

National Cultural Policy Submission

**Distinguished Professor Anthony Uhlmann, Discipline Leader English and Creative Writing
Western Sydney University**

Submitted: On behalf of an organisation with arts-components (e.g. community organisation, tourism, venue, health, education etc)

First Nations

We fully agree with the central importance of this goal. However, we wish to underline that reading and teaching works of oral literature and literature authored by First Nations peoples is essential to achieving understandings that might begin to do justice to the richness of the experience of Australia's First Nations peoples to Australian and world culture. We urge policy directors to consult with First Nations writers and communicate with teachers of literature at both schools and universities so as to devise curriculum that can make use of the stories of First Nations peoples be they traditional or contemporary. Written and spoken stories are of major importance as they carry the voices of First Nations people and allow windows into their cultural experience and wisdom. So too, First Nations peoples should be supported in sharing their stories as they wish them to be shared.

A Place for Every Story

Similar points can be made here. The study of Australian and world literature (and not just film, performance, the visual arts and other media) is essential to the understanding of what it means to live in such a successful multi-cultural community with such a rich and deep diversity of cultural traditions. So too, the study and creation of literature (and so the teaching of literary studies and creative writing) is essential to developing a diversity of voices telling us stories about both particular and community focused understandings of all aspects of Australian experience.

The Centrality of the Artist

At times the role of literature and creative writing can fall from view when discussing the arts in cultural policy spaces. We insist on the importance of the writer as an artist who is able to powerfully engage with many media (through scripts or the writing of other materials for the media). Yet literature and the ecology that surrounds it (book publishing, reviewing, essay writing, and the teaching of literature and creative writing) is often overlooked in forums that look to consult on policy related to the arts and artists. We urge policy makers to include writers and teachers of writing and literature or their peak bodies (such as for example the Australian Universities Heads of English) in discussions of policy going forward.

Strong Institutions

The policy document rightly emphasises the importance of teaching in the arts. However, these statements currently neglect the importance of teaching literature and creative writing. These disciplines, along with others in the Humanities, are directly threatened by policies put forward under the 'Jobs Ready' banner, which seeks to discriminate against students who study the arts at universities. These policies ask arts study to directly cross-subsidise other students through paying higher fees. This aspect of Jobs Ready is a direct impediment to the study of the arts and the study of the arts underpins elements of the cultural policy being developed here. We urge policy directors to clearly understand the harm being done by these aspects of Job Ready.

Further, recent policy has directly harmed research into literature at universities. For example, with regard to the ARC, only 70% of recommended grants in literary studies were approved in the DP22

round (9 out of 13) as against 98.9% of projects overall. On average, it is nearly thirty times more likely that a grant in literary studies will be refused than for other fields of research. So too, we ask that the role of the arts be taken into account in the “National Benefit Test” within the ARC processes. The current focus upon manufacturing in these policy settings often means that practice-led research with Non-Traditional Research Outputs can be overlooked in ARC metrics. This overlooking of the arts is also in part due to citation-driven assessments of impact and quality, which while appropriate in some areas tend to overlook the value creative arts *as* research. In short, we would welcome more inclusive policies in these areas.

Finally, while social disadvantage and the disadvantages facing First Nations communities is mentioned in passing in the policy we wish to underline that arts policy must strongly engage with and seek to overcome levels of disadvantage in our community. That is, needs-based funding should direct resources to working-class, recent migrant and First Nations communities so that they can enter and participate fully in producing Australian literature and culture.

Reaching the Audience

There is an immense opportunity at this moment to reset cultural discussions that once again recognise the importance of literature and writing to Australian culture. While Australia continues to produce works of literature of a high level and the status of creative writing itself is less openly questioned, the role and importance of literary scholarship and criticism and the teaching of literature at universities has come under significant pressure in the public sphere. So too fewer column inches are available to consider the importance of literature in major news outlets, and far less funding for literary or scholarly or review journals is available through funding bodies. Literature and deliberation over its value, which so decisively shaped the social networks and intellectual character of the modern public sphere, is now noticeable by its absence. We call on policy makers to support those institutions, such as literary magazines and review journals that engage with the general public about stories of importance to Australia and its diverse population.

Are there any other things that you would like to see in a National Cultural Policy?

The major point we wish to make is that literature and representatives of the eco-system that supports it (writing, publishing, reviewing, but also the study and teaching of literature and creative writing) need to be included in discussions of arts policy in Australia. The importance of stories written about Australian experience as well as how stories written elsewhere impact upon our culture needs to be understood as being essential to the health of that culture and experience. We urge policy makers to invite representatives not just of the publishing industry and writers, but representatives of teachers of literature at school and university levels to forums that consider the development of arts policies.