

National Cultural Policy Submission

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We are a colleagues from the School of Media, Culture, Art, and Social Inquiry at Curtin University and in addition to being teachers and researchers in higher education, we are also advocates, writers, creative practitioners, and advisors across multiple industries within the arts. We would like to take the opportunity to highlight the need for the upcoming New National Cultural Policy to focus all five pillars on grassroots and community centred cultural centres throughout the country. Namely, we focus on the importance of access an inclusion for local communities, accessibility and inclusion for disabled people working in the arts, and also ensuring that the pursuit of excellence does not neglect the important work that community organisations do in nurturing and supporting individuals and organisations in the arts.

Better Support for Libraries, Archives and Community Centred Organisations

Australia's previous National Cultural Policy downplayed the importance of Australia's libraries and archival institutions. These places collect, curate and enable access to information that documents our past and informs our future. The stories and lessons of the past, ancient and contemporary, held in these collections are core, and in many cases untapped, resources that can educate, inspire and lead to a better, fairer Australia. Adequate resourcing to ensure their ongoing care is essential to Australian culture.

A 2018 Report on how libraries were contributing to the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (<https://read.alia.org.au/australian-libraries-support-sustainable-development-goals>) noted that over 3.1 million Australians attend free story time and rhyme time sessions at public libraries each year. Additionally, over 9 million Australians are registered members of public libraries (<https://read.alia.org.au/covid-19-and-australian-public-libraries-interim-report-30-april>) and we know that they are a key part of Australia cultural flora. Public libraries are major supporters of the arts, through activities such as author talks, exhibitions and local history collections. They promote lifelong learning, support digital inclusion and contribute to wellbeing as community engagement hubs. Unique features of public libraries include: a physical location alongside recreation facilities, health centres, museums and other community spaces; established connections with local services, such as aged care facilities, health services and schools; and inclusive principles that enable free and open access to all members of a community in a safe environment. These attributes mean that public libraries are well placed to play an even stronger role in national cultural initiatives at a grass-roots level by developing programs centred around established local connections.

At present, the support and resourcing of cultural institutions appears to be patchy affair. Grants and coordinating organisations are divided by sector, rather than encouraged to work together. Stronger organisations are advantaged by their capacity to compete for resources and a 'louder' voice at decision-making tables. A more holistic approach to cultural institutions may reduce the competitiveness between and within arts and cultural sectors. This would require careful oversight and inclusive processes.

Remove Barriers to Participation for the Disability Community

Participation and Inclusion is highlighted as one of the five pillars underpinning this policy review. The policy therefore seeks to "create opportunities for all Australians to participate in and contribute

to arts and culture”. We applaud this goal and note that people with disability are a prioritized in this focus. However, the discussion paper does not offer specific accessibility solutions to facilitate this important site of inclusion.

In the absence of a robust discussion about disability inclusion solutions, the policy refers to three key related policies that address people with disability – the NDIS, the Disability Strategy and Article 31 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disability. It is important to note that Article 31 does not specifically refer to participation in the arts and culture, instead it refers to the collection of statistics. However, the most recent Australia Council report on participation in Arts and Culture articulated difficulties collecting data about disability participation, in part due to a lack of definition. Indeed, the approach to disability in that study continued this discussion paper’s lack of specific focus on disability and the accessibility needs of both artists and audiences with disability. Disability is presented as somewhat tangential to the rest of the survey and disability is described as being difficult to define.

While acknowledging that *disability is diverse*, we argue that in taking this tentative approach to naming and describing the experience of disability, the cultural policy context in Australia risks creating further obstacles to inclusion. Without naming what people with disability need to access cultural life or acknowledging that people with disability may experience cultural life in a different way to the nondisabled community, for example through alternative formats or low sensory environments, there is no way to ensure all Australians have equal access to cultural life. Disability is the result of a complex interaction between impairments that may exist in the body and the socially created physical and attitudinal barriers imposed on people with disability. As article 1 of the CRPD explains:

Persons with disabilities include those who have long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments which in interaction with various barriers may hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others.¹

We urge the Australian arts and culture sector to more closely align with the social model of disability to develop specific solutions for people with disability to participate in the arts and culture in this country. **Accessibility and removing barriers is key to this discussion** as prioritized in the Australian Disability Strategy. Focusing on the issue of removing barriers, this strategy identifies clear solutions to the problem of ensuring people with disability can participate in cultural life:

People with disability should be supported to live more accessible and connected lives within their communities, including being able to fully participate in social, recreational, sporting, religious and cultural life. This requires accessibility to be an integral part of the design of services and systems to avoid barriers arising. It requires going beyond just physical accessibility. Providing easily accessible information about community services, events and facilities, and providing low sensory spaces, helps support the inclusion of people with disability in their communities.²

Drawing on these insights the national arts and cultural policy needs to be clear that accessibility barriers must be removed to ensure people with disability are included in arts and culture. Health is referred to several times throughout the policy document and we remind the department that health is identified in the Australian Science and Research priorities as ‘not simply the absence of disease or infirmity’. Arts and culture play a key role in ensuring social inclusion for all members of the community. We refer the department to **article 30 of the CRPD**:

¹ [Article 1 – Purpose | United Nations Enable](#)

² [Australia’s Disability Strategy 2021-2031 \(disabilitygateway.gov.au\)](#)

1. States Parties recognize the right of persons with disabilities to take part on an equal basis with others in cultural life, and shall take all appropriate measures to ensure that persons with disabilities:

a) Enjoy access to cultural materials in accessible formats;

b) Enjoy access to television programmes, films, theatre and other cultural activities, in accessible formats;

c) Enjoy access to places for cultural performances or services, such as theatres, museums, cinemas, libraries and tourism services, and, as far as possible, enjoy access to monuments and sites of national cultural importance.

2. States Parties shall take appropriate measures to enable persons with disabilities to have the opportunity to develop and utilize their creative, artistic and intellectual potential, not only for their own benefit, but also for the enrichment of society.³

In response to the 'Towards a national cultural policy' discussion paper, we propose that is essential that the Australian national cultural policy, like the Australian Disability Strategy and the CRPD, articulate the specific strategies required to remove barriers to participation for the disability community to ensure access to cultural life as a human right.

Supporting Community Arts and Culture in Pursuit of Excellence

Finally, we stress that making cultural experiences more accessible only benefits all audiences and practitioners across all tiers of arts and culture. The cost of attending cultural events across the sector is prohibitive for many Australians. The location of mainstream productions is dominantly in urban city centres which are not easily accessible to people who do not live or work in main centres. Attending a performance will have many added costs such as transportation and parking. Providing more funding and incentives for arts organisations to partner with business to address issues of access and affordability would address the current and growing gap between socio economic groups.

There is an emphasis in government arts funding bodies and agencies on supporting and providing incentives for entry level artists and media practitioners that is not evident for those at mid-career level. This is particularly disadvantageous for many women whose careers are interrupted by pregnancy and caring for young children. Women also are often primary carers for elderly parents and family members who are ill. Due to the freelance environment and collaborative nature of media and arts productions there is greater reliance on relationships, networking and collaborations between individuals. When people are required to take time out of the industry (i.e., to have children and care for dependents) these collaborations and networks in many cases desist. It can be very hard to get back into the industry especially a commercially driven industry where your value and expertise is determined by your last commercial or artistic success. Providing initiatives for women to return to the work force and incentives for arts and media organisations and funding bodies to fund and hire mid-career female practitioners would address this gap in opportunity and loss of expertise and knowledge.

Kind regards,

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³ [Article 30 – Participation in cultural life, recreation, leisure and sport | United Nations Enable](#)