



24th May 2026

Submission to:

Office for the Arts

Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development, Communications, Sports and the Arts

Australian Government

The Australian SHAPE Futures EMCR Network

Submission to the National Cultural Policy

The Australian SHAPE Futures EMCR Network welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the development of the nation's next cultural policy.

As Australia's first network supporting Early and Mid-Career Researchers (EMCRs) working across the social sciences, humanities and creative arts within and beyond academia, SHAPE Futures is committed to fostering an inclusive and diverse community that supports, empowers and promotes emerging researchers and cultural practitioners across Australia. Our network advocates for the significance of SHAPE disciplines (Social Sciences, Humanities and Arts for People and Environment) and works to ensure these fields are recognised for their national importance and contribution to Australian society.

In terms of the new policy priorities, our concerns largely lie in relation to Pillar 3 – Centrality of the Artist and this submission focuses mostly on what should be done in this space.

SHAPE Futures advocates on behalf of cultural workers, early-career practitioners and emerging artists whose labour sustains Australia's cultural, intellectual and social life. A strong national cultural policy must recognise creative and cultural labour as legitimate, valuable and socially necessary work that deserves long-term investment, protection and the creation of sustainable career pathways for current and future generations.

Across Australia, artists and cultural workers continue to face significant wage precarity, insecure employment conditions and limited long-term opportunities. SHAPE Futures has consistently highlighted the challenges of casualisation, career insecurity and inequitable access across the broader humanities, arts and social sciences sectors. The future National Cultural Policy must establish equitable material conditions that enable artists and cultural workers to thrive while dismantling the structural barriers that leave many workers in precarious positions. This includes fair remuneration, stable funding pathways, accessible infrastructure, healthy work-life balance, mentorship opportunities and sustainable career development.



Creative and cultural work is not secondary to the economy or public life. It is central to how communities preserve memory, share knowledge, foster belonging and imagine collective futures. Artists and cultural workers sustain storytelling traditions, cultural integrity and community connection across generations. The National Cultural Policy must continue to position the arts as core to Australia's social wellbeing, cultural identity and our democratic future.

SHAPE Futures also emphasises the urgent need for ethical and culturally safe approaches to technological innovation, particularly in relation to Artificial Intelligence (AI). Technology, including AI, must not compromise First Nation knowledges, cultural practices, artistic ownership or community agency. Any integration of AI within Australia's cultural industries must prioritise informed consent, Indigenous data sovereignty, cultural intellectual property protections and transparent governance frameworks. Technology is being increasingly used to extract, imitate or commodify artists work without acknowledgment and this must be stopped.

We further encourage the National Cultural Policy to support more interdisciplinary and cross-sector pathways for artists and cultural workers. SHAPE Futures strongly supports building connections across academia, industry, government and community sectors. There is significant potential for creative practitioners to contribute meaningfully to education, health and medicine, community development, public policy and more. Artists bring critical thinking, storytelling, innovation and relational approaches that strengthen public engagement and social outcomes across sectors, and their work needs to be valued and prioritised. Within this prioritisation we must not forget to support emerging (early and mid career) practitioners who often face the greatest hurdles. The National Cultural Policy must invest in future generations of cultural workers by creating clearer pathways for emerging practitioners to build sustainable and visible careers.

Overall, Australia's creative future depends on recognising artists and cultural workers as essential workers whose labour sustains our community life and shapes our collective imagination.

Thank you for considering our submission.

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