

# National Cultural Policy Submission

Magabala Books Aboriginal Corporation: ABN 56 764 219 082

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Magabala Books is Australia's leading Indigenous publishing house. First Nations owned and led, we have successfully balanced our strong relationship to Country and Culture with our status as an award-winning national publisher for over 35 years. From Broome, in the Kimberley, we publish Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander writers, storytellers, artists and illustrators from all over Australia.

The last couple of years has seen exponential growth in interest in, and demand for, First Nations storytelling in all forms. To capitalise on the opportunities this incredible moment in history presents and to guarantee it leads to meaningful and lasting change, more resources are required to ensure First Nations-led organisations and First Nations publishing professionals, writers, storytellers, artists and illustrators can thrive in sustainable and culturally safe ways.

Magabala Books commends Minister Tony Bourke's commitment to a new National Cultural Policy. We recognise it will not be an easy undertaking. The new National Cultural Policy must respond to a policy vacuum of 10 years and be receptive to current industry needs – there is urgent work to be done. Publishing in particular is a creative industry facing unique disruptions, risks and opportunities. The sector is under pressure due to global supply chain factors and our dependence on overseas printers is something requiring government investigation and leadership.

## General points in response to the ambitions of a new National Cultural Policy:

- First Nations first always. We are wary of the potential danger in isolating First Nations as one pillar – First Nations first must be a principle embedded across all aspects of the Cultural Policy.
- Culture is life: arts and culture should not be limited by departmental divisions. We have the opportunity to reimagine and redefine what a new Cultural Policy could mean for all areas of society including health, wellbeing, the environment, education, foreign affairs, regional development, our economy and much more.
- Literature matters: the literature sector is severely underfunded and undervalued. Reading comes second only to listening to recorded music as the most common way Australians engage with the arts yet Literature receives the smallest proportion of Federal arts funding – a figure that has more than halved over the past two decades.<sup>1</sup> Magabala supports the Australian Publishing Association in their call for a specific 'plan, policy forum and increased funding for literature'.
- For the long term: this policy must be robust and future proofed, so it survives beyond the rollercoaster of political will and a change of government.
- There is much work to be done to ensure our society understands and appreciates arts and culture, and the value of First Nations Culture in particular. This cultural shift must include engagement with our young people and the education sector.
- Accessible: the new National Cultural Policy must be communicated in a way that it can be understood by all mob (including those who may not be literate in English).

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<sup>1</sup> <https://australiacouncil.gov.au/advocacy-and-research/reading-the-reader>

## Key points in response to the Key Pillars:

### First Nations:

- First Nations stories at the centre of arts and culture begins with self-determination and empowerment. First Nations organisations and artists must be supported to do things differently. Organisations demonstrating a commitment to First Nations-led practice at both governance and executive levels must be adequately compensated for their cultural labour and best-practice example. This requires extra funding, flexibility, and acceptance of a different way of working.
- First Nations artists, arts workers and publishing professionals need real, sustainable and culturally safe employment pathways. In 2020, with the support of The Ian Potter Foundation and Kimberley Development Commission, we established our Cadetship program, employing two First Nations publishing cadets under the guidance of our First Nations Publisher. Restructuring internal resources has also enabled the creation of three further Indigenous identified positions across our publishing, projects, and marketing teams. These roles provide strengths-based career development for First Nations professionals. Such initiatives need specific, ongoing funding in the form of wage support/subsidies, professional development, and supervision costs, to ensure long term successful outcomes. This could take the form of a First Nations arts and cultural employment fund.
- A focus on First Nations stories must work to strengthen Indigenous Cultural and Intellectual Property (ICIP) rights, consumer protection frameworks, laws and protocols. Non-Indigenous authors and creators have long benefitted from taking First Nations stories and knowledge. Magabala does not endorse non-Indigenous writers and artists publishing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander stories. First Nations stories should be told from First Nations perspectives.
- The new National Cultural Policy must be alert to possible backlash in response to its focus on First Nations culture and strong in its anti-racist leadership. This must be a policy that inspires and leads our society in a way that prioritises the cultural safety of First Nations artists and organisations.

### Strong institutions:

- Strong institutions are fundamental to the existence of arts and culture, however even our most successful organisations exist on precarious foundations. We need to reverse the cuts to the Australia Council and significantly increase arts funding, particularly multi-year operational funding. Our sector needs the independence, leadership and transparency of the Australia Council to administer these funds, not a duplication of funding bodies. Magabala receives multi-year funding from the Australia Council and from the WA Government, without which we could not achieve the full breadth of our social, cultural and commercial outcomes.
- Strong institutions require consistent and aligned funding: Federal, State, Territory and Local Governments must collaborate to align funding opportunities, increase impact, and decrease unnecessary and onerous repetition of applications, reporting and acquittals.
- Long-term investment: arts and cultural organisations need access to recurrent and long term operational funding to ensure a sustainable and thriving arts and culture sector. This should be longer than 4 years. First Nations organisations must be prioritised and supported within our unique knowledge systems and different ways of working. Additionally, strong arts and cultural

institutions rely on strong leadership and strong boards. Specific funding support for governance training tailored to organisations is needed.

- A new National Cultural Policy must understand the real costs of arts and cultural practice in regional and remote areas. Operating in these regions adds many layers of financial impost, including limited access to the resources, infrastructure and professional networks of cities. Arts and culture funding needs to use a weighted funding formula that accounts for increased costs of operation, living, travel, transport and freight. These costs significantly impact our capacity to survive and thrive as successful arts organisations.
- Deficit perceptions of regional and remote areas should be challenged and First Nations connection to Country prioritised. Magabala's cultural foundations in the Kimberley and our strong connection to Yawuru Country is key to our success and should be celebrated.
- Arts infrastructure: arts and cultural organisations desperately need fit-for-purpose infrastructure and security of tenure. Most major arts organisations are currently operating under precarious tenure. The industry needs a specific and dedicated arts and cultural infrastructure strategy and fund to support purpose builds, refurbishments, or digital capacity builds.

### **A place for every story:**

- Equity does not come from treating everyone equally. For our arts and culture to reflect diversity, we need to understand the structural conditions that will enable diverse storytelling to flourish. It requires investment in targeted development opportunities and career pathways for creatives and publishing professionals from diverse backgrounds. We also cannot assume great writing and storytelling emerges only from 'literate' individuals or communities; alternative methods of publishing must be supported.

### **The centrality of the artist:**

- Arts is not a hobby: much has been documented of the low earnings of authors and illustrators. Successful authors can aspire to an average of <\$13,000/year from creative work (or <\$5,000/year for poets)<sup>2</sup>. First Nations artists are at particular risk of financial precarity and poverty. The sector desperately needs further investment for creative development funding, fellowships, and wage support for writers, storytellers and artists.
- Supplementary income: to ensure artist earnings are not further eroded copyright protections must be strengthened, and the push from some of the library and education sectors to weaken copyright protections must be resisted. It is essential that the ELR/PLR schemes be retained – for many Australian authors this provides more income than royalties from book sales. It is also essential to extend this to digital lending, which is increasing rapidly.

### **Reaching the audience:**

- Specific marketing funding: Marketing grant streams within the Australia Council have been lost to funding cuts. It is now very difficult for publishers to gain support for marketing strategies, and access international export strategies (i.e., representation at global bookfairs).

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<sup>2</sup> <https://australiacouncil.gov.au/advocacy-and-research/making-art-work>