

Queensland Performing Arts Centre Submission to the National Cultural Policy

Strengthening Intergovernmental Coordination to Maximise Cultural Outcomes

Executive Summary

The Queensland Performing Arts Centre (QPAC) is one of Australia's leading state-owned cultural institutions, operating at the intersection of artistic excellence, public value and civic responsibility. As a statutory authority of the Queensland Government, QPAC is responsible for both the stewardship of significant cultural infrastructure and the delivery of outcomes that contribute to Queensland's and Australia's cultural, social and economic life.

QPAC's perspective is informed not only by its role as a state-based asset, but by executive leadership with deep experience across all tiers of government. Members of QPAC's executive team have held senior leadership and governance roles in federal, state and local government cultural contexts across South Australia, Victoria, New South Wales and Queensland. This provides a system-wide view of how Australia's cultural ecosystem operates in practice.

That experience confirms a simple proposition: while each level of government plays a critical and complementary role in supporting arts and culture, there remains substantial unrealised value in how these roles are aligned, coordinated and leveraged for maximum public benefit.

From the vantage point of a major state institution that partners with interstate and national cultural organisations, engages local government through regional infrastructure and access programs, and contributes to national cultural outcomes, QPAC sees first-hand what stronger intergovernmental collaboration can unlock. This includes clearer pathways for commissioning and touring work, better alignment of infrastructure investment with long-term program planning, and more coordinated approaches to workforce development and audience engagement.

This submission therefore offers practical opportunities to better coordinate the resources, responsibilities and ambitions of local, state and federal governments so that public investment in culture delivers the greatest possible benefit to Australian communities.

Background

Public funding for Australia's arts ecosystem operates across three tiers.

Local Government, comprising over 560 councils servicing populations ranging from a few hundred to over a million, delivers community-facing cultural infrastructure such as galleries, libraries, cultural centres and festivals. Local government also supports grassroots creative activity through grants; acts as consent authority for localised cultural activations in public space; frequently manages night-time economy settings including live music venues; and authorises planning and development approvals that can enable or constrain cultural activity.

State and Territory Governments fund and operate major cultural bodies and infrastructure, provide grant funding for small-to-medium organisations and projects, and invest in sector initiatives and development programs.

The **Commonwealth Government** sets national policy directions and invests in critical cultural organisations, programs and infrastructure (eg Playing Australia), sector-wide initiatives including research and development, and grant funding for organisations and projects.

Each tier's cultural policy goals are highly aligned in intent, even where scale, tools and delivery mechanisms differ. Consistent themes include:

- **Access and Participation** - Policies consistently emphasise broad public participation and audience engagement as core objectives. Cultural policy is seen to improve wellbeing and ensure that all Australians can engage with creative activity.
- **Support for Artists and Creative Workforce** - There is shared recognition that artists are central to the system. National policy explicitly highlights the "centrality of the artist" and the need for sustainable careers. Across jurisdictions, policies also aim to support employment, fair remuneration, and sector sustainability.
- **Cultural Identity and Storytelling** - All tiers focus on culture as a vehicle for expressing identity and telling Australian stories, emphasise the value of diverse stories and cultural expression, including contemporary and multicultural identities. Arts policy is also linked to national identity and shared civic life.
- **First Nations Recognition** - A consistent and prominent theme across all tiers is the central role of First Nations culture, including self-determination and protection of cultural expression.
- **Infrastructure and Ecosystem Development** - Governments at all levels recognise the importance of cultural infrastructure with policies that support facilities,

institutions, and creative spaces as enablers of artistic production and participation. This includes both major institutions and local community assets.

- **Economic and Social Value** - Arts and culture are framed as both economic drivers and public goods. Policies consistently highlight contributions to jobs, economic growth, and industry development, alongside social benefits like wellbeing and cohesion.

Despite these shared priorities, Australia's cultural policy settings remain fragmented, with no consistent mechanism for alignment or shared accountability across the three tiers. Coordination is often ad hoc, weakening the effectiveness of investment and constraining national impact.

The scale of local government's contribution is also undervalued and insufficiently integrated into national policy settings. The 2018 National Local Government Cultural Forum report highlighted that local governments invest \$1.7 billion annually in culture and heritage - more than 27% of total national expenditure by all levels of government - and valued the national base of cultural infrastructure at \$7.5 billion. This investment supports a diverse and place-responsive portfolio of activity, yet in the absence of strong intergovernmental coordination it can result in duplicated effort, missed co-investment opportunities, uneven access (particularly in regional and outer-metropolitan areas), and weaker long-term funding signals for the sector.

Comparable countries demonstrate that national coordination can be achieved through different delivery mechanisms. France provides a highly centralised model in which national priorities are set by the Ministry of Culture and delivered through structured regional networks. The United Kingdom operates an arm's-length system but achieves coordination through Arts Council England via national frameworks, touring requirements and program design. Germany - more comparable to Australia as a federal system - demonstrates stronger coordination through an embedded cultural mandate and shared investment across federal, state and municipal levels. Canada similarly shows how coordination can be achieved without centralisation, using federal funding bodies and co-investment frameworks to incentivise collaboration across provinces and cultural institutions. Across these models, the consistent lesson is that national outcomes follow formal mechanisms - policy leadership; funding conditions or co-investment structures align national objectives with regional assets.

The importance of structured coordination was recognised in the establishment of Australia's Cultural Ministers Council (CMC), which operated from 1984 to 2022. The CMC provided a mechanism for intergovernmental alignment by bringing together ministers from the Commonwealth, states and territories (with local government participation) to coordinate policy, share information and address national challenges and opportunities.

Reconstituting the Meeting of Cultural Ministers provides an opportunity to restore and strengthen this intent. The forum should have a formal mandate for national coordination, clear lines of accountability, and an explicit role in aligning policy, investment and priorities

across all three levels of government, including local government participation. This should be supported by a dedicated three-year policy agenda managed by Creative Australia, with measurable outcomes and regular reporting, to ensure sustained focus and tangible progress.

Two case studies: *Workforce Shortages and QPAC's TechConnect program*, and the *Major Festivals Initiative* illustrate how national coordination can solve key sector challenges while unlocking growth opportunities.

Case Study: Workforce Shortages and QPAC's TechConnect program

There are pressing workforce shortages across the performing arts sector, particularly in technical theatre, production and specialist backstage roles after senior and mid-career technical theatre professionals left the sector in significant numbers during COVID. In the post-COVID period, declining arts subject enrolments in secondary school- alongside reductions in specialist creative arts undergraduate programs - has further weakened the pipeline of job-ready technical and production graduates.

This is a pipeline failure between education and industry, reinforced by structural settings in both school and tertiary systems.

Secondary school

Declining participation in arts subjects at Year 12 level is directly contributing to workforce shortages by reducing early exposure to applied disciplines such as technical theatre, design, staging and production.

In many jurisdictions, Year 12 scaling methodologies shape subject selection. Arts subjects are widely perceived to “scale down” relative to STEM and other academically weighted subjects, meaning strong performance can still translate to a lower tertiary entrance rank. Teachers report that careers counsellors and parents are increasingly advising high-achieving students to avoid arts subjects regardless of aptitude or interest. This creates a systemic disincentive at the point of subject choice and reduces participation among students most likely to progress into advanced training and professional careers.

Year 12 enrolments in arts subjects have declined by more than 20% nationally in recent years, and by more than 40% in Queensland, a state which applies a downward scaling methodology more aggressive than any other state's approach to arts subjects. The decline is particularly sharp in drama and dance.

Tertiary training

At the tertiary level, this dynamic is compounded by pricing signals embedded in HECS settings. Policy changes have increased student contributions for creative arts degrees - by more than 100% in some cases - making them substantially more expensive relative to many STEM pathways. This creates a second filter: even where students maintain interest

through school, the financial and geographic burden can discourage progression into formal training.

The combined effect is a narrowing pipeline: fewer students undertake arts subjects in senior school; fewer progress into VET and higher education pathways; reduced viability of tertiary programs leads to course closures; and there is a diminished supply of trained entrants into the workforce. This contraction is reflected in national research identifying acute shortages in production and technical roles across the creative industries, including lighting technicians, sound engineers and stage managers.

The impact is pronounced in Queensland and regional Australia, where the loss of local education and training pathways has disrupted historically reliable transitions into the workforce and makes local recruitment increasingly difficult.

Despite these structural barriers, interest from young people in backstage careers in the performing arts remains strong. QPAC's TechConnect program, a twice-yearly apprenticeship pathway in technical production, receives approximately 350 applications per intake for six places. This indicates that demand is not the limiting factor; the limiting factor is the absence of visible, accessible, and scalable pathways from education into employment.

TechConnect

QPAC's TechConnect program demonstrates what collaborative, place-based initiatives can achieve. Developed in partnership with Arts Centre Melbourne and supported through a combination of institutional leadership, government investment and philanthropic engagement, TechConnect creates structured pathways into technical theatre, builds industry-relevant skills and strengthens the connection between training and employment. It also recruits young people from regional areas whose training at QPAC and in regional contexts ensures that regional performing arts centres can support career development for local young people and benefit from the skills uplift the program provides.

A national approach

While TechConnect has been developed within specific state contexts, the workforce shortages it addresses are national and require coordinated policy attention. Initiatives of this kind show how state-led and partnership-based innovation can generate scalable models with broader applications.

Creative Australia's 2025 Creative Workforce Scoping Study articulated the same workforce shortages that had been identified in 2020 across the sector, during and post COVID. While the Scoping Study *"highlighted opportunities for improved collaboration between governments and agencies; as well as with industry, community organisations, schools, and VET and higher education institutions"* and *"identifie(d) a range of opportunities to build on, scale up, connect and coordinate existing initiatives, industry-led work, and accredited training opportunities..."* a year after its release there is no formal mechanism by which all tiers of government coordinate individual efforts or work towards a national ten-year plan.

A strengthened National Cultural Policy should therefore include clearer mechanisms to identify, support and scale proven initiatives emerging from state governments, cultural institutions and philanthropic partnerships. This would enable investment to build cumulative capability nationally rather than replicate isolated efforts.

Major performing arts centres are uniquely positioned to contribute to a coordinated workforce strategy. As sites of production, training and professional practice, and as convenors of partnerships across government, industry and philanthropy, they can deliver coordinated training programs, share specialist expertise and technical resources, support structured career pathways through collaborative networks, and align skills development with workforce demand.

Case Study: The Major Festivals Initiative (MFI)

A practical example of cross-jurisdictional coordination is the Major Festivals Initiative (MFI), established in 1997 within the Australia Council (now Creative Australia). The program supports the development and commissioning of new Australian performing arts productions delivered through the country's leading international arts festivals.

Leveraging state-based cultural assets

The MFI's distinctive strength is that it leverages existing state-based, state-funded cultural assets. Participating organisations—including Adelaide Festival, Brisbane Festival, Melbourne Festival, Perth Festival, Sydney Festival, Rising, Ten Days on the Island and Darwin Festival are flagship, state-supported cultural institutions. While each is embedded and funded within its jurisdiction, together they operate as a national network.

Through the MFI, relatively modest federal investment is applied strategically to connect and activate these state-funded assets as a coordinated national platform. This aligns commissioning, programming and presentation capacity toward shared outcomes, transforming individually programmed festivals into a collaborative national commissioning system.

Investment and outcomes over time

The program receives approximately \$1.55 million annually in federal funding, which is matched at 80–90% by festivals and co-commissioning partners, amplifying the scale of investment. This model has consistently delivered the creation of major new Australian works, world premiere seasons within leading festivals, and national and international touring pathways that generate export revenues and international visibility for Australian artists. By embedding presentation within commissioning, the MFI ensures public investment results not only in production, but in audience reach and national impact.

Why the model is effective

The MFI works because it combines co-commissioning across jurisdictions, curatorial collaboration between artistic directors, leveraged funding through matched contributions,

and the integration of creation and presentation so that commissioned works have guaranteed performance platforms and audiences. Most importantly, it aligns federal funding with state infrastructure so that each level of government contributes according to its strengths.

A model for future programs

The MFI shows that national outcomes can be achieved not by building new structures, but by coordinating and activating existing ones. It is a clear template for future policy: using federal investment as a catalyst; embedding collaboration and shared accountability into program design; and integrating creation, presentation and distribution into a single system.

Further opportunity: Australia's flagship performing arts centres

A comparable opportunity exists in Australia's state-significant performing arts centres, including QPAC. These centres are major, state-funded cultural infrastructure assets that already function as presenters, producers and commissioners. They also drive audience development, regional and statewide engagement, and workforce capability through technical skills development and training.

However, these assets are largely state-oriented, with few national incentives to foster structured cooperation. A national framework could enable joint commissioning across multiple centres, support larger-scale productions, and strengthen development pathways. Critically, it could embed touring from the outset by establishing pre-committed touring circuits that link capital city programming with regional access and amplify existing state touring investments.

Recommendation

This submission recommends a scoping study for a new federally funded Commissioning and Regional Touring Program for major performing arts centres, modelled on the principles of the MFI.

The program would leverage state-based performing arts centres as a national network, align their commissioning and programming capacity, enable co-commissioning across jurisdictions to increase scale and reduce risk, and require pre-committed national touring pathways so that regional and outer-metropolitan access is embedded from inception.

It should mandate partnerships with local government cultural infrastructure to strengthen place-based delivery and access and align federal investment with state capability so that responsibility and co-investment are shared across all levels of government.

As with the MFI, the program should operate through a collaborative governance model, with participating centres jointly identifying projects, co-investing in development, and committing to coordinated presentation and touring outcomes. In doing so, it would increase the scale and ambition of Australian work while addressing structural gaps in

distribution and access, ensuring national cultural investment delivers outcomes created at scale and experienced widely.

This approach provides a practical mechanism to move from a collection of high-performing institutions to a cohesive national cultural system, maximising return on existing public investment, and delivering stronger artistic, social and economic outcomes.

Conclusion

Practical reform opportunities

To realise these opportunities, the National Cultural Policy should consider:

- A National Intergovernmental Cultural Agreement which aligns priorities and defines shared responsibilities
- Strengthening the Meeting of Cultural Ministers with a dedicated three-year policy agenda, clear accountability and structured collaboration
- Expanding proven models: ie extending the 'MFI model' to other domains including national frameworks for state performing arts centres
- A new Workforce and Skills Strategy which addresses critical shortages through coordinated national programs

Australia's cultural system already contains significant assets across all levels of government. What is lacking is not capability, but coordination.

Closer coordination across local, state and federal governments can unlock the full value of Australia's cultural assets delivering stronger artistic outcomes, broader community participation, and greater national impact.

While increased grant funding for the broader sector is desperately needed, especially youth and regional arts activity, a new national cultural policy that prioritises and creates incentives for cross-government cultural coordination is even more crucial and long overdue. It will grow the impact of Australia's existing cultural assets in practical ways, ensuring that Australia's cultural ecology is not only vibrant within jurisdictions, but coherent, connected, equitable and enduring.