

# National Cultural Policy Submission

## Submission to the National Cultural Policy Review, 2020

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### Focus of this submission:

The [Centre for Urban Research \(CUR\)](#) at RMIT University is a leading national institute of urban scholars undertaking cross-disciplinary conceptual and applied research to enable transformative change to cities and regions. CUR's programs encompass urban governance, climate change, planning, transport and infrastructure, housing, urban ecology, and health and liveability.

This submission draws on [research in CUR](#) on the cultural heritage and cultural institutions of cities, and the relationships between technology, culture, and urban geographies.

We argue that refreshing Australia's national cultural policy requires:

- Understanding **the diverse contexts and influences that shape (and in some cases impede) cultural and creative activities** in different urban and regional settings.
- Recognising the **vital contribution that the arts and cultural heritage sectors make to how we collectively imagine and respond** to twenty-first century social, environmental, and economic challenges.
- Avoiding rigid **segmentation of policy outlooks and actions within government departments** which works against the development of cross-cutting support in complex policy domains such as culture and heritage.

These themes are elaborated within and across the sections below.

## First Nations

The fundamental and first principle of a cultural policy, or indeed any public policy or program in Australia, is the endorsement of First Nations' cultural self-determination and sovereignty. This includes recognition of the impact of settler society on Indigenous cultures, support for the capacity of Indigenous people to care for

Country including through cultural and artistic expression, and documentation of the plural histories of Indigenous-settler relations in Australia. In urban settings, cultural and urban policy should recognise the existence and claims of Indigenous sovereignty on cities, and seek to promote and enact voice, truth, and justice through cultural and urban planning and institutional support.

As recommended in the [National Indigenous Languages Survey](#) (see Recommendation 8), we argue for the importance of **making visible Indigenous histories and culture in the urban fabric**, through place naming and interpretive activities such as the [Yalinguth walking tour app](#) (Fitzroy, Melbourne), and the recognition by and support of urban governments and justice authorities of the distinctive cultural associations and social interactions of Indigenous people with particular urban precincts.

With regard to the intersection of justice and Indigenous cultural programs, we urge **policy and practical support for cultural programs** such as [The Torch](#), which provides art, cultural and arts industry support to Indigenous offenders and ex-offenders in Victoria. [Similar programs](#) operate in other states, and we argue for exploration of national policy support.

Effective policy support for Indigenous cultural economies requires an **understanding of their spatial dynamics at a national scale**. For example, Indigenous creative works marketed through [Desart](#) and similar rural/remote enterprises are mostly purchased online by customers living in major cities. Uneven broadband infrastructure in rural/remote Australia (an area of national jurisdiction) is a significant constraint on this market ([Holcombe-James 2019](#)). Such inequalities are cross-cutting and compounding, highlighting the importance of addressing the multiple factors that hinder the pursuit of Indigenous cultural self-determination and sovereignty.

## **A Place for Every Story/ Reaching the Audience**

Cultural policy should **provide the settings whereby the extremely diverse stories, histories, and cultures of Australia and the Australian people can be surfaced and fostered**. Australia's cultural institutions provide the very infrastructure upon which histories are written, stories are told across generations, and communities are supported to help tell their own stories ([Hegarty 2022](#)). A national cultural policy for the twenty-first century must recognise and respect the critical role cultural institutions play and provide them with the resources they need to tell diverse stories and reach new audiences in engaging and innovative ways.

We suggest **the right policy settings can support programs that enable cultural organisations of various sizes to collaborate and coordinate their work as to**

**provide innovative and engaging platforms for diverse cultural expression.** At a state level, this has been effectively achieved through the Australian Museums and Galleries Association Victoria's [Victorian Collections](#) initiative, which provides largely small and volunteer-run organisations with free access to a world-class content management system, as well as training and support to make their unique collections discoverable. *Victorian Collections* (and [similar programs](#) in other states) offers an example of a larger cultural heritage industry body and a plethora of smaller community organisations effectively working together to surface and amplify a diverse range of stories from across the state of Victoria and offers promising directions for effective collaboration across cultural institutions nationally.

Libraries and museums, particularly, have a key role to play in collecting and making available the diverse stories of Australia and the Australian people. [Two recent Australian Research Council projects](#) conducted by CUR researchers on representing cultural diversity in museum and library collections found a key barrier to achieving this important function was the mismatch between the mandate of these institutions to build, maintain, preserve, and share representative collections and the increasingly resource-constrained environments they operate in. We call for **policy settings and funding commitments that match the responsibility libraries and museums face in the digital age to tell diverse stories and reach diverse audiences.** Libraries and museums have shown remarkable ability to innovate and collaborate to better achieve their mandates—for example, through the award-winning, National Library of Australia-led discovery service *Trove*. Despite impressive levels of community engagement and passionate support (with over 70,000 daily users and a committed volunteer base), there have been [threats to the sustainability of the popular service](#) in recent years due to funding constraints. A national cultural policy for the twenty-first century must value cultural professionals and institutions and provide the settings where they can fulfil their important role in providing 'a place for every story'.

## **The Centrality of the Artist**

Addressing this theme requires **acknowledgement of policy and economic settings beyond the cultural sphere that are increasingly impacting on arts and cultural activities.** Housing policy and the financialisation of housing and property have had a significant impact on [housing affordability](#) for workers in the arts and cultural sectors, whose livelihoods and working conditions are often precarious ([de Peuter, 2011](#); [Morgan & Nelligan, 2018](#)). Appropriate policy responses must recognise the spatial dynamics of housing (un)affordability and its effect on local artists. While acknowledging the impact of housing costs in major urban centres on the ability for artists and arts workers to live, work, and thrive, it is important to draw attention to increasing unaffordability and lack of supply of housing in [regional areas](#) with a strong creative sector. We also note the challenge of rapid urban growth and densification on the availability of affordable studio space in major metropolitan

areas. In this light, we endorse innovative solutions such as [Creative Spaces](#) to make underutilised properties available for creative and cultural pursuits.

Planning decisions by local and state governments also have a significant detrimental impact on the availability of studio space. In particular, the readiness of planning authorities to rezone light industrial or manufacturing precincts, which have many structures suited to workshops and studios, for high-density apartment development has been questioned for the impact on innovation and industrial development in new IP-rich design and manufacturing enterprises ([Gibson et al. 2017](#)). Australian artists play **an essential role in creating the unique cultural life and identity of our suburbs, cities, towns, and regions**, and must be fostered and supported to live and work in these places. The potential social and economic benefits of creative industries on cities and towns are well-recognised ([Flieschmann, Daniel & Welters 2017](#)) but require the right policy settings to realise these benefits.

## Strong Institutions

Cultural institutions and facilities, in addition to fostering national and local cultures and identities, are **important locations for social connectedness and well-being** ([Cantillon & Baker 2018](#); [Murzyn-Kupisz & Dzialek 2013](#)). This highlights the importance of cross-sectoral policy approaches to ensure local-level cultural and community facilities, which constitute most of Australia's cultural infrastructure, are properly recognised and funded ([McShane & Coffey 2022](#)). The local government sector, which is both the most financially constricted tier of government and the sector with the greatest share of its assets in built infrastructure, cannot shoulder this burden alone.

The release of *Creative Australia*, two decades after its predecessor *Creative Nation*, brought renewed and much-needed attention to cultural policy at a national scale. However, despite *Creative Nation's* argument that culture required a policy frame that looked beyond efficiency and productivity, both documents have **failed to re-examine generic public management policy principles that impact on cultural institutions**. In particular, continued demands for an 'efficiency dividend' from national government departments and authorities is misapplied to cultural and educational institutions which largely rely on human rather than technological inputs ([van Barneveld & Chiu 2017](#); [McShane 2016](#)). The impact of the efficiency dividend has been particularly [severe](#) on the National Library of Australia. This significantly constrains the ability of cultural institutions such as the National Library to fulfil its mandate, let alone foster new forms of cultural expression and engage diverse audiences in innovative ways.

Finally, we note **the increasing policy, economic and social challenge of climate change** since the release of *Creative Australia*. In the face of the climate crisis,

cultural initiatives have a key role to play in creating awareness of the challenges at hand, as well as fostering the reflexive, creative, and future-orientated thinking such a crisis demands ([Cameron 2011](#)). Australia's historical collections held by collecting institutions can also help us better understand the dynamics and effects of climate change ([Hobbins 2019](#)). *Creative Australia* refers to climate change as an "unknown" (p. 30). A decade later we know much more about the impending impact of global heating and as a nation seem more prepared to acknowledge and act upon that awareness. Climate change impacts significantly on cultural institutions at multiple levels. First, the threat to cultural collections posed by fire and flood is [well-demonstrated](#), and many cultural facilities require infrastructural and financial support to secure collections, undertake emergency planning, or relocate away from vulnerable sites altogether. Second, we point to the role of creative and cultural initiatives such as [Climarte](#) and exhibitions such as the Australian Museums' [Changing Climate](#) and [Future Now](#) in creating awareness of the climate emergency and enabling audiences to engage with future imaginaries of a carbon-constrained world ([Cameron & Neilson 2015](#)). The availability of public cultural venues to conduct such conversations, and the continued support of creative programs in this area, is vital to the national conversation.