



Submission to the National Cultural Policy Review, 2026

About the Australian Society for Music Education

The Australian Society for Music Education (ASME) is a professional association that aims to support, represent, and advocate for music education at all levels and sectors in Australia as an integral part of education and community life. Our approximate 1,000 members are music educators in early childhood settings, primary and secondary schools, tertiary institutions, and community and professional music organisations across the country.

As an Australia-wide organisation, ASME operates under a National Executive and representative National Council who work in Chapters in Australia's States and Territories. All ASME committee members work in a voluntary capacity and are primarily music educators working at school and tertiary institutions.

ASME is an affiliate organisation of the International Society for Music Education (ISME), which operates under the auspices of UNESCO's International Music Council. This international connection reflects our commitment to situating Australian music education within a global context of rights, research, and professional practice. ASME also holds a seat on the National Advocates for Arts Education (NAAE), Australia's coalition of peak arts education associations, and endorses the NAAE's submission to this review. The present submission complements that collective voice by bringing ASME's specific expertise and perspective as the national body for music education.

ASME publishes the *Australian Journal of Music Education*, a fully refereed scholarly journal that advances knowledge in music teaching and learning. We convene a biennial National Conference, support Chapter-level professional learning, and administer a national suite of awards recognising excellence in music education practice. Through these activities, ASME plays a central role in building the knowledge, capability, and professional identity of Australia's music education workforce.

Music, culture, and human life

Music is not a cultural luxury. It is a fundamental dimension of human experience, present across every known society, in every historical period, and at every stage of life (Australian Council for the Arts, 2014; 2023). Music is how communities mark occasions of joy and grief, transmit stories and values across generations, affirm identity, and forge belonging. It is, in the fullest sense, a primary language of culture.

The UNESCO Framework for Culture and Arts Education (2024) affirms this understanding explicitly, recognising that culture and the arts are integral to human development (Barrett & Bond, 2015), wellbeing (Cain et al, 2020), and social cohesion (Bartleet et al, 2016), and calling for their genuine integration into education systems worldwide. ISME, as a UNESCO-affiliated body, similarly affirms that music education is a human right: that every person deserves the opportunity to engage with music as both participant and audience, and that this engagement is foundational to cultural citizenship.

Music education is the primary means through which Australians gain access to this cultural right. It is where children first discover that music is something they can make, not merely consume. It is where young people encounter musical traditions beyond their own experience, developing the cultural literacy and empathy that come from engaging with the diversity of human expression (Crawford, 2019; 2020). And it is where the knowledge, skills, and identities of future musicians, music educators, and culturally engaged citizens are formed.

This connection between music education and cultural life is not incidental. Australia's arts and cultural sector depends on a continuous pipeline of musically educated people: not only professional musicians, but informed audiences, community practitioners, music educators, and the many other roles that sustain cultural organisations and industries. Professional artists are not born; they are educated. The pathway into a life in music begins in schools, in communities, and in the early years of learning. Without sustained, equitable access to ongoing, engaging, quality music education, that pipeline is broken.

Yet the case for music education does not rest solely on its role in producing future professional musicians. Access to rich, culturally-affirming music education provides every young person with the means to engage with and understand culture. It develops creativity, critical listening, emotional intelligence, and collaborative capacity. It supports wellbeing, builds identity, and enables lifelong participation in musical life (Goopy & MacArthur, 2026). These are outcomes that matter for all Australians.

As revealed in the recently released report, *More Than Notes on a Page: The Music Education Ecosystem* (Music Australia, 2026), in addition to being culturally important, music education is one of the strongest contributors to Australia's music industry and the economy more broadly. Data within the report revealed that the music education sector generates \$1.79 billion in revenues and contributes more to Gross Value Added (GVA) than live performance. This cultural and economic impact cannot be taken for granted and speaks to the need and financial and social benefits of greater recognition and support for music education in Australia's renewed cultural policy.

A system under strain

Despite this evidence, music education in Australia is in systemic decline. The increased policy focus on literacy and numeracy, including through the Better and Fairer Schools Agreement (2025-2034), has contributed to the progressive marginalisation of the Arts in national education priorities. The consequences are measurable and deeply concerning.

Across Australia, participation in senior secondary Music has declined by approximately 16% between 2015 and 2023 (Gattenhof and Saunders, 2026; Music Australia, 2026). Enrolments in Creative Arts degrees at Australian universities have fallen, and at least 54 Creative Arts programs have been discontinued since 2018 (NAAE, 2026). The introduction of the Job-Ready Graduates policy in 2020 increased Creative Arts degree fees by approximately 42%, sending a powerful signal to students, to institutions, and to the broader community about the perceived value of arts learning.

The effects ripple across the entire cultural ecosystem. Declining participation in music education in schools leads to reduced enrolments in tertiary music programs. Reduced tertiary provision weakens the pipeline of music educators, professional musicians, and creative workers. Workforce shortages emerge across arts organisations and cultural institutions. Each contraction makes the next more likely.

This is not simply an education policy problem. It is a cultural policy problem. The ambitions of Australia's National Cultural Policy cannot be realised without a population that is musically and culturally educated. A thriving cultural sector cannot be sustained while the conditions for cultural participation continue to erode.

ASME's position: arts education is the precondition for cultural policy

ASME's submission to this review is grounded in a central conviction: music education is not a beneficiary of cultural policy. It is the precondition for cultural policy to work at all.

The five pillars of Revive articulate an ambitious and worthy vision for Australia's cultural life. Yet each pillar depends on outcomes that music and arts education produces: informed audiences, practising artists, a skilled creative workforce, First Nations cultural vitality, and equitable cultural participation. Revive does not, in its current form, invest in the conditions that make those outcomes possible. This is a critical structural gap. A National Cultural Policy cannot be sustained without the education system that develops cultural participants, creators, and professionals from the earliest years of life.

ASME recognises that cultural education encompasses many forms of learning and engagement. However, arts education is distinct in ways that warrant explicit recognition within national cultural policy. Music education is not cultural appreciation from the outside; it is active participation in the making of culture. It is where cultural knowledge is embodied, transmitted, and renewed.

This submission therefore calls on the Australian Government to recognise arts education, including music education, as an explicit pillar of the National Cultural Policy, and to make targeted investment in four interconnected priorities:

- A sustainable music education workforce, including initial teacher education, professional learning, and specialist teacher pathways
- Universal access to music education for every Australian child and young person, regardless of their geographic location, socioeconomic background, through early childhood and school education.
- Preparation of the cultural workforce, through music education opportunities in community, tertiary and VET settings.
- Music education as crucial contributor to a vibrant, Australian cultural life, not merely a preparation for cultural consumption

These priorities are elaborated below in relation to each of the five existing pillars of Revive. In each case, ASME identifies how music education enables the realisation of that pillar's goals, and what specific actions are required to align policy intent with practice.

Music education and the five pillars of Revive

The following section addresses each of the five pillars of the National Cultural Policy in turn. For each pillar, ASME sets out the ways in which music education is necessary to the realisation of that pillar's aims, and the specific actions the Australian Government should take.

First Nations First

First Nations peoples are the first musicians, storytellers, and educators of this land. ASME acknowledges Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in this way because it reflects the centrality of music to First Nations cultures, and the responsibility that all music educators carry to engage with that reality with honesty, respect, and humility.

Song, dance, and story are not peripheral expressions of First Nations culture but the very medium through which Country, law, language, and identity are held and transmitted across generations. First Nations music is not a historical artefact; it is a living, dynamic, and continuously evolving set of practices, deeply connected to community and place (Kruger, 2022). Music education that engages meaningfully with First Nations musical traditions develops genuine cultural understanding in all Australian students, while creating pathways for First Nations young people to see their own cultures affirmed and celebrated within educational institutions. Research evidence speaks to the impact of First Nations-led engagement between schools, industry and community leading to the co-creation of artistic works and mentoring of First Nations students through First Nations Artists in Residence programs (Fienberg & Higgison, 2023; Fienberg et al., 2025).

These possibilities are frequently unrealised. Engagement with First Nations music in schools is often episodic, tokenistic, or undertaken without appropriate cultural authority (Webb & Bracknell, 2021). Similarly, within tertiary music institutions and conservatoires, First Nations music is not prioritised to the same extent as European music cultures (Bracknell & Barwick, 2021). Representation of First Nations educators within the music teaching workforce remains critically low. Without systemic change, the First Nations First pillar cannot be realised in the educational contexts where cultural understanding is first formed.

ASME supports

ASME supports the First Nations First pillar's commitment to centring First Nations stories, cultures, and creative practices within Australia's cultural life. We affirm that this commitment must extend into education. Schools are a primary site through which First Nations cultural knowledge is either affirmed or erased, and music education has a particular responsibility in this regard. ASME supports the International Music Council's and ISME's calls for culturally responsive music education practice, and recognises that First Nations-led design and delivery is not optional, but essential.

ASME recommends

The Australian Government should invest in First Nations-led music education, including curriculum resources, professional learning for educators, and community partnership models that embed cultural authority in design and delivery as a structural feature, not an add-on. This should include:

- Dedicated funding for the development of First Nations-led music education resources, in partnership with communities and cultural authorities
- Dedicated funding to increase First Nations-led First Nations Artists in Residence programs across all states
- Support for First Nations music educators to enter and remain in the profession, including targeted pathways within initial teacher education and professional learning programs
- Investment in community-based music programs that strengthen First Nations leadership, cultural transmission and create pathways between community practice and formal education

A Place for Every Story

The vision of a place for every story, that all Australians regardless of background, geography, or circumstance can see their lives and experiences reflected in Australia's cultural life, cannot be realised without music education. Music education is the primary mechanism through which young Australians develop the knowledge, skills and confidence to tell their story through music. It is where children learn that culture belongs to them, that they can create music, not only consume it.

In practice, access to music education remains deeply inequitable (Brasche and Thorn, 2018; Music Australia, 2026). Whether a child receives music education depends heavily on which school they attend, which postcode they live in, and whether their family can afford private tuition. Students in regional, rural, and remote communities, students from low socioeconomic backgrounds, and students in under-resourced government schools are consistently less likely to receive sustained, specialist music education (Collins & Dwyer, 2026). A place for every story requires that every child has access to the education that makes cultural participation possible.

Further, music education provides opportunities for cultural affirmation and social cohesion, where children and young people may see their experiences and communities reflected in their schools, and be supported to share their own stories. This kind of educational experience has potential to support the development of social cohesion (Bartleet et al, 2016), which is of critical importance to Australia's cultural future.

It is also important to recognise that children and young people are not merely the cultural participants of the future. They are artists, audiences, and cultural contributors now. Music education should be understood not only as preparation for adult cultural life, but as a site of active and agentic cultural making in the present.

ASME supports

ASME strongly supports the principle of equitable access to cultural life that underpins this pillar, and affirms that school-based music education is the primary mechanism through which this equity is either enabled or denied. ASME supports the NAAE's advocacy for matched funding between arts and STEM education, and endorses the Music Education: Right from the Start initiative's call for dedicated national investment in music education in primary schools.

ASME recommends

The Australian Government should treat equitable access to music education as a cultural policy imperative, not only an education policy matter. This requires:

- Dedicated Commonwealth investment in music education provision across all school sectors, with particular attention to government schools in regional, remote, and low socioeconomic communities;
- A national data collection framework to monitor participation in music education across school sectors, year levels, and geographic and demographic contexts, enabling evidence-based accountability for equitable access;



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- Recognition within the National Cultural Policy that children and young people are current cultural participants, and that their access to music education is a cultural rights matter as much as an education matter;
 - Increase support for Local Multicultural Projects initiatives, including funding for culturally diverse artists in local schools.

The Centrality of the Artist

Professional musicians are the product of years of sustained, high-quality music education: formal and informal, in schools and communities, through specialist teachers, collaborations, ensemble experiences, and the countless hours of practice that music education makes possible. The centrality of the artist to Australia's cultural life cannot be secured without investing in the educational conditions that produce artists.

This is not only a matter of elite pathways into professional performance. Music education supports the full ecology of musical life: the community musician, the music educator, the sound engineer, the arts administrator, the composer, the session musician. All of these roles contribute to Australia's cultural and creative economy, and all of them begin in education. The contraction of music and creative arts education across schools, initial teacher education, and higher education is a direct threat to the future of the artistic workforce.

The introduction of the Job-Ready Graduates policy, with its substantial fee increases for arts and humanities degrees, has compounded the problem by creating financial disincentives to study arts-related fields at the tertiary level. The message sent by these policy settings runs directly counter to the rhetoric of the Centrality of the Artist pillar.

ASME supports

ASME supports the recognition of musicians, artists and creative workers as central to Australia's cultural identity and economy. We affirm that this recognition must extend upstream into the education pipeline, and that the Centrality of the Artist pillar cannot be realised without investing in the music and arts education that develops it. ASME also affirms the role of music educators as artists: as co-creators in the musical lives of their students, and as practitioners whose own artistry is integral to the quality of education they provide.

ASME recommends

The Australian Government should take urgent action to reverse the decline of tertiary music and creative arts education, and to strengthen the pipeline from school-based music education into professional artistic life. This requires:

- Repeal of the Job-Ready Graduates fee increases for Creative Arts degrees, restoring affordability and signalling the genuine value of music and arts study;
- Targeted investment in tertiary music and creative arts programs, with particular attention to regional institutions where program closures have most severely limited access;
- A nationally coordinated Artist-in-Schools program, coordinated through organisations such as Creative Australia, connecting professional musicians with schools to enrich student learning and provide income pathways for working artists. This creates sustainable income pathways and strengthens the connection between professional artistic practice and music education including through professional learning and mutually beneficial partnerships for artists and music teachers.

Strong Cultural Infrastructure

Cultural infrastructure is typically understood to encompass the venues, institutions, organisations, and funding mechanisms that support arts and cultural activity. ASME submits that this definition is too narrow. Schools, universities, TAFEs, early childhood education centres, community settings/centres, and the teaching workforce are equally essential components of Australia's cultural infrastructure, and their absence from this pillar reflects a structural blind spot in the current policy framework.

Music education institutions are sites where musical knowledge is developed, transmitted, and renewed. They are where cultural traditions – including First Nations traditions, the traditions of Australia's diverse migrant communities, popular musics, and the western classical tradition – may be studied, shared, practised, developed, and carried forward. They are where the educators who will teach the next generation of Australians are trained. Without strong, well-resourced music education infrastructure, the rest of Australia's cultural infrastructure becomes increasingly difficult to sustain.

Arts and cultural institutions also play a vital role in the ecology of music education through their education and outreach programs. These programs connect students with professional practice, enrich classroom learning, and extend access to students who might not otherwise encounter live performance or professional musicians. Yet these programs are themselves under pressure as institutional funding tightens, and they are rarely recognised as core cultural infrastructure alongside performance venues and major companies.

ASME supports

ASME supports a broad conception of cultural infrastructure that includes schools, universities, TAFEs, youth arts organisations and community venues, as well as cultural venues, performing companies and institutions. The long-term sustainability of Australia's cultural institutions depends on the strength of the educational pipeline that provides trained artists, educated audiences, and skilled practitioners. ASME also supports the inclusion of arts and cultural institutions' education and outreach programs as a recognised and funded component of their cultural infrastructure role.

ASME recommends

The Australian Government should expand its understanding of cultural infrastructure to explicitly include music education institutions and the music education workforce. This requires:

- Investment in a sustainable music education workforce as a matter of cultural infrastructure policy, including support for initial teacher education in music, professional learning, and specialist teacher pathways;
- Dedicated funding for arts and cultural institutions to maintain and expand their education and outreach programs, with equitable access for students in regional, remote, and low socioeconomic communities recognised as a core performance expectation for government-funded organisations;
- Further investment in community music hubs, with additional funding to employ music education project officers to engage with local schools;
- Expand song writing and recording initiatives in schools with dedicated funding for recording equipment and expertise in schools to enable ongoing and equitable access to music creation tools;
- Investment in ASME and equivalent representative arts education organisations as essential infrastructure for workforce capability, professional standards, and sector coherence.

Engaging the Audience

Music and arts audiences require active engagement. The capacity to engage deeply with music, to attend live performances, to support Australian musicians and musical organisations, to participate in community musical life: these capacities are cultivated through education. Research consistently shows that early and sustained engagement with music education is one of the strongest predictors of lifelong participation in musical and cultural life (Elpus, 2018).

The current direction of policy is working against audience development. As music education opportunities tend to be more readily available in more affluent primary schools (Pascoe et al, 2005), and as secondary school students turn away from studying music (Gattenhof & Saunders, 2025), fewer young Australians are developing the musical knowledge, confidence, and appetite necessary to sustain healthy audiences.

Audience development cannot be separated from music education. Every young person who engages meaningfully with music education becomes a more knowledgeable, more curious, and more committed audience member and cultural citizen. Any policy framework that treats education and audience development as parallel tracks, rather than as deeply interconnected, will fail to achieve its goals.

ASME supports

ASME supports the goal of building deep, diverse, and sustainable audiences for Australian music and cultural life, and affirms that school-based music education is the most powerful mechanism available to national cultural policy for achieving it. ASME also supports the recognition within cultural policy that children and young people are current audience members and cultural participants, not merely audiences in waiting.

ASME recommends

The Australian Government should recognise school-based music education as a core audience engagement strategy, and invest accordingly. This requires:

- Explicit recognition within the Engaging the Audience pillar that music education is the foundation of audience development, and that investment in education and investment in audiences are inseparable;
- Funding for partnerships between schools and music organisations, including orchestras, music festivals, community music groups, and live music venues, that give students meaningful experience of professional music-making as both participants and audience members;
- Support for community music programs that extend musical participation beyond the school years and create pathways between school-based education and adult cultural life.

ASME's calls to action

The Australian Society for Music Education calls on the Australian Government to:

- 1. Ensure that the importance of Music Education is meaningfully recognised in the National Cultural Policy,** recognising arts education as essential national infrastructure. This would best be achieved through the introduction of a sixth pillar of Arts Education to the Revive framework, and could also be fulfilled via strengthening the connections with music and arts education throughout the existing framework.
- 2. Invest in music education for every Australian,** with dedicated, sustained Commonwealth investment in music education provision across all schools, particularly government schools in regional, remote, and low socioeconomic communities. Access to ongoing, engaging, quality music education must not be determined by postcode or family income.
- 3. Build a sustainable music education workforce** by investing in initial teacher education in music, professional learning, specialist teacher pathways, and deployment models that extend access in regional and remote schools.
- 4. Restore and strengthen tertiary music education pathways,** including repeal of the Job-Ready Graduates fee increases for Creative Arts degrees, targeted investment in music and creative arts programs at regional institutions, and stronger pathways from school music education into tertiary study and professional artistic careers.

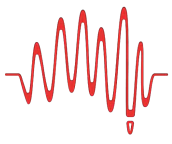
Conclusion

Music education is where cultural life begins. It is where children first experience the power of making music together, where young people encounter traditions beyond their own, where future artists discover their calling, and where lifelong audiences are formed. It is the precondition upon which every ambition of the National Cultural Policy rests.

Australia has a proud tradition of music education, and a professional community of music educators deeply committed to the young people in their care and to the health of Australia's musical culture. But that community is working against the tide of a policy environment that has progressively marginalised arts education, reduced its resourcing, and sent powerful signals through funding decisions, fee structures, and curriculum priorities that music and the arts are less valuable than other areas of learning.

This review is an opportunity to change that. The National Cultural Policy has the scope and the authority to bring arts education into its frame as a central pillar. It has the opportunity to align the ambitions of cultural policy with the educational investments required to realise them. And it has the opportunity to affirm, clearly and unequivocally, that every Australian child deserves access to ongoing, engaging, quality music education as a matter of cultural right.

ASME commends this submission to the review and offers its expertise, research capacity, and professional networks in support of the work ahead.



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