

Queensland Art Teachers' Association Submission to the Review of the Commonwealth Government's National Cultural Policy: Revive

The Queensland Art Teachers Association (QATA) has 13 executives and a growing membership of 666 Visual Art educators, artists, and industry professionals from Queensland and interstate who access our resources and attend our conferences, camps, and professional development events. For this submission, we refer to 'The Arts' broadly. 'The Arts' includes five subjects: Visual Art, Dance, Drama, Music, and Film, Television and New Media. The Australian Curriculum outlines that all Australian students from Prep to Year 12 have an entitlement to engage in The Arts; however, this entitlement is increasingly being discouraged, reducing enrolments and jeopardising the nation's capacity to achieve the aims of the National Cultural Policy.

Challenge: From a Queensland perspective, we are experiencing declining student enrolments in Arts subjects with a 45% reduction between 2015 and 2023 (Gattenhof & Saunders, 2026). This decline is driven by systemic issues that can be remedied at both a state and commonwealth level. We know that there are reduced offerings of Visual Art and other arts subjects in Queensland primary and secondary schools, and are particularly concerned with the rapidly declining enrolments in senior Visual Arts largely due to systemic issues with the ATAR system. Research also suggests this decline is not isolated to Queensland but is a national issue with a 21% decline in enrolments across the country which is greatly weakening cultural learning pathways (O'Connor, Dunbar-Hall, & Ewing, 2021; Ewing, 2022).

Impacts: Falling Arts enrolments and shrinking tertiary pathways weaken Queensland and Australia's capacity to achieve the aims of the National Cultural Policy (Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development, Communications and the Arts, 2023).

1. **First Nations First** – Declining enrolments in The Arts reduce students' access to First Nations cultural learning, limiting the potential to develop future cultural leaders and promote culturally aware Australian citizens (Ewing, 2010).
2. **A Place for Every Story** – Fewer students studying The Arts, and the embedding of a hierarchy of subjects and beliefs that The Arts are not as valued as other areas of interest, means falling creative literacy and fewer young people feeling encouraged or able to share Australia's diverse stories through cultural processes and forms of expression (Robinson & Aronica, 2015).
3. **Centrality of the Artist** – A shrinking Arts pipeline leads to fewer students receiving Arts education and entering creative degrees, weakening future opportunities for this pathway and adversely weakening the breadth and skills of the artistic workforce (Cunningham & Flew, 2019).
4. **Strong Cultural Infrastructure** – Reduced school-level Arts participation in senior schooling filters down to lower enrolments in middle school, with a trickle-down effect of devaluing The Arts and Culture through the education system and broader community. This creates long-term skills gaps that make it very challenging for cultural institutions to fix later (OECD, 2019).
5. **Engaging the Audience** – Less Arts exposure in school lowers cultural participation, shrinking future audiences and weakening the cultural ecosystem. This negatively impacts the wellbeing of our population. (Fancourt & Finn, 2019; Martin, 2020).

How we suggest these concerns might be addressed by the government:

1. **Introduce Arts Education as a sixth pillar in the next National Cultural Policy** to recognise that Arts education; from Early Years through Primary and Secondary schooling and into Tertiary levels, is the foundation for nurturing and developing a strong, creative, innovative and highly skilled workforce.
2. **Commission a national inquiry into arts education in Australia**, identifying where enrolments and participation in arts education is declining and/ or quality is weakening to prioritise key issues before mapping a way forward.
3. **Form a National Arts Education Working Group with sub-committees**, co-led by the Office of the Arts and the Australian Department of Education, with representatives across each state and territory, including national professional Arts subject teacher associations such as NAAE and QATA. Part of these communications might involve a national roundtable discussion with relevant Ministers and organisations from education institutions as well as advocacy groups and professional teacher associations from impacted areas of study, to research, voice findings and debate workable solutions.

4. **Formulate a national plan to identify and prioritise issues in Australian Arts education**, including rapidly declining enrolments in The Arts and other emerging impacts, to prevent significant long-term consequences for the cultural sector and the nation. As part of this plan, investigate the causes of declining participation and examine high-performing international assessment systems- such as the International Baccalaureate, England, and Canada- that avoid punitive subject scaling and treat all senior subjects equally (Doherty, 2020; OECD, 2019; Sahlberg, 2021), with the aim of re-opening the creative industry pipeline by removing disincentives to study The Arts in schools. In addition, a National Inquiry should identify what the Commonwealth, in partnership with state and territory governments, can do to support and strengthen engagement in The Arts from Prep through to industry.
5. **Develop a National Arts Education Ten-Year Strategy to provide a clear national roadmap** for remedying identified issues including reversing the decline in Arts education and strengthening the quality and depth of the Arts education pipeline. This strategy should reinforce the National Cultural Policy pillars by supporting First Nations cultural learning, enabling every young person to tell their story, sustaining the future artistic workforce, strengthening cultural infrastructure through a robust education pipeline, and fostering lifelong cultural participation to build a strong cultural workforce and nation.

Arts education in Queensland schools and universities is in crisis, with growing short- and long-term impacts, including increasing closures of Arts subjects and courses. This decline in engagement undermines key pillars of the National Cultural Policy eroding cultural engagement from Australia's youth making coordinated national leadership urgently necessary.

Clarifying the problem for Queensland Arts Teachers Queensland's QCAA system already delivers strong academic rigour, quality assurance, and integrity through moderated internal assessments and external exams with annual reviews for improvements inbuilt. The issue is not the school curriculum. The barrier lies in the tertiary entrance system, particularly QTAC and ATAR calculations which inadvertently discourage students from choosing subjects in The Arts due to perceived "poor subject scaling" (Mitchell Institute, 2025).

Why tertiary entry reform is needed in Queensland

Tertiary Creative Arts courses are in decline across Australia, and the Commonwealth Government needs to ensure that these pipelines from school to tertiary education are robust and dynamic. Reforming tertiary entry would allow students to choose subjects aligned with their interests and strengths. This would improve pathways into suitable tertiary study and careers for all students, particularly in The Arts, supporting a more stable, satisfied, and productive future workforce. Investigate related data around student and staff wellbeing, behaviour, and engagement to understand the wider impacts of the ATAR system (Brady et al., 2024; Kahu & Nelson, 2018).

Learning from global models

High performing international systems do not inadvertently stigmatise Art and Culture through "subject scaling" placing them below STEM subjects. These systems do not scale subjects or cohorts. They use standards-based assessment and treat all disciplines as academically valid (OECD, 2019; International Baccalaureate Organization, 2026). Australia's existing raw percentage scores also use standards-based externally moderated assessments which could be transparently converted to a GPA aligned with university practice and remove the need for "subject scaling". Universities can maintain academic standards by requiring essential prerequisite subjects to be included in a graduate's GPA and have a GPA cut-off percentage for eligibility to enrol in their course (e.g., Specialist Mathematics for Engineering, Biology for Medicine) and offer bridging courses where needed to ensure preparedness. This would encourage students to select subjects based on their own strengths and interests thus retaining our strongest and most engaged artists, dancers, singers, musicians, performers and film industry workers to contribute and build a cultural and creative industries powerhouse in Australia.

National benefits

This approach supports strong participation across all subjects in secondary school, removes structural disincentives to study creative subjects, and promotes a healthier, more diverse senior curriculum which will ultimately contribute to a more engaged, culturally enriched, educated, and confident population (Sahlberg, 2021). Extensive research shows that strong participation in The Arts enhances population mental health, social cohesion, and overall life satisfaction, contributing to a healthier and more resilient society (Fancourt & Finn, 2019; Winner, 2018).

Conclusion:

Declining enrolments in senior Arts subjects threaten the success of the National Cultural Policy and require urgent investigation. Without action, a generation of young artists risks being pushed out of The Arts by a tertiary entrance system designed around a single score, whose influence now far exceeds its intended purpose.

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