

Submission to the Parliament of Australia Inquiry into the *Revive* National Cultural Policy

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Summary

1. *Revive* continues Australian national cultural policy's practice of communicating the **value** of the arts/creative/cultural sectors through their **capacity to generate employment**; this is problematic as it **reduces workers to economic actors** and neglects to recognise the **cultural and social contributions generated from this work**, as well as the lived experiences of many arts/creative/cultural workers in a highly precarious sector.
2. **Quantitative measures of employment obscure** the difficulties many artists and creative and cultural workers experience in attempting to sustain a career and a basic quality of life. **Job precarity** is one of the reasons many workers leave the sector, particularly when approaching life milestones.
3. Creative Workplaces, an initiative of *Revive*, has provided a central collection of resources about working in the sector. This is welcomed, however without addressing **underlying structural deficiencies** such as the exploitation underlying precarious work, this institution continues to place the burden of maintaining a creative career on individuals.
4. **Reasserting the 'security and status'¹ of artists and creative and cultural workers** in policy discourse is a critical precursor to the implementation of future funding models such as a Universal Basic Income (UBI). New models of financial support for artists and creative/cultural workers are urgently required.

Recommendations

- Future national cultural policies **must move beyond narrow, quantitative economic and employment metrics** to explicitly recognise and embed the public, social, and cultural value of artistic, creative, and cultural labour within its frameworks, and to **capture invisible labour**.
- Future policies must explicitly address the **precarity of work** and career sustainability across the full lifespan, including structured pathways for mid-career and older artists, as well as continuing to foster emerging practitioners and educational pathways to creative careers.
- Future national cultural **policies must reassert the security and** status of artists and formally recognise artistic, creative, and cultural labour as essential social infrastructure in a progressive, human-focussed society.
- Future national cultural policies must make **a radical shift in discourse and in funding models**, such as looking to a Universal Basic Income, to **provide security** to artists and creative/cultural workers and ensure the longevity of the sector as a **pillar of Australian life**.

Introduction

Over the past six decades, Australian cultural policy has increasingly adopted an instrumentalist approach to the arts, framing the creative and cultural sectors primarily through their capacity to contribute to economic growth. While this approach may seek to legitimise public funding of the sector, it reduces creative and cultural workers to economic actors within a broader neoliberal policy

¹ *Commonwealth Parliamentary Debates*, H. of R., vol 89, 23 July 1974. pp. 485, 487

framework while obscuring their contributions to public life including democracy, collective identity, education, social cohesion, and the cultural fabric of society.

Revive continues the tradition of Australian cultural policy adopting a market-oriented approach that privileges measurable economic outcomes. Employment statistics, productivity measures, and economic impact modelling frequently dominate policy evaluation because they provide quantifiable evidence of a return on investment. Consequently, the value of creative and cultural work is often assessed through the sector's economic utility rather than its social and cultural contribution. This is typically referenced through claims of the sector's capacity to generate strong employment metrics. While the sector, resplendent with a rotating calendar of festivals, blockbuster musicals and exhibitions, multiple theatre seasons, music concerts, and public events, certainly offers opportunities for employment, the type of employment usually available does not necessarily equate to sustainable work.

Employment across the sector is frequently precarious: gig-based, short-term, low-paid, seasonal, and heavily dependent on interpersonal networks. For many artists and creative/cultural workers, these conditions fail to provide the financial stability necessary to sustain a long-term career, particularly in the face of escalating living costs, housing insecurity, and the growing pressure to abandon creative practice for more reliable income in other sectors. Job precarity is one of the reasons many workers leave the sector, particularly when approaching life events, such as home ownership, family, and retirement.² This results in a 'talent drain' and leaves the sector with a skills shortage while – without urgent policy intervention – nascent generations are predetermined to reproduce unsustainable work patterns.

If employment remains a central metric through which cultural policy is evaluated, then employment in the creative/cultural sectors must be understood through both quantitative and qualitative frameworks. Statistically based employment measures alone reveal little about whether creative workers can establish sustainable careers or maintain long-term participation in the sector or achieve economic security through their practice and/or employment.

This Inquiry presents a critical opportunity to reconsider how Australia understands, values, and measures creative and cultural work beyond narrow economic frameworks. Recognition of the public and cultural value of creative/cultural labour is critical, as is understanding how precarity impacts the lived experience of artists and creative/cultural workers.

Policy Gaps in *Revive*

Successive policies have promoted the capacity of the sector to provide 'employment' or jobs rather than opportunities for career building. The failure of policies to address this perpetuates the reproduction of the precarious model, placing the burden of responsibility for career progression on the individual creative worker.

Revive framed 'artists as workers' through initiatives grouped within Pillar 5, 'Centrality of the Artist' (p.51). Supporting this pillar was the statement "there is no pathway forward unless...arts workers are able to find pathways for long-term career options. The policy aims to provide improved

² McRobbie, A. (2018) *Be creative: Making a living in the new culture industries*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

circumstances for arts workers” (2023, p.52)³. A signature initiative of this pillar, the establishment of Creative Workplaces, was designed as “a resource hub designed to support fair, safe and respectful workplaces across Australia’s arts and culture sector” (Creative Workplaces, 2025). While this is commendable, a ‘resource hub’ only continues to individualise the responsibility for sustaining a creative career in the precarious labour market. There are significant structural inequalities limiting career viability that need to be addressed beyond the establishment of this new body.

Creative Workplaces conducted its inaugural survey in early (2026) stating its intention was to capture “what it’s really like to work in Australia’s creative industries” (Creative Workplaces website 2026). The survey was mostly quantitative, limiting responses to reflect activity from the preceding twelve months except for one section questioning experiences of workplace conditions and behaviours requesting responses to reflect the past five years. Quantitative data reflecting this short timeframe risks capturing a narrow range of experiences in numerical terms and misses an opportunity to capture the true unevenness of experiences at the lived, personal level of the creative/cultural worker, including navigating careers throughout changing economic, policy and personal contexts.

The failure of policy to attack precarious employment and unstable careers is a long-term issue. Historically, Australian cultural policy has not been able to secure creative careers or the reliability of creative work. Preceding *Revive*, the 2013 *Creative Australia* policy recognised the need to secure long-term career paths and to provide ongoing, innovative and appropriate support across an artists’ lifetime⁴ (p.97). This policy sought to, “recognise and reinforce the centrality of the artist ... in the ecology of creative organisations, agencies, and cultural institutions” (p.97). However, the policy was too short-lived to action any initiatives.

The 1994 policy, *Creative Nation*, promised an industry model that appeared to advantage arts workers, while increasing the Australia Council’s funding⁵. The policy focussed on building audiences and employing nascent technology, as levers to “ensure that Australian artists’ incomes are improved” (n.p). In the decade following, artists continued to be underemployed while the Australia Council for the Arts reported an increase in the number of artists working in the sector.⁶

The 1972 – 1975 Whitlam Government pledged to provide ‘security and status’ for artists (Williams 2019). This government sought to improve the position of artists by tripling arts funding and awarding 239 individual fellowships (1971 – 1974)⁷, by providing artists with representation in the decision-making of the Australia Council, and through the personal championing of the Prime Minister who was also the Arts Minister. While held up as the golden era of arts funding, the impact of these initiatives was also short-lived.

While economic rationalism, political agendas and personal vendettas have divested funding processes away from individual artists over the past 50 years, these policies demonstrate historical

³ Australian Government Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development, Communications and the Arts (2023) *Revive: National cultural policy*. Canberra.

⁴ Office for the Arts. *Creative Australia: National Cultural Policy*. Australian Government, 2013, <https://www.arts.gov.au/publications/creative-australia-national-cultural-policy-2013>. [1, 2, 3]

⁵ Commonwealth of Australia (1994) *Creative nation: Commonwealth cultural policy*. Canberra: Department of Communications and the Arts.

⁶ Cunningham, S., McCutcheon, M., Hearn, G. and Ryan, M.D. (2021) “Demand” for culture and “allied” industries: Policy insights from multi-site creative economy research’, *International Journal of Cultural Policy*, 27(6), pp. 768–781.

⁷ Jim Davidson (1987) “Mr Whitlam’s cultural revolution”, *Journal of Australian Studies*, 11:20, 83-91

recognition of the role artists and creative/cultural workers in the creative ecology. They also show that successive efforts to address labour conditions have failed. The realities of portfolio careers, non-linear employment pathways, and the emotional and affective dimensions of creative labour result in forms of work that remain statistically and politically invisible and therefore difficult for policies to represent. The next iteration of *Revive* is an opportunity to research and implement new approaches to this long-term problem and effect meaningful, long-term change.

Challenges

Precarity

Precarity has become the dominant mode of employment in the creative/cultural sector as it is upheld as a financially efficient means of production in the face of technological advances and tight budgets, and there is a strong supply of labour increasing competition for work⁸. Creative work is seen as intrinsically rewarding, leading to creative workers acceptance of the exploitative conditions in return for ‘opportunity’. Creative/cultural workers are relatively powerless in this labour market as being able to participate in creative work requires adapting to this structure. Creative careers are typically characterised through short-term creative work and parallel employment in other fields. This has ongoing consequences for artists and creative/cultural workers including the normalisation of precarious work and the reproduction of the precarious model which encompasses low pay and high levels of emotional investment⁹. These challenges threaten the viability of sustaining a creative/cultural career, presenting a risk for the sector in terms of retaining a suitably trained workforce, skills shortages¹⁰ succession planning, and the sector’s capacity to continue using employment and economic statistics as a communication strategy with governments and other stakeholders.

Invisibility

The reliance on employment metrics in the creative and cultural sector sees only labour that is easily countable captured. This means that the contribution or experiences of many workers who are not regularly working in the sector are missed. This obscures many forms of work, including volunteering, and many experiences of working in the sector including patterns of attrition, and job-seeking behaviours¹¹. Accurate analysis becomes challenging as data does not capture employment patterns between creative and non-creative labour markets, or the extent precarity influences exits from the creative cultural labour market.

Passion

Artist and creative/cultural workers frequently identify with passion as a driver of their careers. This is problematic because it is frequently mobilised as a justification for precarious working conditions, and the expectation of personal sacrifice. Creative workers are often encouraged to view artistic work as intrinsically rewarding rather than economically valuable, reproducing expectations that exploitative conditions can be normalised. This frames insecurity and unstable employment as acceptable measures to attain creative fulfilment and personal identity at the expense of secure employment conditions and institutional support.

⁸ Scott, M. (2012) ‘Cultural entrepreneurs’, *Poetics*, 40, pp. 237–255.

⁹ Eltham, B., Gu, X. and Badham, M. (2025) ‘Artists as workers? Re-imagining cultural policy for insecure and precarious artists and cultural workers’, *Journal of Sociology*, 61(3), pp. 447–468.

¹⁰ Creative Australia and Service and Creative Skills Australia (SaCSA) (2025) *Creative workforce scoping study report: Addressing the challenges with critical skills and sustainable careers*. <https://creative.gov.au/>

¹¹ O’Connor, J. (2024) *Culture is not an industry*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

Socialising the 'Security and Status' of Artists to justify alternative funding measures

Introducing alternative models of funding support, such as a universal basic income (UBI), is currently difficult because it challenges dominant policy assumptions that creative/cultural labour should be market-driven, economically measurable, and the responsibility of the individual. It also challenges the current funding model which has been mostly unchanged since the formation of the Australia Council in 1975. This model prioritised competitive applications, short-term project grants, and organisational funding over stability for individuals within a labour force. Within this context, alternative models require careful research, and early socialisation to be introduced as an effective initiative of future policy. While I advocate for radical change as a necessity to support the vitality and longevity of this sector, new ideas will require a significant cultural and political shift in how artistic work is recognised, valued, and funded in Australia. Re-asserting the 'security and status' of artists and creative/cultural workers in policy documents and discourse is critical to the ushering in of much needed change in the policy and public funding domain.

Conclusion

Policy frameworks can strengthen the social and economic status of Australian artists. There is a long history of Australian national cultural policy recognising the role of the artist and creative/cultural workers; however, these policies have not been successful in enacting meaningful change. The precarity of work have led to the normalisation of exploitation and short-term opportunity and unstable, insecure careers. A fundamental shift in discourse that reasserts the security and status of creative workers, and consideration of alternative funding models is urgently needed. Critically, it is vital that accurate data inform policy decision-making, and that policy discourses shift from their emphasis on quantitative statistics to effectively communicate the social and cultural value of artistic and creative/cultural labour.