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Office for the Arts
Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development, Communications and the Arts
Australian Government

Re. Consultation on a renewed National Cultural Policy

Introduction

In this submission we write from the perspective of academic leaders at RMIT University in the fields of design and creative practice. We bring to this submission extensive, interdisciplinary global experience across our fields and we draw on this as the basis for our propositions herein.

RMIT is recognised as a world leader in both education and research across design and creative practice, with a depth and breadth of excellence across the full range of sub-disciplines and fields. We are ranked 15th internationally and 1st in the southern hemisphere for Art and Design in the QS World University Rankings by Subject 2022. Having pioneered the Practice Research Symposium model of research higher degree education nationally and internationally, as well as being at the forefront of interdisciplinary, impact-driven research via its Enabling Capability Platforms, RMIT is committed to the contribution that design and creative practice make to the production of new knowledge and the pursuit of the common good.

The development of the new National Cultural Policy is a signal moment in Australian cultural life. We applaud the Albanese Labour Government and Arts Minister the Hon Tony Burke MP for this initiative, and for the consultative manner in which it has proceeded. We also commend the use of the previous national cultural policy, *Creative Australia* (2013), as the basis for the new policy, given that the visionary potential of that previous document was unable to be fully realised.

Indeed, in his Minister's Introduction to *Creative Australia*, then-Arts Minister Simon Crean wrote in 2013 that '[w]e must build on the strength and excellence of our artistic and cultural heritage and recognise that *creative talent and design thinking need to be at the heart of our innovation, technological development and national economic growth*' (italics added).

It is in the spirit of that aspiration that we make this submission: concurring with the earlier policy's statement that 'a creative nation is a productive nation in the fullest sense of the word—empathic, respectful, imaginative, industrious, adaptive, open and successful' (*Creative Australia* page 27).

We contend that this mission is now more crucial than ever, and that the value of design and creative practice extends far beyond their *inherent* worth (which are, themselves, vital to the national character) into their role as enablers and amplifiers of wider benefits in the social, environmental, and economic spheres. We contend that much of this value is tied to the locus between practice, education, and research in these fields – and therefore to the universities as principal sites for this integration. The contemporary university works closely with the full breadth of

cultural, business, not-for-profit and industry representative bodies. No longer can universities be perceived as a phase within a supply chain. Partnerships and lifelong learning have become central to the practice of universities and the future of our contributions, in creative practice as elsewhere.

The national tertiary context for design and creative practice

In the creative practice fields, there is no hard line between education, research, and practice: these activities are fundamentally overlapping and intertwined. Today, practicing artists, designers and creatives are not only teaching at universities (in both casual and permanent academic roles), they are undertaking and supervising research higher degrees, and carrying out crucial research – both within their home disciplines, but also, crucially, beyond them into other domains identified in the national Research and Science Priorities.

It would be a missed opportunity to overlook the tertiary sector as both an incubator and enabler of contributions in design and creative practice, which have major potential benefit to the nation. The new cultural policy should recognise the role of the universities in a vibrant creative sector ecology, not only in educating the next generation of practitioners, but going well beyond that into research collaboration leading to impact and beneficial change.

The maturation of research cultures in design and creative practice

In the nine years since *Creative Australia* was released, the status and maturity of design and creative practice research within Australian universities has developed considerably. This is partly a result of Australian universities' general shift in orientation towards research translation, engagement, and impact, which has led institutions to recognise the value of design and creative practice as enablers of research across disciplines (including with major impacts in health and wellbeing, advanced manufacturing, digital transformation, equity and inclusion, and climate awareness, amongst others). The value of design and creative practice as synthetic integrators, which enable meaningful and integrated co-design, collaboration, and translation of research into beneficial outcomes in the world, is increasingly recognised.

In this way design and creative practice are far from superfluous 'extras' or luxuries – they are in fact intrinsic to national and global priorities such as Reconciliation, health, social cohesion, skills development, productivity, innovation, and economic prosperity.

In fact, we argue, they are *central* to each of these domains – or they have the potential to be. Until and unless Australia brings design and creative practice to the centre of our national agenda, enshrining these practices in policy and government decision-making at all levels, we will lag behind other nations who have embraced such an approach.

Australia's regional neighbours Singapore and Hong Kong, for example, have for the past 20 years had a keen focus on design and its capacity to transform industries and quality of life, through the establishment of national Design Councils, and Design Centres that promote design. Collaboration with universities and facilitating multi-sector collaborations are key to their missions.

Furthermore, recent research for the UK-based Design Council, working with collaborators at the University of the Arts London, undertakes an extensive investigation of the 'Design Economy' – finding that design contributes materially to economic, social, and environmental goals. In particular, they identify six key 'pillars' - economic growth, regional prosperity, digital innovation, exports, skills for the future and diversity within the sector – which are essential to a thriving contemporary nation.

The particular role of design

In all of this, and in addition to the vital importance of art and creative practice, we contend that design has a particular role to play: but that this potential will only be fulfilled if it is carefully

conceived and framed within the new Cultural Policy. The complex contribution of the cultural sector to our current global challenges must be acknowledged.

We contend that design cannot (or not entirely, or no longer) be framed in terms either of entertainment or aesthetics. Contemporary design goes far beyond the visual – it facilitates vital civic processes of participation and collaboration; it enables the provision of humane and human-centred policies and services; it rethinks strategy and systems across all types and scales of organisation, and so on. Aspects of contemporary, cutting-edge design practice can be understood within a conceptual framework of management, innovation, strategy, productivity, social change, and futures thinking – as much or more than under the aegis of the creative arts.

Australia will quite simply be unable to meet its targets for climate change mitigation and adaptation without design. Likewise our ambitions around Reconciliation, and a better Australia for all. Design is essential to enable the major changes which we must see across almost every sector of the economy and Australian life.

Conclusion and recommendations

The new National Cultural Policy should provide a structure for understanding and enacting the potential for design and creative practice – across all disciplines, sectors, and challenges that the world now faces. The rich eco-system of practice, research and education in these fields, as enacted in university contexts, is fundamental to this contribution.

In light of this, we call for an expanded understanding and framework of support for design and creative practice, and argue that the new National Cultural Policy must achieve four things:

1. Understand and support the intertwined roles of government, the arts sector, and (notably) the *universities* in sustaining a thriving arts and cultural sector.
2. Understand and support the intertwined ecology *between practice, education, and research* in the design and creative fields, and as enacted in tertiary contexts.
3. Understand and support *the contributions that design and creative practice make to interdisciplinary research impact*, which in turn contribute in myriad ways to national benefit and Australia's regional and international leadership, both within and beyond the arts.
4. Understand and support *the particular role of design*, conceived in expanded terms both within and beyond the arts, as an enabler of benefit and impact across disciplines.

We look forward to the launch of the renewed National Cultural Policy, and to engaging with it in our capacity as educators, researchers, practitioners and leaders.

We provide our permission to the Department to publish this submission and to cite it in the National Cultural Policy Report.

Yours sincerely,

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