

Submission to the
Department of
Infrastructure,
Transport, Regional
Development,
Communications
and the Arts

June 2026



THE UNIVERSITY OF
MELBOURNE

Consultation on a new National Cultural Policy

Executive Summary

The University of Melbourne welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the next National Cultural Policy.

The next National Cultural Policy is an opportunity for generational change that impacts the lives of those who create art, those who engage with it, and the broader ecosystem that sustains cultural practice. This submission identifies critical policy challenges affecting the cultural sector:

- There is a lack of structured leadership pathways for Indigenous artists within cultural institutions, while current higher education funding creates barriers to equitable access for First Nations students.
- Stories from underrepresented communities remain under-resourced and under-represented in cultural production and exhibition.
- The Job-Ready Graduates package has created marked inequities in arts and humanities education, producing growing student debt and widening participation gaps.
- Australia's creative industries face workforce and skills shortages, with gaps between formal education and industry needs requiring strengthened partnerships.
- Young people's engagement with quality arts education remains essential to critical thinking and wellbeing and requires sustained funding and support.
- Universities have collection stewardship responsibilities equivalent to state and national institutions but lack equivalent government funding for this work.
- Engaging audiences—and protecting access and sector viability—within the attention economy is challenging, amid digital competition and rising cost of living.

The University's recommendations, outlined on the next page, address these gaps in the current policy settings. The University emphasises that a comprehensive National Cultural Policy must recognise the role universities play in cultural capacity building, civic engagement and social cohesion. The policy should also include the Galleries, Libraries and Museums sector within the cultural strategy to ensure it provides a complete picture of Australia's cultural infrastructure and needs. Where possible, policy and funding should support continuity and long-term planning over short-term initiatives.

In summary, reform of higher education funding is essential to address inequities created by Job-Ready Graduates. The Government should invest in dedicated leadership pathways for Indigenous artists and expand support for stories from underrepresented groups. Increased government funding for repatriation of Aboriginal Ancestors should be made accessible to universities on the same basis as state and national museums. The University also calls for funding to help arts organisations engage audiences, increased investment in lifelong arts education, and recognition of cultural diplomacy within the new National Cultural Policy.

For further information or to discuss the submission, Professor Michael Wesley, Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Global, Culture and Engagement) can be contacted at [REDACTED]

Recommendations

The University of Melbourne recommends that the Australian Government:

- Fund dedicated leadership pathways for Indigenous artists in the performing and visual arts, embedding these within cultural institutions and integrating Indigenous Knowledges throughout their design and delivery.
- Invest in the development of stories from across the community, with a particular focus on stories from underrepresented groups.
- Expand investment for research into full participation in the creative arts by artists and arts workers with disability.
- Reform higher education funding to address inequities created by the Job-Ready Graduates package.
- Provide dedicated funding to enable arts organisations to resource and maximise work-integrated learning opportunities for students.
- Support arts education within initial teacher education programs by embedding arts within mandated expectations, accreditation requirements, or assessment frameworks.
- Ensure the new National Cultural Policy reflects the importance of engaging young people in lifelong arts education and provides increased funding for arts and cultural organisations to deliver these specialist arts education programs.
- Recognise universities' distinctive role in cultural capacity building, civic engagement and social cohesion within Australia's cultural infrastructure ecosystem.
- Include the Galleries, Libraries and Museums (GLAM) sector within the National Cultural Policy to ensure comprehensive coverage of collecting institutions.
- Increase government funding available for repatriation of Aboriginal Ancestors, making this accessible to universities on the same basis as State and national museums.
- Establish an entrepreneurial fund tailored to innovative, responsible use and transformation of legacy collections.
- Resource Australia's world-class film and television industry and training programs so it can keep pace with technological developments brought by AI.
- Continue to fund and develop initiatives that help artists and arts organisations to engage national and international audiences, including through the provision of data tools and resources.
- Ensure the new National Cultural Policy reflects the importance of cultural diplomacy.

Introduction

The University of Melbourne commends Creative Australia for its achievements, including establishing key sector councils such as Creative Climate, First Nations Arts, and Music Australia, and delivering *Equity: The Arts and Disability Plan 2022-2026*. The University shares this commitment to build a cultural landscape that reflects our diversity, embeds sustainability, and supports our arts workers.

The University occupies a multifaceted and distinctive place within this cultural landscape – as an educator of artists and creative professionals, employer of artists and creative-arts academics, creative arts research hub, cultural custodian and sector partner. This distinctive positioning gives the University insight into policy settings that shape artist development, workforce readiness and the health of the creative sectors.

The University educates future artists through the Victorian College of the Arts (VCA) and the Melbourne Conservatorium of Music, both part of the Faculty of Fine Arts and Music. The Faculty, which also includes the Wilin Centre for Indigenous Arts and Cultural Development, trains 2500 undergraduate and postgraduate students and undertakes research across disciplines including acting, music performance and composition, dance, film and television, animation, Indigenous arts and culture, visual art, and writing for screen and stage. The Faculty is based at the University's Southbank campus in the centre of Melbourne's Arts Precinct. The University of Melbourne is also an Australian leader in creative arts and health, training therapists and delivering education and research in creativity and wellbeing.

Beyond the Faculty of Fine Arts and Music, the University offers creative industries education and the first university art history program established in Australia through the Faculty of Arts. It also provides specialisations in design and games design through the Faculty of Architecture, Building and Planning and the Faculty of Engineering and IT respectively. The University of Melbourne is Australia's top university for Performing Arts and ranks in the global top 20 for Arts and Humanities in the 2026 QS World University Rankings.

As a cultural custodian, the University stewards the Melbourne Theatre Company (MTC), holds significant interests in the Australian National Academy of Music and Australian Music Examinations Board, and maintains one of Australia's most significant Indigenous collections. The University's cultural estate includes 15 galleries and museums, more than 15 performance venues, and 30 significant collections that enrich campus and community life. This cultural fabric demonstrates that art, ideas, and learning are deeply interconnected, and that through creativity we find new ways to understand each other and the world around us.

The University's cultural program reflects its commitment to its Indigenous strategy, *Murmuk Djerring*, which is grounded in respectful, reciprocal relationships with communities of origin. It honours 65,000 years of First Peoples' knowledge, creativity and cultural authority, and acknowledges its own complex histories. It also embraces the stories of migrant communities and contemporary cultural practice, together forming a rich and evolving expression of place and identity.

This submission reflects the University's multifaceted role and provides perspectives on policy settings that affect artist pathways, cultural equity, workforce development, and the sustainability of Australia's creative sector.

1. First Nations First

The government is seeking views on how cultural policy can continue to reflect First Nations priorities, strengthen recognition of cultural rights, recognise the centrality of language to culture, and support pathways for First Nations leadership across the cultural landscape.

Indigenous storytelling is central to the cultural life of the nation. The University of Melbourne employs and collaborates with some of the nation's most senior Indigenous scholars and artists. It is important that the Government fund dedicated leadership pathways for Indigenous artists in the performing and visual arts, embedding these within cultural institutions and integrating Indigenous Knowledges throughout their design and delivery. We highlight the model of the Wilin Centre for Indigenous Arts and Cultural Development at the University of Melbourne, which champions advocacy and presentation of Indigenous arts and cultural practice. The Centre works with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities to recruit and support potential and practicing Indigenous artists to study and refine their academic and artistic skills at the Faculty of Fine Arts and Music.

The University of Melbourne supports and commissions Indigenous artistic practice and encourages the Government to support arts organisations to do the same. A recent example is *65,000 Years: A Short History of Australian Art*, an exhibition celebrating Indigenous culture and artistic practice which received over 50,000 visitors and was awarded the Large Project of the Year at the 2026 Victorian Museums and Galleries Awards. The exhibition included a sold-out publication edited by distinguished Associate Provost Professor Marcia Langton AO and Senior Curator Judith Ryan AM, offering insights into the first art of this country and featuring twenty-five leading thinkers. The exhibition demonstrated a strong audience appetite for Indigenous-led storytelling. It showed the importance of scaffold funding from multiple sources, including Government and philanthropy.

Equitable access to higher education is also a critical component for Indigenous leadership. The Job-ready Graduates (JRG) Package is addressed below in further detail (see 'Centrality of the Artist') but must be highlighted as part of any examination of pathways for First Nations leadership across the cultural landscape. Indigenous Knowledges contain Humanities and Social Sciences (HASS) and Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) study areas, and policy that prioritises one over the other is unhelpful for promoting academic engagement and student learning that references Indigenous Knowledges. JRG also places a major financial burden on Indigenous people who are more likely to enter university via HASS disciplines. Despite the Government's widening participation agenda, current government policy is widening the education gap and increasing disadvantage for many Indigenous people who are keen to embark on tertiary study in the arts and humanities.

The University acknowledges the importance of truth-telling and confronting history with accountability, publishing two volumes of [Dhoombak Goobgoowana. A History of Indigenous Australia](#). Having undertaken significant work to ensure respectful and culturally appropriate access to Indigenous Collections under its stewardship and having been actively engaged in the careful and considerate process of repatriation of Indigenous materials, we commend the Government's commitment to this in *Revive*. This is explored further in the section on 'Strong Cultural Infrastructure.'

Recommendation: Fund dedicated leadership pathways for Indigenous artists in the performing and visual arts, embedding these within cultural institutions and integrating Indigenous Knowledges throughout their design and delivery.

2. A Place for Every Story

The government is seeking views on how cultural policy can continue to recognise diverse forms of cultural expression and participation, including local and place-based practice and emerging modes of expression, while responding to changing patterns of participation and supporting inclusion.

The University, and related entities such as the Melbourne Theatre Company, commission, create, produce, stage, film and critique local work, across a number of areas from film to visual art, theatre, interdisciplinary practice and music composition. Through curriculum, research and extra-curricular activity such as student theatre, University staff and students are continually creating and developing art. This critical role is a core part of the University's remit. Spaces like the Victorian College of the Arts and University student theatre are where stories are conceived and nurtured. We encourage investment in the development of stories from across the community, with a particular focus on stories from underrepresented groups noting that this important work often takes dedicated resources and supports and can require different ways of working.

Public-facing venues within universities, such as the Potter, Buxton Contemporary, Science Gallery and UMAC, form a vital part of the nation's cultural infrastructure. They complement major and state institutions by providing spaces that incubate new works, creative concepts and artistic expression. Within a university context, these venues offer an environment in which works foster dialogue, critical reflection and debate. They provide significant employment opportunities for the creative workforce, as well as providing venues and platforms to connect and co-create with the diverse communities we serve in our local neighbourhoods through Civic and Community Engagement.

The University is committed to diversity, equity and inclusion and welcomed the Government's release of *Equity: the Arts and Disability Associated Plan*. As an employer and educator of people with disability, the University fully endorses the Government's commitment to creating information about arts education and careers for d/Deaf and disabled artists and arts workers and calls for greater government investment for research into full participation in the creative arts. For example, the University of Melbourne platforms the creative outputs of staff, students and alumni with disability in an annual professional production in the Melbourne Southbank Arts Precinct. It also partners with organisations and schools supporting disadvantaged young people and young people with disability, including through emerging modes of expression and adaptive technologies. We would also highlight the role that digital technologies can play in diverse forms of cultural expression and the need for ongoing research in this area, particularly where this widens participation and extends opportunities to those seeking greater access to arts and culture.

Recommendations:

- *Invest in the development of stories from across the community, with a particular focus on stories from underrepresented groups.*
- *Expand investment for research into full participation in the creative arts by artists and arts workers with disability.*

3. Centrality of the Artist

As creative practice, technology and work patterns continue to evolve, the government is seeking views on how cultural policy can respond to changing conditions for creative work, including safer and fairer workplaces, the protection of creative rights in the digital environment and the role of arts education, creative skills and lifelong learning, and how creators are recognised across the broader economy.

Universities play a critical role in developing and platforming artists by providing arts education, researching creative practice, building skills and networks, and enabling lifelong learning and professional outcomes.

Equity in accessing higher education

Artists are highly educated (74% hold university qualifications compared with around one-quarter of the broader workforce)¹ and Australian universities, as providers of creative arts education, are essential for preparing future artists and producers of cultural content, including uniquely Australian content.

Revive recognises that JRG has had significant and disproportionate effects on students studying arts and humanities degrees. It commits to actions to “review Australia’s higher education system and develop the Australian Universities Accord which will...consider the impacts of changes made under the 2020 Job-ready Graduates reforms.” Despite the Universities Accord calling for “urgent remediation” of JRG, the Government is yet to replace it. The University notes that a [Senate inquiry](#) into the *Higher Education Support Amendment (Reverse Job-Ready Graduates Fee Hikes and End 50k Arts Degrees) Bill 2025* is currently underway. Any National Cultural Policy must be underpinned by funding and policy settings that address the deep inequities under JRG. Where *Revive* rightly positions the centrality of the artist as a theme and calls for practical measures to strengthen arts education and lifelong learning pathways, JRG has undermined this.

Skills and links to industry

Revive states that “training in both traditional creative skills and digital skills will be required to support growing industry needs.” Research conducted by Creative Australia for Service and Creative Skills Australia (SaCSA) in 2025 revealed that Australia’s creative industries are facing critical workforce and skills shortages. The University supports the ambition of SaCSA, which is exploring new training approaches and delivery models to better connect education with the workforce. As a leader in skills development and professional practice, the University believes higher education has an important role to play in this area. Our practice and production-focussed courses deliver technical, industry-oriented training. For example, the Faculty of Fine Arts and Music recently partnered with industry to build capability in the growing field of virtual production, offering a number of industry-based MicroCerts. This exemplifies how we develop training and pathways that lead to professional degrees and deeper levels of industry-applied learning.

Where the [2025 Creative Workforce Scoping Study Report](#) highlighted the need for “new or reinvigorated initiatives to...bridge gaps between formal education and industry needs through strengthened partnerships and feedback mechanisms,” we would also like to highlight the importance of work-integrated learning. This benefits both students and the broader creative arts sector. However, arts organisations need to be supported to resource and maximise the benefits of student placements so that graduates are fully able to contribute to the cultural and creative industries. We would welcome greater support for arts organisations to nurture talent through participating in such higher education pathways.

The University of Melbourne is exploring entry options to tertiary education that extend beyond ATAR alone. The University’s Faculty of Fine Arts and Music is a leader in this regard, as it has for years used audition and interview as its entry pathway instead of ATAR. Pipeline to university training from both secondary schools and TAFE is the backbone of the future arts workforce. In particular, primary and secondary school programs support budding talent, create understanding of artistic professions as viable careers, and stream students into higher education pathways. Support of school arts education is therefore critical, giving students more choice in taking either a university or TAFE pathway to further study or directly to the profession upon leaving the secondary system. In classical music, for example, a university degree is required to gain a position in a European orchestra or with a professional mentor, often the next step for orchestral and solo performers after their Bachelor program. These artists often then return to Australia for their professional careers. As part of how the University supports school-age pathways, the Faculty Fine Arts and Music has a longstanding partnership with Melbourne Youth Orchestra. Through this partnership

¹ Creative Australia, *Artists as Workers: An Economic Study of Professional Artists in Australia*, 2024, p 29.

agreement, MYO students meet and rehearse in the University's Southbank campus in the heart of the cultural precinct, familiarising them and their families with the creative economy, and providing easy access to other creative venues (NGV, Melbourne Recital Centre, and Arts Centre Melbourne).

The importance of arts education for young people

The University would like to highlight the importance of quality creative arts education including in the performing, visual, screen arts and music, and the role these disciplines play in the development of essential critical thinking and wellbeing in children and young people. [Reports](#) in recent years have outlined how the average music training time for generalist primary educators has more than halved since 2009. This decline is particularly concerning given that arts education not only [supports children's development and learning](#), but also sustains the next generation of artists, academics and audiences.² We commend the Government's activity with specialist arts education programs and support calls to expand these programs, particularly in schools.

A persistent tension remains: while policy identifies the marginalisation of the arts, initial teacher education (ITE) providers must meet expanding mandated core content that excludes them. In already crowded programs, each new requirement displaces existing curriculum, leaving the arts especially vulnerable. In primary education, assessment priorities continue to shape what is valued and sustained; as long as the arts sit outside these accountability frameworks, they will be deprioritised in practice. Addressing this requires alignment between policy ambition and regulatory settings. Without embedding the arts within mandated expectations, accreditation requirements, or assessment frameworks, their position in ITE will remain precarious.

Delivering funding, continued curriculum reforms, support for specialised teacher training and engaging creative arts graduates in their delivery is essential to the health of the sector, and to society more broadly. The case outlined in *Revive* on engaging young people in lifelong arts education is compelling and must remain a key part of the new National Cultural Policy. University of Melbourne staff and students engage with thousands of primary and secondary students in creative arts diversification programs each year through schools outreach, education programs, performances and exhibitions. Research verifies the very real benefits that these programs provide. We recommend increased funding for arts and cultural organisations to deliver such specialist arts education programs.

Recommendations:

- *Reform higher education funding to address inequities created by the Job-Ready Graduates package.*
- *Provide dedicated funding to enable arts organisations to resource and maximise work-integrated learning opportunities for students.*
- *Support arts education within initial teacher education programs by embedding arts within mandated expectations, accreditation requirements, or assessment frameworks.*
- *Ensure the new National Cultural Policy reflects the importance of engaging young people in lifelong arts education and provides increased funding for arts and cultural organisations to deliver these specialist arts education programs.*

² Richard Gill, The Value of Music Education, <https://www.musictechhelper.com/blog/my-favorite-ted-talk-richard-gill-the-value-of-music-education>

4. Strong Cultural Infrastructure

The government is seeking views on how Australia’s cultural infrastructure can remain resilient, adaptable and fit-for-purpose, including how existing partnerships, investment, infrastructure and systems could be used more effectively to support long-term sustainability.

The University’s cultural estate encompasses an extensive range of cultural and scientific collections, museums, galleries, libraries, archives, theatres and performance venues. The estate is tightly woven into the fabric of the University and constitutes a major asset. It enriches teaching, research and community engagement, manifesting the University’s important place in driving a culturally-focused and connected community. It also demonstrates the University’s broader civic purpose, strengthening social connectedness, identity and respect across diverse communities. Universities function as anchor institutions, playing a key role in cultural capacity building and civic engagement that complements state and national institutions.

A comprehensive National Cultural Policy must recognise universities’ contribution to Australia’s cultural landscape and include the Galleries, Libraries and Museums (GLAM) sector within its strategic framework. A cultural strategy that omits collecting institutions will not provide a complete picture of Australia’s cultural infrastructure and capacity. While universities have responsibilities equivalent to State and national institutions in caring for collections, they do not receive government funding for this key activity.

Collecting institutions have an ethical obligation to confront and address the legacy of collections acquired through unacceptable past practices, actively reviewing their provenance, meaning and future stewardship. These institutions require dedicated funding not only to meet their stewardship obligations but also to reimagine the future of their collections—embracing new ideas, technologies such as AI, and community-led approaches. An entrepreneurial fund tailored to innovative, responsible use and transformation of legacy collections would help inspire bold, forward-looking projects while upholding accountability to the communities and histories they represent. The Government should increase funding available for the repatriation of Aboriginal Ancestors and make this funding accessible to universities on the same basis as State and national museums.

Global connectivity affects all creative disciplines, but the film and television industry remains uniquely vulnerable to the associated risks. During Revive, the Hollywood writers’ strike had a direct downstream impact on Australian industries. For example, the planned remake of the film *Metropolis*, slated for production at Melbourne’s Docklands Studios, was withdrawn due to the strike action. This prevented a surge in creative workforce employment for graduates and work-integrated learning opportunities for students. The impact was particularly acute for VCA Film & Television students and graduates, who had been actively preparing for those opportunities through MicroCerts in virtual production technologies, developed through a \$5m Department of Education [grant](#) in partnership with Nant Studios. While the increase to the Film Location Offset, a Revive initiative, is welcome, it only addresses part of this immediate challenge.

Beyond immediate disruptions, Australia’s film technology and infrastructure must evolve to keep pace with digital transformation, particularly AI-driven innovations. The creative industries face ongoing risks as AI reshapes production workflows, skills requirements and competitive advantages. Strategic investment in emerging technologies and workforce development will be essential to ensure Australia remains competitive in this rapidly transforming landscape.

Recommendation:

- *Recognise universities' distinctive role in cultural capacity building, civic engagement and social cohesion within Australia's cultural infrastructure ecosystem.*
- *Include the Galleries, Libraries and Museums (GLAM) sector within the National Cultural Policy to ensure comprehensive coverage of collecting institutions.*
- *Increase government funding available for repatriation of Aboriginal Ancestors, making this accessible to universities on the same basis as State and national museums.*
- *Establish an entrepreneurial fund tailored to innovative, responsible use and transformation of legacy collections.*
- *Resource Australia's world-class film and television industry and training programs so it can keep pace with technological developments brought by AI.*

5. Engaging the Audience

The government is seeking views on how cultural policy can respond to changing audience behaviours, discovery pathways and modes of engagement, including innovation in presentation and discovery to sustain participation, as well as marketing and distribution so Australian creativity continues to inspire, include and connect.

The University produces and exhibits a number of significant creative works each year, engaging with tens of thousands of visitors across our Parkville and Southbank campuses, and internationally with partner universities and significant cultural organisations. We are particularly aware of the challenges of finding audiences for important creative work from within the 'attention economy'.

The ongoing provision of timely consumer data, resources and tools to support audience development is essential as the sector competes for attention. Connecting artists with those who consume or engage with art, while also attracting new audiences, is a skill as well as an internationally recognised research area. We continue to offer expertise in audience development to support the government with research and data, evidence synthesis, and evaluation.

The sharp rise in the cost of living has compounded the challenge of rebuilding audiences after the pandemic. The University partners with civic, community and cultural organisations to better understand the cultural economy, its benefits, drivers and obstacles. Research is showing there are significant challenges confronting creative practitioners and organisations in growing in-person audiences as they compete with a plethora of streaming services, changed subscription models, and AI-generated content. When audience numbers decline, ticket prices are put under strain, compromising access and the scope of cultural activity available. Cultural activity is critical to social connectedness, wellbeing, and identity, but diminished audience accessibility is a growing concern.

Cultural diplomacy is another area where there have been calls for support since *Revive* was released. Mutually beneficial agreements between cultural organisations, exchanges and partnerships pave the way both for welcoming international investment, trade and positive relations, while also showcasing Australia as an attractive country for tourism and business. This focus under *Revive* should also be reflected within the new National Cultural Policy.

Recommendations:

- *Continue to fund and develop initiatives that help artists and arts organisations to engage national and international audiences, including through the provision of data tools and resources.*
- *Ensure the new National Cultural Policy reflects the importance of cultural diplomacy.*

The University of Melbourne

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