of talent.

My submission addresses the five pillars set out in Revive:

1. First Nations First
2. A Place for Every Story
3. Centrality of the Artist
4. Strong Cultural Infrastructure
5. Engaging the Audience

Embed First Nations-informed leadership, governance, anti-racist and anti-discrimination rights-based safeguards within the sector

The failure to meaningfully advance the Uluru Statement of the Heart in 2023 was a missed opportunity to enact a profound nation-building and cultural direction setting proposal.

It is even more urgent to strengthen First Nations self-determination, cultural authority and Indigenous Cultural and Intellectual Property (ICIP) protections, and UNDRIP UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

As AI and transnational cultural production evolves, tangible forms of indigenous cultural expression across the artforms also remain vulnerable to unethical usage. All Australians of non-First Nations heritage should share the cultural load of protecting and honouring these expressions.

Simultaneously, the experiences of discrimination and racism of First Nations communities must not be conflated and confused with that of settler-migrants like myself to ensure a bespoke approach to all rights-based lens to fully participate in culture.

A PLACE FOR EVERY STORY

Outline direct, measurable actions to address systemic underrepresentation of Culturally and Racially Marginalised (CaRM) and underrepresented Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CaLD) communities in the arts and cultural sector

I've championed the development of underrepresented storytellers and artists. In 2014, I helped establish the [REDACTED], which opened pathways for Asian-Australian theatre makers to step into leadership roles across stage and screen.

Alongside other non-Anglo communities, there remains systemic underrepresentation in the creative sector, and whose stories get told and heard. This leaves us vulnerable to an empathy deficit within a nation that prides itself on multicultural approach to nation-building. Current public discourse that scapegoats migrants for housing pressures or social cohesion shows how far we still are from recognising the contributions of all communities. That artists of diverse backgrounds sometimes defer to overseas markets underscores the consequences of failing to ensure long-term viability for diverse voices to flourish at home.

To build a creative sector that reflects and respects the full breadth of Australia, we must embed long-term support for culturally and racially marginalised artists through:

- **A national Anti-Racism and Cultural Equity Strategy** — industry-led and aligned with the AHRC's National Anti-Racism Framework and Multicultural Framework Review Roadmap.
- **Protection of artistic freedom** — with safe, independent reporting mechanisms for censorship, racism and discrimination.
- **Compulsory anti-racism and cultural safety training** — embedded across large publicly funded organisations through equity action plans and enforceable accountability.

CENTRALITY OF THE ARTIST

Protect freedom of speech and artistic expression across the sector

Strong cultural infrastructure must be based built upon on artistic freedom of speech. This aspiration is already enshrined in the Creative Australia Act (11.e “to uphold and promote freedom of expression in the arts”) and needs to be upheld in the National Cultural Policy.

Art must be able to facilitate critical discourse and be allowed to address social imbalances that manifest in society from time to time.

The recent growing list of festivals and companies enduring operational collapse upon censoring artists' right to speak out against injustices, already condemned by intergovernmental and international legal and human rights bodies, is a threat to the long-term viability of key cultural infrastructure that supports artists and communities.

The National Cultural Policy must vehemently discourage the culture of intimidation that is borne of subpar board governance and donor impropriety that prevents artists from expressing and creating art freely.

Regulate AI and emerging technologies across the arts and creative industries.

The work started by the government on the National AI Plan must continue moving towards a regulatory and ethical framework for the use of AI, data extraction and emerging technologies that is grounded in artist consent, remuneration, copyright, ICIP, cultural rights and equity.

There remains urgent concern about artists' work being scraped, extracted, reproduced or reused without consent or remuneration. Particularly vulnerable are First Nations cultural material, the work of CaRM artists, community-held knowledge, language, archives, storytelling and works grounded in cultural identity or collective memory.

All artists must have control over where their work is seen, how it is used and payment for use. Policy settings must protect cultural sovereignty, copyright, moral rights, attribution, consent and community-held cultural rights. Policy responses to emerging technologies must regulate harm and support community-led experimentation- especially with digital participation, gaming, online storytelling and cross-sector models that expand cultural engagement for diverse communities.

STRONG CULTURAL INFRASTRUCTURE

Restore equitable youth arts investment as a way of building a self-sustaining and access sector for employment and participation.

A decade from the Brandis' 2015 cuts have borne fruit in the severely diminished youth arts sector. This is a sector where early-career development, cultural innovation mainly delivered by the small-medium organisations, have also provided an important gateway for young people of CaLD and CaRM background to explore their livelihoods in the arts and creative industries.

What has transpired is a lopsided sector, where larger organisations with greater operational responsibilities and budgets left to scramble to do this work, while operating in an environment where on the other end formal tertiary arts education has become more cost-prohibitive for young people.

Restoring the youth arts in a creative workforce that is unable to self-replenish itself from a diverse source of backgrounds, lived experience and communities.

Embed Community Arts and Cultural Development (CACD) as a government delivery mechanism across health, education, social services, justice, environmental protection, climate adaptation, disaster preparedness and recovery, and regional development.

The Covid-19 pandemic, global conflicts, threats to democratic participation by misinformation has had a deleterious impact on the wellbeing of local populations, and increased the burden on civic infrastructure.

Community-led cultural participation has shown to be a cost-effective impactful way of addressing complex social challenges:

- improves mental health, reduces loneliness, and protective social networks
- improve engagement, attendance, and learning outcomes in people within and beyond the formal education system
- reduce recidivism within the justice system
- boosts local economies, strengthens place-based identity, and increases civic participation in regional and concentrated metropolitan areas
- drives social reconnection and support long-term recovery of disaster and trauma-affected communities
- improve trust, transparency, and community consent amongst citizens and residents for effective policy work.
- reducing polarisation across diverse cultural and socioeconomic groups

ENGAGING THE AUDIENCE

Much has been mentioned in this submission about the need to centralise artists, their practices while also not underfunding already-stretched organisations across scale and capacity.

However, the ongoing lack of diversity in culture, lived ability and economic diversity of Australian audiences threaten sustainability and relevance of an arts sector that is working to justify its public and social value. The ubiquity and socially-levelling effect of audience development in sport (often interchangeable with community development) in Australia is not mirrored in the arts considering that while the key finding within 2022 National Arts Participation Survey reveal that:

“Australians have a strong interest in First Nations and Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) arts and culture, 39% of First Nations, and 31% of CALD respondents report feeling as though arts and culture in Australia is ‘not for them’”

This disconnect reveals a high willingness amongst diverse audiences to engage with the arts but still feeling excluded from participating wholly in them, which is a missed opportunity for driving cross-cultural social connection and local economic benefits.

I recommend

- **targeted long-term investment in geographically and socioeconomically marginalised areas**, where smaller metropolitan and regional organisations who support First Nations, CACD and CaLD/CaRM artists, are not only supporting said artists short-term project delivery, but are likely to work alongside goals of cultivating long-term audiences, (also interchangeable with the goals of long-term community development)
- **invest in global audiences and transnational connections**: audiences of migrant background and connections to other countries have the capacity to engage with diasporic markets for their work. This applies across artforms but also in particular the screen sector, where the reduction in locally produced screen content is being crowded out by stories led by countries and cultures outside Australia. Centring migrants settled in and contributing to Australian society will transform their lived experience and encourage them to lead in cultivating global connections from a uniquely multicultural perspective and simultaneously strengthen the Australian cultural brand.
- **Improve the measuring and reporting on audience diversity**: while it is incumbent on member companies within National Performing Arts Partnership Framework as well as other major arts, screen and cultural institutions to ensure that audience diversity data be rigorously collected, First Nations-led, CaLD/CaRM, CACD driven organisations as smaller size be adequately resourced to collect this data and ensure this is publicly available

CONCLUDING COMMENTS

All the above points respond to the pillars of Revive by centring the people behind art and cultures and their ability to equitably produce, present and participate in the arts in Australia.

These recommendations are aimed at **protecting cultural identity** and **strengthen creative resilience** amidst rapid global shifts. As a multicultural migrant nation that is still find its cultural reckoning within in the enduring custodianship of its First Nations peoples, Australia's arts and cultural sector faces rising pressures from global homogenisation and relentless digital disruption. Restoring and expanding funding to all the above-mentioned sectors will go a long way to safeguard our distinct voice while supporting one of our most economically dynamic sectors.