

Submission to the National Cultural Policy Consultation 2026

Dr Tim Nikolsky | Educator, Musician, Creator of the Australian Jazz Real Book

| April 2026

Who I Am

I am a music teacher, composer, performer, and the creator of the Australian Jazz Real Book (AJRB) — a comprehensive digital and print archive of more than 1,800 compositions by over 350 Australian jazz composers, spanning more than seventy years of the tradition. I hold a PhD, have served on the VCAA Music Study Design Review Panel, and have worked as a VCAA assessor across performance and written examinations for years. My work on the AJRB received an APRA/AMCOS Art Music Award as a culturally significant educational resource. Eight Australian universities subscribe to it institutionally. It is directly cited in VCE and HSC music curricula — in part because I personally advocated for the inclusion of Australian repertoire requirements during the Study Design redevelopment process.

I also teach in Victoria's largest school, which serves some of the most vulnerable students in the state. It is critically underfunded. I am 45 years old, should be approaching the peak of a twenty-year career still ahead of me, and I am leaving the profession. I write this not as a grievance but as evidence. The systems we have built are not retaining the people they need. If someone with my qualifications, track record, and commitment to both public education and Australian cultural life cannot sustain a career, then something structural has failed — and that failure should concern anyone who takes cultural policy seriously.

I write from the inside. I know what the gap looks like between stated cultural policy intent and the daily reality of trying to build something culturally meaningful without institutional support, without sustainable income, and without a safety net.

The Australian Jazz Real Book: What It Is

For most of its history, jazz education in Australia has been conducted almost entirely through American repertoire. Students at secondary and tertiary level have learned from the Great American Songbook and from international anthologies that, by definition, exclude Australian compositional voices. As the late Graeme Bell observed, without deliberate intervention, Australian jazz risked sinking from view entirely. The cycle is self-reinforcing: when teachers have no curated, gig-ready access to Australian repertoire, they cannot assign it; when they do not assign it, students do not learn it; when students do not perform it, composers remain unrecognised.

The AJRB was built to interrupt that cycle. It now hosts over 1,800 compositions with full notation, transposed parts across concert pitch, B \flat , E \flat , and bass clef, composer profiles, audio recordings, and links to live performances. It is a functionally complete teaching resource, not merely an archive. In 2025 I published instrument-specific repertoire guides — for guitar, voice, bass, horn instruments, and piano — aligned directly to VCE and HSC requirements, annotated with pedagogical context. Annual royalty distributions go to contributing

composers. A Substack newsletter serving over 1,000 subscribers functions as ongoing professional development for music educators. Institutional subscriptions from eight universities demonstrate that this is not a passion project sitting on the margins of the sector — it is embedded in the formal infrastructure of Australian music education.

And it is at risk of disappearing.

The Core Problem: Cultural Value Without Economic Viability

The AJRB generates almost no income. The gap between its demonstrable cultural value and its financial sustainability is not a minor inconvenience — it is the central problem this submission asks the policy to address. A resource recognised by industry awards, adopted by eight universities, integrated into national curricula, and distributed to over 1,000 educators generates income insufficient to justify its continued existence on economic grounds alone. It continues because I believe in it. That belief is finite. I am burning out of a parallel career in public education. The personal goodwill sustaining the AJRB is a depleting asset, and there is no institutional backstop when it runs out.

This is not an unusual situation. It is the normal situation for small-scale cultural infrastructure in Australia. We have become very good at funding events and projects with discrete deliverables. We have become very poor at funding the ongoing maintenance of resources that underpin sector-wide activity. The AJRB is not a concert season or a festival. It does not produce a single output that maps neatly onto a grant reporting cycle. It is a living resource requiring continuous curatorial labour: adding new compositions, maintaining relationships with composers, updating curriculum guides as study designs change, keeping notation software and website infrastructure current and accessible. None of that work is glamorous. None of it fits cleanly into the funding mechanisms that currently exist.

What the AJRB represents — and what is at risk — is the quiet connective tissue of a cultural ecosystem: the resources, databases, and educational infrastructure that make it possible for the visible, celebrated parts of the sector to function. You cannot have a thriving Australian jazz scene if the next generation of musicians is trained exclusively on American repertoire because no accessible alternative exists. You cannot honour the policy commitment to make Australian stories visible and tellable if the tools that would make those stories teachable are left to survive on the unpaid overtime of their creators.

Strong Cultural Infrastructure: What the Policy Must Get Right

The consultation paper describes Strong Cultural Infrastructure as providing support across the spectrum of institutions which sustain our arts, culture and heritage, and asks how that infrastructure can remain resilient, adaptable and fit-for-purpose. The AJRB is a case study in what happens when the answer to that question is: it cannot, because no funding mechanism exists to support it.

The infrastructure problem is not only about big institutions. The National Gallery, the symphony orchestras, the opera — these have advocates, budget lines, and political visibility. The quiet, specialised, educationally embedded resources that do the daily work of making Australian culture accessible and teachable do not. They are too niche for the major arts

agencies, too arts-focused for education funding bodies, and too labour-intensive to sustain through user fees in a digital environment where free access is the default expectation.

The result is predictable: culturally significant work is created by individuals who subsidise it with their own labour, sustained until that labour becomes untenable, and then lost. This is not a market outcome to be accepted. It is a market failure to be corrected.

There are further systemic problems that compound the infrastructure challenge and that the new policy must directly confront:

AI and the Expropriation of Creative Assets

Generative AI has ingested the entirety of recorded and notated creative output — including the compositions of the 350-plus Australian jazz composers whose work sits in the AJRB — without consent, credit, or compensation. For working musicians earning modest incomes from teaching, performance, and royalties, this represents a direct and uncompensated appropriation of their creative assets. The policy framework acknowledges this risk. It must go further. Aspirational statements about ethical AI development are insufficient. The new policy needs specific, enforceable protections for Australian creators in the context of AI training data, with mechanisms for attribution and remuneration, not voluntary industry codes that the technology sector can disregard.

There is also a discoverability problem that is not being adequately addressed. AI recommendation systems do not favour Australian content. They optimise for engagement signals drawn from global data, which means American and British repertoire dominates default discovery pathways. A student seeking jazz resources online will be directed towards international material not because Australian alternatives are inferior, but because the infrastructure to surface those alternatives does not exist at the algorithmic level. Cultural policy must treat discoverability of Australian work in digital environments as a core infrastructure challenge, not an afterthought.

The Collapse of Equity in Music Education

Music is increasingly only taught in well-resourced private schools. The per-student funding gap between public and private schools is not merely an equity concern in the abstract — it has direct and measurable consequences for who gets to participate in Australian cultural life as a practitioner. Instrumental music programs require capital investment in facilities, instruments, and specialist staff that underfunded public schools simply cannot make.

The ATAR system compounds this. Music and creative arts subjects scale down, meaning a student who devotes genuine talent and years of commitment to music may receive a study score that disadvantages their tertiary entrance ranking relative to a peer who chose differently. Schools are aware of this and, in many cases, actively discourage students from pursuing music at VCE even when those students have demonstrated exceptional aptitude. I have heard, more times than I can count, a version of the following from colleagues: 'I've got a student who's done their AMus and they're not doing Music because it's not [REDACTED] Specialist Maths, Maths Methods, Physics, Chemistry, and English — is an informal but widely understood shorthand for the subjects that maximise ATAR scores. Music is not on that list.

The consequence is a generation of capable young musicians steered away from the subject they love because the incentive structure of our senior secondary system tells them their passion is not worth the risk. ATAR does more harm than good in this context. Universities increasingly agree — the proportion of students gaining tertiary entrance through alternative pathways grows each year. The new policy should make the scaling of creative arts subjects a specific and urgent area of examination.

The Loss of Third Places and the Live Music Pipeline

We have lost most of the informal, semi-professional creative spaces where artists develop and communities gather. Venues that once hosted original music have retreated to tribute shows and cover bands — in significant part because public liability insurance costs have made original programming an unacceptable financial risk for small operators. The pipeline that once brought young musicians from learning an instrument to performing publicly to developing their own repertoire has been severely disrupted. Established artists who should be performing their own music are instead doing tribute shows simply to survive financially. This is a market failure, not a market correction, and it warrants direct policy intervention.

What the New Policy Should Do: Concrete Recommendations

I urge the next National Cultural Policy to act on the following specific priorities:

- Create a dedicated funding stream for ongoing cultural infrastructure maintenance — not projects, not events, but the continuous curatorial and technical labour required to sustain educationally embedded resources, databases, and archives of demonstrable sector-wide value. Assess eligibility on the basis of institutional uptake and educational integration, not on the production of discrete deliverables.
- Commission an independent review of the ATAR scaling of creative arts subjects, with a specific brief to assess its impact on participation equity and to recommend corrective mechanisms. The review should include the perspectives of teachers, students, and university admissions bodies.
- Establish specific, enforceable legal protections for Australian creators whose work is used to train AI systems, including the right to opt out, the right to attribution, and the right to remuneration. Voluntary industry codes are insufficient. This requires legislation.
- Invest in discoverability infrastructure for Australian creative work in digital environments. This may include algorithmic requirements on platforms operating in the Australian market, funding for metadata and cataloguing initiatives, and support for educational technology that surfaces Australian content as a default.
- Reform and expand tax incentives for arts philanthropy, specifically to benefit small and mid-scale projects and infrastructure resources that currently sit outside the major institutional sector. The philanthropic potential in Australia is real but structurally underdeveloped.
- Address the public liability insurance barrier facing small live music venues hosting original Australian music. Explore industry-wide insurance pooling models,

government-backed underwriting, or direct subsidy mechanisms that lower the cost of programming risk for small operators.

- Fund specialist arts education programs in public schools at a level that meaningfully closes the gap with what private schools can provide through their own resources. The contrast between the two sectors, as I observe it every year through VCAA assessment visits across Victoria, is not just inequitable — it is unconscionable. Cultural participation should not be a privilege of wealth.
- Prioritise qualitative evaluation methods for cultural programs alongside quantitative output measures. Not everything that is valuable fits in a spreadsheet. Wellbeing, community cohesion, creative development, and the spark of a new artistic direction are real outcomes. A policy framework that can only measure what it can count will systematically defund the work that matters most.

Conclusion

The Revive policy did important things. Establishing Creative Australia, creating dedicated councils for music and literature, commissioning arts education programs in schools — these were meaningful steps in the right direction. But for many people working at the coalface of arts education and small-scale cultural production, the gap between stated policy intent and lived experience remains very large.

I have spent more than a decade building something of genuine cultural value — a resource used by eight universities, integrated into national curricula, recognised by industry bodies, and distributed to over a thousand educators — and I cannot sustain it financially. I have spent twenty years teaching music in public schools and I am leaving. These are not personal failures. They are data points about the adequacy of the structures we have built, and data points that the next policy has an opportunity to take seriously.

The next National Cultural Policy must move from aspiration to architecture. It must build the specific, funded, enforceable mechanisms that allow artists, educators, and cultural producers to do the work that policy says it values. That means funding the unglamorous infrastructure, not only the celebrated events. It means protecting the creators who built the cultural commons that AI is now consuming. It means being honest about the structural barriers — in education, in the live music sector, in the funding landscape — that are narrowing participation and driving talented people out.

Australia's cultural story deserves better than that. I hope this submission contributes usefully to shaping what comes next.

Dr Tim Nikolsky

Musician, Educator, Creator — Australian Jazz Real Book

[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]

April 2026