NATIONAL CULTURAL POLICY

Media, Entertainment & Arts Alliance (MEAA)

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ABOUT MEAA

The Media, Entertainment & Arts Alliance (MEAA) is the largest and most established union and industry advocate for workers in the creative and cultural industries, with a history going back more than 110 years. Our members include people working in television, radio, theatre, film, entertainment venues, sporting stadia, journalists, actors, dancers, sportspeople, cartoonists, photographers, musicians, orchestral and opera performers as well as people working in public relations, advertising, book publishing and website production – in fact, everyone who works in the industries that inform or entertain.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF COUNTRY

The Media, Entertainment & Arts Alliance acknowledges the traditional custodians and cultures of the lands and seas on which we live and work. We pay our respects to all First Nations Peoples, Elders and Ancestors. We acknowledge that sovereignty was never ceded and stand in solidarity towards a shared future.

Submission to Senate Environment and Communications References Committee Inquiry into the National Cultural Policy

MEAA welcomes the opportunity to submit to the Senate Environment and Communications References Committee inquiry into the National Cultural Policy. This submission provides feedback on potential tax reform measures to boost the productivity of Australia's arts and creative sectors and on the opportunities and challenges for Australia's arts and creative sectors associated with emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence.

Introduction

Australia's arts and cultural sectors are a cornerstone of economic and social life. They contribute more than $17 billion to the Australian economy and are a major jobs creator, employing 228,000 people.[1] However, Australia's arts and cultural sectors are in crisis. For much of the last 20 years, funding for arts and culture in Australia has been in deficit. The sector has been subject to unpredictable and inconsistent political commitments, with only fleeting attempts to recognise its true value. These shifting political cycles have had a corrosive effect on cultural policy and investment, thwarting the development of any long-term vision for arts and culture in Australia.

The historical decline in government funding has had a negative effect on audience participation and workforce conditions. In addition, major disruptions to demand, driven by the cost-of-living crisis and the COVID-19 pandemic, have created a set of challenges that have further undermined participation. As a flow-on effect of reduced investment, diminishing support for cultural activity, and low rates of participation, we have seen the evisceration of stable work, good jobs and careers in the sector.

Tax reform is a necessary and important step to support Australia's arts and creative sector. These efforts, however, are just one aspect of what must be a comprehensive response to the crisis. This response must not only incorporate tax measures, but address direct funding shortfalls, the decline of public participation in the arts, and the systemic crisis of work in the sector. In other words, it should be a comprehensive cultural policy, not merely a creative industry policy.

In addition, the emergence of generative Artificial Intelligence (AI) is posing a significant challenge to the sector. Workers in film, music, and other forms of creative work are facing substitution, replacement, and devaluation at the hands of AI. In addition, they are being increasingly cut out of whatever meagre compensation is offered where

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[1] Based on 2018-19 and 2021 figures, respectively. Pennington, A. & Eltham, B. (2021) *Creativity in Crisis: Rebooting Australia's Arts and Entertainment Sector After COVID*. The Australia Institute.

licencing schemes are put in place. Robust legislation to manage the risks of AI is therefore both much needed and long overdue.

The Crisis in Funding

For much of the last 20 years, funding for arts and culture in Australia has been in deficit. Between 2007-08 and 2021-22, expenditure on arts and culture across all levels of government – including federal, state, and local – fell on a per-capita basis.[2] While spending grew by 14% over this period, Australia's population increased by 22%, creating a significant deficit in per capita funding. In real dollar terms, this meant that arts and culture funding fell from $314 per person in 2007-08 to $295 in 2021-22.[3]

Over this period, Australia ranked 26th out of 33 OECD countries for government investment in 'recreation, culture and religion'.[4] While the average OECD country spent 1.2% of its GDP on this sector during this period, Australia spent only 0.9%.[5] This put Australia, based on these figures, significantly behind most other OECD countries for investment in this sector. Much of this shortfall can be attributed to issues on the federal level, particularly to a hostile Coalition Government.

This crisis in funding was precipitated by nearly four decades of unpredictable and inconsistent political commitment to arts and culture. Since 1996, Australia has had nine Arts Ministers, only one of whom remained in office for more than three years. Two national cultural policies created by the Australian Labor Party in 1994 and 2013, prior to their subsequent election losses — *Creative Nation* and *Creative Australia* — proved to be fleeting attempts to recognise the true value of cultural activity within Australia. These shifting political cycles have had a corrosive effect on cultural policy and investment, thwarting the development of any long-term vision for arts and culture in Australia.[6]

Since 2022, there has been a reinvestment in arts and cultural policy in Australia. The Federal Government, through Creative Australia, restored funding that former Minister for the Arts George Brandis removed from appropriations to the Australia Council during his term.[7] There has also been a significant restoration of funding to public

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[2] Vivian, A., Hui, A., Fielding, K., Acker, T., & Rossi, S. (2024) *The Big Picture 4: Expenditure on Artistic, Cultural and Creative activity by governments in Australia in 2007–08 to 2021–22*. A New Approach.
[3] *Ibid*
[4] *Ibid*
[5] *Ibid*
[6] Winikoff, T. (2020) 'Arguing Value: Attitudes and Activism', in *The Australian Art Field: Practices, Policies, Institutions*, New York: Routledge
[7] Creative Australia (2024) *One Year of Revive*, https://www.creative.gov.au/news-events/news/one-year-revive

broadcasters, who are an important facilitator of arts and cultural production.[8] Australia's major arts training and educational institutions have also received much-needed investment, with the federal government committing $115.2 million towards NIDA, AFTRS, and other institutions in the 2024 budget.[9]

However, these measures only go so far. Inflation has significantly eroded the real value of nominal funding increases to broadcasters, educational institutions, and the arts.[10] This means, for example, that funding for the ABC is now below 2013 funding levels in real terms.[11] In addition, the effects of historical underfunding continue to exert lingering effects on the sector.

Tax relief measures have a role to play in supporting the industry, including tax offset measures being proposed for the theatre and live music sectors. These stand to support the sector and reduce the risk burden of investment. However, such incentives are insufficient to resolve broad-based funding crisis in the sector. This is because these tax relief measures will likely benefit large, incumbent, commercial operators the most. This, in turn, stands to place them at a comparative advantage in the market – especially relative to the subsidised, small, independent, and not-for-profit sectors.

This means that the proposed tax offsets, though in many respects a positive step for the overall sector, fail to account for the need to recognise the value of non-commercial artistic and cultural production. Cultural activities are frequently beyond the scope of the market and need to be funded differently – often directly – to make such activities viable. It is crucial, therefore, that tax relief measures are paired with increased real funding for Australia's subsidised sector. Because these cultural activities are intrinsically valuable, they must be valued beyond what will be supported by the market.

The Performing Arts Partnership Agreement, for example, has seen the number of organisations included under the partnership increased by nearly 40% – from 28 in 2014 to 39 in 2023 – over which time there has not been a commensurate increase in real funding allocated to the partnership. As a result, many of Australia's major cultural institutions are now experiencing funding shortfalls, leading to cost-cutting, casualisation, and a culture of philanthropic dependency. As such, while MEAA in

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[8] These changes brought an additional $83.7 million to the ABC and moved the broadcaster from a three to five-year funding cycle to provide a greater degree of stability to operations. Seth-Purdie, R. (2022) *Only partial restoration of ABC funding and function*. The Australia Institute.
[9] Barlow, K. (2024) 'Exclusive: Budget to promise $115.2 million arts bailout', *The Saturday Paper*, https://www.thesaturdaypaper.com.au/news/economy/2024/05/11/exclusive-budget-promise-1152-million-arts-bailout
[10] Fraser, N. (2025) 'New Government Supports for the ABC', *Flagpost*. https://www.aph.gov.au/About_Parliament/Parliamentary_departments/Parliamentary_Library/Research/FlagPost/2025/February/New_government_supports_for_the_ABC
[11] *Ibid*

principle supports the government's decision to widen the partnership, it believes that such actions must be tied to a commensurate increase in funding.

Additional tax measures are being proposed to bring more philanthropic funding into the arts. While these changes would bring much-needed funding to the sector, they come with significant concerns about the corrosive influence of philanthropic dependency. We have already seen recent evidence of the influence of philanthropists over programming, with donors pulling out of multiple different arts organisations for social and political reasons. Importantly, philanthropic funding should not paper over the proper role of government in funding the sector, which, all things being equal, would be preferable to philanthropic funding.

Artistic and cultural expression will always be political, necessarily testing prevailing norms and values. There must be a positive recognition of the inherent value of this work and, as a consequence, it must be protected from undue influence. Philanthropic dependency is a threat to this principle as it leaves artistic organisations and individuals vulnerable to the withdrawal of funding based on social or political disagreement or offence.

The Crisis in Participation

At the same time as the sector has been experiencing long-term funding shortfalls, there has been a decline in participation in the arts. Major disruptions to demand and participation, driven by the cost-of-living crisis, have created a set of challenges that have reduced public participation in the arts and culture. Despite the overwhelming majority of Australians agreeing that arts and culture are vital, many feel that cultural activity is too expensive and inaccessible. Inflation has impacted not only the price of tickets, but driven up the costs of transportation, food, and equipment associated with attending arts and cultural events. These cumulative costs are halting audience participation.

In addition, audiences have continued to lag since the pandemic, with performing arts and live music companies reporting reduced audience numbers.[12] And while the same proportion of Australians are now attending festivals and other arts events per year than they did pre-pandemic, they are attending them less frequently. For example, the most recent National Art Participation Survey found that weekly attendance has dropped across all art forms.[13] There are also concerning signs about the declining rates of pre-

[12] Siebert, B. (2025) 'Music venues still recovering from the effects of COVID', *Central News*, https://centralnews.com.au/2025/06/27/music-venues-still-recovering-from-the-effects-of-the-covid/
[13] Creative Australia (2023) *Creating Value: Results of the National Arts Participation Survey*, https://creative.gov.au/sites/creative-australia/files/documents/2025-04/National-Arts-Participation-Survey-results-2022-1.pdf

purchased subscriptions and rising rates of last-minute tickets being purchased.[14] These audience behaviours in turn create financial instability for arts organisations, contributing to the crisis in funding.

In addition, today, fewer Australian children are learning music, singing, acting, painting and doing other forms of cultural and creative activity at school. This undermines the strong relationship between early arts education and subsequent participation in the arts. The Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA), for example, shows that arts enrolments in Australia have significantly declined at the senior level, from 22.6% of boys and 37.5% of girls in 2011, to 16.9% of boys and 29.1% of girls in 2021, respectively.[15] This trend is especially pronounced in low socio-economic communities, where participation is inhibited not only by cost, but by work constraints and poor access to transport and cultural infrastructure. In turn, where children and young people are not provided opportunities to engage in the arts, they are less likely to participate in cultural activity later in life.[16]

These barriers in cost, time and opportunity in turn contribute to entrenched perceptions of arts and culture as ‘inaccessible’, ‘elite’, and ‘not for me’. In an Australia Council Survey, the percentage of people who believed that ‘the arts tend to attract people who are somewhat elitist or pretentious’ increased from 30% to 43% in the three-year period from 2013 to 2016.[17] In turn, where cultural activities are perceived as overly commodified, profit-driven, or where access is reserved for the privileged few, average Australians are less likely to define and respect these activities as ‘arts and culture’, or as important elements of civil society. They are also less likely to respect marginal or minority cultural activities, which are crucial part of our multicultural society.

As such, governments should encourage arts education from a young age and ensure that there are ample opportunities to participate across all spheres of life – that there are enough art schools, dance teachers, music events and literary workshops – but also that there are adequate support systems to enable families and communities to participate in these activities and benefit from these services. Arts education outside of the education system is also a crucial way to stimulate future participation in arts and

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[14] For example, see Creative Victoria (2023) *Audience Outlook Monitor*, https://creative.vic.gov.au/resources/audience-outlook-monitor

[15] Thomson, P. (2025) ‘Why bother with arts education in schools?’ *The Australian Educational Researcher,* 52:781–801. https://doi.org/10.1007/s13384-024-00741-0

[16] Zakaras, L. & Lowell, J. (2024) *Cultivating Demand for the Arts*, The Wallace Foundation. https://wallacefoundation.org/sites/default/files/2024-08/arts-learning-and-arts-engagement.doi_.10.7249%252FMG640.pdf

[17] Australia Council (2017) *Connecting Australians: Results of the National Arts Participation Survey*, https://creative.gov.au/research/connecting-australians-results-national-arts-participation-survey-june-2017

culture, including through the use of vouchers through which recipients can receive discounted access to arts and music classes, institutions, and events.

In addition, the cost-of-living crisis and the pandemic have constructed a set of real and imagined barriers around participation in the arts and culture. These barriers not only relate to the cost of tickets, but to the additional costs of transport, food, equipment and supplies. It is critical that a comprehensive response to the participation crisis include an evaluation of policy instruments across a range of different departments, including transport, healthcare, education, training, care services, health, housing, utilities, and public infrastructure. These departments should work collaboratively to lower barriers to participation in the arts.

The crisis in work

A consequence of declining investment, waning support for cultural activity and low participation rates is the evisceration of stable work, good jobs and careers in the arts and cultural sectors. The majority of the cultural workforce is excluded from secure work, engaged as contractors and freelancers in jobs that are largely unregulated and inherently precarious. Within this work, there are often no minimum rates of pay, superannuation is almost non-existent, and late payment is common. Musicians, for example, work in an industry where 90% of work is not regulated by a minimum fee, up to a quarter of gigs are unpaid, and undercutting is rife.[18] Meanwhile, those in permanent jobs struggle to leverage the collective bargaining system in an era of declining public funding and commercial disruption.

Incomes across the industry remain consistently low. As one measure of the state of work in the arts and creative sector, *the Artists as Workers* report found that professional artists earn about $54,500 per year, including work from outside of the creative sector.[19] This income falls well below both the median income in Australia and the earnings of workers with comparable education and skill levels in other sectors of the economy.[20] In addition, the economic instability and precarious employment endemic to the industry leave workers vulnerable to bullying, harassment, and discrimination.

Tax reform to support workers in the arts is much needed, including efforts to remove taxes on prizes, grants and awards, the introduction of tax relief measures to claim

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[18] MEAA (2024) *Insecure work and poor pay forces musicians to hang up their instruments: new survey*, https://www.meaa.org/mediaroom/insecure-work-and-poor-pay-forces-musicians-to-hang-up-their-instruments-new-survey/

[19] Throsby, D. & Petetskaya, K. (2024) *Artists as Workers: An Economic Study of Professional Artists in Australia*, Creative Australia. https://creative.gov.au/research/artists-workers-economic-study-professional-artists-australia

[20] *Ibid*

more for expenses related to artistic production, and tax offsets for touring artists. However, more comprehensive action is needed to support arts workers. While individual tax relief measures are a welcome first step, the potential impact of these reforms is limited by entrenched low incomes across the sector. To make meaningful progress, the real wages of arts workers must be lifted – for example through industrial relations reform to include precarious arts workers within the Government's *Closing the Loopholes* legislation.

Importantly, government should ensure that tax offsets granted to the live music and theatre industry are tied to the expectation that recipient organisations will provide stable and fair employment for employees. The overwhelming view of MEAA members is that if government money is to be used to subsidise commercial operations in the theatre and live music industries, then it must be accompanied by a commitment to provide good, safe and sustainable jobs at MEAA standards.

The impact of AI

Millions of images, songs, articles, and films have been scraped without consent or compensation for the purposes of training AI. These include up to 18,000 books from the Books3 training dataset, as well as over five and a half billion images from the LAION-5B dataset.[21]

These automation products are being used to replace workers in the creative and media industries. Already, we are seeing AI rolled out in newsrooms to write headlines and create lead paragraphs. AI music generators are being used to produce synthetic music that is being distributed on platforms like Spotify, driving down the payments that originating artists receive. AI voice generators are being used to replace voice actors, with some actors reporting a 50% decline in income. Other AI applications like Adobe Firefly are being trained on datasets consisting of First Nations' work, which are then used to generate fake Indigenous art and merchandise, further undermining the market for genuine works. In all these sectors, workers are facing threats of redundancy and displacement by AI.

AI is also devaluing existing forms of work. In particular, the entry of cheap and readily accessible AI-generated art tools onto the market is devaluing human-led artistic production. Award-winning illustrator Dapo Adeola, for example, highlights that "[AI generated art] reinforces the argument that what [artists] do is easy and we shouldn't be

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[21] Kelly, C. (2022) 'Australian Artists accuse popular AI imaging app of stealing content, call for stricter copyright laws', *The Guardian*; Burke, K. (2023) 'Biggest act of copyright theft in history': thousands of Australian books allegedly used to train AI model', *The Guardian,* https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2023/sep/28/australian-books-training-ai-books3-stolen-pirated

able to earn the money we command".[22] The main risk posed by this development is not that it will necessarily create a mass class of unemployed workers (though these fears are not unfounded), but rather that it will flood the pool of workers competing for low-skill and low-wage work, further driving down wages and conditions of an already financially precarious sector of the economy.

To make matters worse, while some rightsholders have successfully negotiated compensation for this theft, they are leveraging their market power to cut creators out. For example, in 2024, publisher Taylor & Francis announced an AI licencing deal worth $10 million, of which they offered no additional payments to authors for the use of any works included under the agreement.[23] In the news publishing world, tens of publishers including News Corp and Australian Associated Press (AAP) have now announced deals to sell journalistic work to AI companies including OpenAI.[24] In return, journalists have received nothing.

In other words, the very workers being displaced by AI are being left out of existing payments for AI theft. These are also the workers who fundamentally create creative and intellectual works in Australia, without whom there will be a hollowing out of Australian culture. Although it is possible that unions may bargain on behalf of employees for some benefits from these licencing deals, other workers in non-traditional forms of employment lack these mechanisms. These include contract workers in the media, film, and music sectors. This is a crucial gap in policy and must be addressed to ensure workers benefit from any licencing schemes put in place.

There are several other gaps in the legislation. There is a critical lack of transparency regarding the use of materials for the purposes of training AI. Many creatives and journalists do not know the extent to which their work has been scraped because there are no current laws in place to require the public disclosure of such information. While well-resourced rightsholders may be able to afford the costs of auditing AI outputs to infer whether their copyrighted content has been used in training, this process is extremely onerous for smaller or independent rightsholders. This is an inequitable system, and places less well-resourced actors at risk of unaccountable copyright theft.

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[22] Shaffi, S. (2024) "It's the opposite of art': why illustrators are furious about AI', The Guardian, https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2023/jan/23/its-the-opposite-of-art-why-illustrators-are-furious-about-ai

[23] Moody, G. (2024) Juicy licensing deals with AI companies show that publishers don't really care about creators, *Walled Culture*, https://walledculture.org/juicy-licensing-deals-with-ai-companies-show-that-publishers-dont-really-care-about-creators/

[24] Buckingham-Jones, S. (2025) 'Google inks first commercial AI news deal in Australia', *Australian Financial Review*, https://www.afr.com/companies/media-and-marketing/google-gemini-aap-ai-deal-australian-first-20250819-p5mnzw; Thomson, T.J., Meese, J. (2024) 'What OpenAI's deal with News Corp means for journalism (and for you)', *The Conversation*, https://theconversation.com/what-openais-deal-with-news-corp-means-for-journalism-and-for-you-230773

It is necessary, therefore, that all AI companies publicly disclose all materials used in the process of training AI.

The production of digital replicas using AI is also a critical issue. Digital replicas are synthetic performers that have the same appearance, voice, and likeness as existing performers. For example, MEAA member Cooper Mortlock has alleged that his voice was stolen and replicated by AI to produce several episodes of a YouTube series after he was let go from the project.[25] This case is illustrative of the ways that AI can be used to replace the work of actors, undercutting their incomes. It is crucial that any use of a performer's biometric data to construct digital replicas of their voice or likeness is protected from unlicenced exploitation via a system of non-transferrable moral rights.

The copying of artistic style is particularly concerning in the case of First Nations creatives. There are now numerous reports of AI-generated 'Indigenous art' being commodified and sold online.[26] Merchandise, graphic designs, and other products are now flooding the market, appearing for sale on a range of different websites, including Adobe, Etsy and eBay. These are adding to the competition Indigenous artists already face from the fake 'Indigenous art' market. First Nations' traditional cultural modes of production and performance must be protected from AI-facilitated imitation through a system of Indigenous Cultural and Intellectual Property (ICIP), and these protocols must be incorporated into existing legislation to ensure proper enforcement.

The negative impacts of AI emphasise the urgent need for government to introduce economy-wide AI regulation. MEAA has consistently argued for the need to introduce a range of reforms to mediate the negative impacts of AI on the workforce, as well as on society more broadly. These include the introduction of an AI Act and AI regulator, the introduction of a system of moral rights to protect performers from unauthorised digital replicas, the enforcement of compensation and consent for the use of content used to train AI, the establishment of an enforceable system of Indigenous Cultural and Intellectual Property (ICIP), and reform to privacy law to protect personal data from being used for the purposes training without genuine and informed consent.[27]

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[25] Scott, E. (2024) 'Cooper heard his voice on a show. But he never recorded the script', *SBS,* https://www.sbs.com.au/news/article/cooper-heard-his-voice-on-a-show-but-he-never-recorded-the-script/1fxhgs18k
[26] Wilson, C. (2024) 'AI is producing 'fake' Indigenous art trained on real artists' work without permission' Crikey https://www.crikey.com.au/2024/01/19/artificial-intelligence-fake-indigenous-art-stock-images
[27] See MEAA (2024) *Submission to the Select Committee on Adopting Artificial Intelligence,* https://www.meaa.org/mediaroom/meaa-submission-to-the-select-committee-on-adopting-artificial-intelligence/; MEAA (2024) *Submission to the House of Representatives Inquiry into the Digital Transformation of Workplaces*, https://www.meaa.org/mediaroom/submission-to-house-of-reps-inquiry-into-digital-transformation-of-workplaces/

Concluding remarks

The lack of leadership observed in the arts over the last 50 years has resulted in a crisis of austerity, participation, and insecurity. As a result, arts and culture have come to be viewed as remote from everyday life – as something to be sought out, paid for, accessed and utilised. A comprehensive cultural policy must address all aspects of this problem, including by restoring funding, encouraging participation in the arts, and addressing the systemic causes of poor wages and conditions – as well as their exploitation, replacement, and displacement by AI.