

Submission to the 2026 National Cultural Policy Consultation

Beyond Symbolic Inclusion: Arab Australian Cultural Citizenship and the Future of Australian Cultural Policy.

Submitted by, The Australian Arab Institute for Culture and Ideas [The Arab Institute](#)

Executive Summary

Australia stands at an important cultural and democratic crossroads.

The next National Cultural Policy presents an opportunity not merely to support artistic production, but to reconsider how Australia understands culture itself: who produces it, who is trusted to shape it, and which communities are permitted to participate fully in the authorship of the national story.

The Arab Institute welcomes the Australian Government's continued commitment to a national cultural policy framework grounded in inclusion, creativity, access and participation. The consultation paper's emphasis on storytelling, artistic centrality, cultural infrastructure and audience engagement provides an important foundation for national cultural renewal. However, this submission proposes that Australia's current multicultural cultural framework remains constrained by an underlying structural limitation: multiculturalism is still too often funded and administered as diversity management rather than nation-building. Culturally diverse communities, including Arab and SWANA (South West Asian and North African) communities, continue to be approached primarily through representation, service delivery, social cohesion, migration and community-management frameworks rather than as permanent co-authors of Australia's intellectual, artistic and civic future. As a consequence, minority-led cultural institutions remain structurally fragile, culturally diverse artists experience disproportionate precarity, collaborative institution-building remains underdeveloped and multicultural artistic practice frequently remains peripheral to the national cultural imagination.

This submission therefore urges the next National Cultural Policy to move beyond symbolic inclusion toward long-term cultural infrastructure, institutional equity, artistic safety, collaborative cultural nation-building and sustained investment in minority-led cultural institutions.

The Arab Institute also proposes that fragmented multicultural funding systems can unintentionally weaken social cohesion by encouraging siloed organisational development organised around narrow ethnic, religious or service-delivery categories. Long-term democratic cohesion is more effectively strengthened through collaborative cultural infrastructure capable of building relationships across communities.

Australia's future cultural legitimacy will depend not simply on whether diverse communities are represented within national culture, but whether they are trusted as co-authors of it.

About The Arab Institute

The Arab Institute is a national cultural and intellectual organisation dedicated to advancing Arab Australian cultural, artistic and intellectual life.

The Institute emerged in response to a significant structural absence within Australia's cultural landscape: the lack of long-term Arab Australian cultural infrastructure capable of sustaining artistic production, research, archival work, intergenerational knowledge and civic participation at a national scale.

The Institute approaches Arab Australian identity as part of Australia's broader democratic and cultural evolution. Arab Australians are not guests or temporary participants within Australian cultural life. Arab Australians are artists, writers, scholars, musicians, filmmakers, intellectuals, organisers, workers and creatives who participate in the continuing creation of contemporary Australia.

The Institute therefore seeks to contribute not only to Arab cultural visibility, but to the broader development of a confident, plural and intellectually mature Australian cultural future.

At its core, the Institute seeks to help build the kind of multiculturalism capable of moving beyond symbolic inclusion toward genuine cultural participation, institutional permanence and shared national authorship.

Australia's Cultural Policy Challenge

The consultation paper correctly recognises the importance of ensuring that Australian stories are reflected within national cultural life.

However, representation alone is insufficient.

The deeper challenge facing Australian cultural policy is not simply whether culturally diverse communities are visible, but whether they possess meaningful cultural power, institutional permanence and equitable participation within the national cultural ecosystem.

Australia continues to underinvest in minority-led cultural infrastructure. This affects archives, publishing, translation, literary development, community memory, intellectual production and long-term institution-building.

As a result, many culturally diverse artistic practices remain precariously project-based, dependent on short-term funding cycles and vulnerable to political and institutional shifts.

This produces a cultural ecosystem in which diversity may be celebrated symbolically while remaining structurally fragile in practice.

The consequences extend far beyond individual organisations. When culturally diverse communities lack long-term cultural infrastructure, Australia loses artistic innovation, historical memory, linguistic richness, intellectual diversity and opportunities for democratic cultural exchange.

This is particularly significant for Arab and SWANA communities, whose histories in Australia intersect with migration, labour, displacement, anti-racism struggles, postcolonial experience and global cultural exchange.

These histories are a part of the Australian story.

Response to the National Cultural Policy Pillars

1. First Nations First

The Arab Institute strongly supports the principle that First Nations cultures and sovereignty occupy a foundational place within Australian cultural life.

The future of Australian multiculturalism cannot be imagined separately from First Nations justice, truth-telling and cultural authority.

Arab and SWANA communities have increasingly developed meaningful creative and intellectual relationships with First Nations artists, organisers and thinkers through literature, music, visual art, anti-racism work and shared conversations concerning dispossession, migration, belonging and cultural continuity.

These relationships are important not because they collapse distinct histories into one another, but because they demonstrate the possibility of a more mature and relational multicultural future grounded in dialogue, solidarity and shared democratic participation.

The National Cultural Policy should actively encourage collaborative cultural frameworks between First Nations and culturally diverse communities while ensuring that First Nations leadership remains central.

The future strength of Australian culture will emerge not through isolated identity silos, but through respectful and equitable collaborative relationships between communities.

2. A Place for Every Story

The principle of “A Place for Every Story” represents one of the strongest foundations within the consultation paper.

However, the policy framework risks reducing cultural inclusion to visibility rather than institutional participation.

Arab Australians remain significantly underrepresented within major publishing sectors, collecting institutions, arts leadership, screen industries, curriculum development and national archives.

At the same time, Arab cultural expression is frequently framed through migration narratives, conflict narratives, security discourse or symbolic multicultural celebration rather than recognised as part of Australia's core intellectual and artistic life.

This has profound implications for cultural legitimacy and belonging.

A mature multicultural democracy cannot merely permit culturally diverse stories to appear occasionally within national culture while withholding the institutional conditions necessary for those communities to sustain cultural production across generations.

Long-term cultural participation requires investment in archives, oral histories, translation, literary development, research partnerships, youth leadership, publishing and independent cultural institutions.

It also requires a shift in how Australia conceptualises multicultural culture itself.

Too often, culturally diverse artistic practice remains structurally peripheral, treated as community engagement, diversity programming or symbolic inclusion rather than as part of the ongoing construction of Australian national culture.

This problem is reinforced by fragmented multicultural funding structures that frequently incentivise siloed organisational development organised around narrow ethnic, religious or service-delivery categories.

While often well-intentioned, such approaches can unintentionally fragment culturally connected communities and weaken long-term social cohesion.

For SWANA communities in particular, fragmented funding ecosystems may reproduce political division, sectarian separation, institutional competition and organisational precarity rather than encouraging broad-based cultural infrastructure capable of fostering shared civic participation across communities.

Australia often funds multiculturalism as diversity management rather than nation-building. A more ambitious cultural policy would support collaborative institution-building, shared cultural infrastructure, intercultural partnerships and long-term minority-led cultural organisations capable of contributing to national cultural life at scale.

Some of the most important cultural innovation in contemporary Australia emerges not within isolated identity silos, but through collaboration between communities with shared histories of migration, labour, displacement, creativity, anti-racism struggle and democratic participation.

Arab Australian cultural life has historically evolved relationally through collaboration with First Nations communities, Greek communities, Italian communities, Jewish communities, African communities, Asian-Australian artists and broader multicultural creative networks.

Australia's future cultural legitimacy will depend not simply on whether diverse communities are represented within national culture, but whether they are trusted as co-authors of it.

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3. Centrality of the Artist

Artists cannot contribute meaningfully to national culture if institutions become risk-averse toward politically sensitive communities.

Across Australia's arts and cultural sectors, culturally diverse artists increasingly report experiences of reputational pressure, institutional caution, political scrutiny, social-media targeting, donor sensitivity and cultural withdrawal. This environment disproportionately affects artists and intellectuals from communities associated with contested geopolitical issues, including Arab, Muslim and Palestinian communities.

The result is not always overt censorship. More commonly, it manifests through institutional caution, anticipatory risk management, reduced programming confidence and narrowing cultural participation.

Over time, this weakens artistic confidence, cultural experimentation and democratic cultural life itself.

The National Cultural Policy should therefore recognise artistic safety and equitable cultural participation as essential conditions for creative production.

This includes ensuring transparent institutional processes, equitable anti-racism protections, support for artistic independence and stronger protections against discriminatory reputational targeting.

A healthy cultural sector requires institutions capable of supporting complexity, disagreement and political nuance without retreating into reputational risk management.

This is particularly important in a democratic society increasingly shaped by polarised digital discourse, geopolitical conflict and rapidly escalating public pressure campaigns.

Cultural institutions should not become spaces in which artists from particular communities feel structurally more vulnerable to cancellation, exclusion or institutional withdrawal than others.

Nor should minority-led institutions be forced into permanent self-censorship in order to secure legitimacy, funding or institutional acceptance.

A mature cultural democracy requires confidence in the capacity of artists, audiences and institutions to engage difficult questions without collapsing into fear-driven governance models.

The centrality of the artist therefore requires more than symbolic celebration of creativity. It requires the institutional conditions necessary for artists to participate fully, safely and confidently in national cultural life.

4. Strong Cultural Infrastructure

This is the area in which the current policy framework requires the greatest expansion.

Cultural infrastructure should not be understood only as major venues, museums, digital systems or flagship institutions. It must also include community-led institutions, archives, libraries, language preservation initiatives, publishing ecosystems, translation programs, research partnerships and the long-term intellectual infrastructure necessary for sustaining cultural continuity across generations.

Australia has historically underinvested in nationally significant minority-led cultural institutions.

As a result, culturally diverse communities are frequently confined to short-term project funding, festival programming or community-service frameworks rather than supported to build enduring institutions capable of shaping national cultural life.

This problem is compounded by fragmented multicultural funding structures.

Arab and SWANA organisations are frequently funded through siloed administrative categories organised around ethnicity, religion, locality or narrow service-delivery outcomes. While often well-intentioned, these structures can unintentionally reinforce fragmentation and competition between culturally connected communities.

For example, Lebanese, Palestinian, Iraqi, Syrian, Egyptian and Sudanese organisations may compete against one another for limited short-term funding while religious communities become administratively separated and collaborative institution-building becomes structurally difficult.

This is counterproductive to long-term social cohesion.

Australia often funds multiculturalism as diversity management rather than nation-building.

A stronger model would support shared civic-cultural infrastructure, cross-community collaboration, multi-year operational support and long-term institution-building capable of fostering democratic cultural participation across communities.

Some of the most important cultural innovation in contemporary Australia emerges not within isolated identity silos, but through collaboration between communities with shared histories of migration, labour, creativity, displacement, anti-racism struggle and democratic participation.

Arab Australian cultural life has historically evolved relationally through collaboration with First Nations communities, Greek communities, Italian communities, Jewish communities, African communities, Asian-Australian artists and broader multicultural creative networks.

These relationships demonstrate that multicultural cultural production is not a collection of isolated ethnic expressions operating separately from one another. It is a dynamic, collaborative and evolving ecosystem of shared national cultural creation.

The National Cultural Policy should actively encourage this collaborative cultural ecosystem rather than reinforcing fragmented administrative multiculturalism.

Long-term investment in minority-led institutions would not only strengthen culturally diverse communities themselves, but would also strengthen Australia's broader democratic cultural fabric.

5. Engaging the Audience

Audience engagement should not be understood simply as audience growth.

It should also be understood as democratic cultural participation.

Australia's cultural future depends upon building institutions capable of fostering curiosity, exchange, translation, complexity and shared public life across communities.

Minority-led cultural institutions play an essential role in this process because they frequently operate as bridges between communities rather than as closed cultural spaces.

The Arab Institute's vision is not sectarian or isolationist. Rather, it seeks to contribute to shared national cultural life through intercultural collaboration, intellectual exchange, artistic experimentation and democratic participation.

This is particularly important at a time when social cohesion is increasingly discussed through the language of security, risk management and social fragmentation.

Cultural policy should resist approaches that reduce multiculturalism to demographic management or symbolic celebration while neglecting the deeper democratic work of building relationships between communities.

One of the most significant opportunities facing Australia's cultural sector is the possibility of creating institutions and artistic spaces capable of fostering sustained intercultural engagement across generations.

This includes collaboration not only between culturally diverse communities, but between metropolitan and regional Australia, between established and emerging institutions, and between artists, educators, researchers and community organisations.

The next National Cultural Policy should therefore support institutions capable of building long-term cultural relationships across communities rather than limiting multicultural programming to symbolic diversity events or short-term engagement strategies.

Audience engagement, in this sense, becomes not merely attendance or participation metrics, but the cultivation of a more culturally confident, intellectually open and democratically connected society.

Recommendations

The Arab Institute recommends that the National Cultural Policy include a dedicated long-term cultural infrastructure strategy for minority-led institutions.

This strategy should support **archives, libraries, publishing, translation, research, oral histories, youth leadership and independent cultural development** capable of sustaining intergenerational cultural participation.

The Institute further recommends the introduction of **multi-year operational funding pathways for culturally diverse organisations**. Short-term project funding creates instability, discourages long-term planning and limits institutional growth. Sustainable cultural ecosystems require durable institutions capable of developing over time.

The National Cultural Policy should also establish **a national translation and language preservation strategy**. Translation is cultural infrastructure. Investment in literary translation, bilingual publishing, community language preservation and cross-cultural literary exchange would significantly strengthen Australia's cultural ecosystem while supporting intellectual exchange across communities.

Funding structures should additionally incentivise collaborative cross-community cultural projects involving culturally diverse communities, First Nations organisations, regional arts sectors and independent cultural institutions. Such collaboration strengthens both artistic innovation and democratic social cohesion.

Finally, the Arab Institute recommends the development of **a national cultural equity and artistic participation framework. This framework should support equitable institutional processes, anti-racism protections, artistic participation and transparency in institutional decision-making affecting artists and communities.**

Conclusion

Australia's next National Cultural Policy presents an opportunity to move beyond symbolic multicultural inclusion toward a more ambitious democratic cultural future. The central challenge is no longer whether culturally diverse communities can be visible within Australian culture. The challenge is whether they can participate fully in shaping it.

Australia's multicultural future will depend upon building institutions, archives, relationships, artistic confidence, intellectual infrastructure and collaborative cultural life across communities. The Arab Institute believes that culturally diverse communities should not be approached merely as audiences to be managed or represented, but as permanent participants in the authorship of Australia itself.

A confident multicultural democracy does not fear cultural complexity.

It invests in it.