

**Submission regarding the National Cultural Policy Discussion Paper
Centre for Cultural Research, University of Western Sydney**

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Do you agree to your submission being made publicly available on the www.culture.arts.gov.au website?* **Yes**

In this submission we have elected not to use the suggested template, preferring to concentrate on thematic issues of definition, scope and the social. The Centre for Cultural Research consents to the submission being made publicly available on the www.culture.arts.gov.au website.

Preface

Australia has a history of adopting a rather piecemeal approach to cultural policy, with responsibility for such a policy tending to be fractured across levels of government and quasi-independent funding bodies. There is also a general lack of clarity around what is - or should be - the object of a cultural policy, let alone one that carries the weight of the national. This proposed national cultural policy is an opportunity to move beyond such an approach and develop a cohesive and far-sighted policy. The first step is to establish the context for the development of the policy by assessing the results and outcomes of previous cultural policies, and to share them in a very succinct way with the citizenry.

Within this context, the Centre for Cultural Research, University of Western Sydney sees three key challenges that need to be addressed in a framing a new national cultural policy. The first is **definitional**, the second is a question of **scope**, and the third relates to what might broadly be regarded as **the social dimension**.

The Definitional Challenge

The question of definition is a perennial one in discussions of cultural policy. Nevertheless, addressing the ‘what is culture?’ question remains the key challenge in formulating a national cultural policy. In short, what should be in and what should be out, and why?

It is now widely accepted, at least at the level of rhetoric, that cultural policy should be much more than an arts policy. The starting point here is accepting the proposition that culture constitutes processes and meanings as well as products, and the everyday

as well as the exceptional. By extension, cultural policy should directly and indirectly engage with a wide range of concerns and the gamut of cultural practices and forms, from the established arts to popular culture, from formal institutions to everyday processes. The problem with this inclusivist approach is that its understanding of culture is completely unwieldy and can justify casting the cultural policy net so wide that everything and everyone conceivably can (or should) be claimed to be the object/subject of cultural policy. Alternatively, it can create a discursive context wherein a fairly traditional arts policy is couched – that is, ‘dressed up’ - in the language of the cultural without registering the significance of moving from a focus on the restricted domain of art to the wider one of culture.

Here is the nub of the definitional challenge. Because of definitional breadth and imprecision there is often a chasm between the way in which cultural policy is positioned (that is, as concerned with a gamut of social, economic, creative, and urban issues), and the spheres in which it actually operates. History overwhelmingly tells us that cultural policy is ‘operationalised’ in the spheres of the arts, heritage and to some extent the cultural or creative industries – as is the case with the draft policy’s description of what it will encompass (p. 6). The draft policy document recognizes that new practices and needs have emerged, but does not give any clear indication that there will be any analysis of how they are shared, or expressed differently by different segments of the country's diverse population. How, for example, is new technology usage being taken up by young people in the different categories of the population and/or impacting on the latter? And what might be the ways in which a national cultural policy link with other related policies such as the draft policy on design?

These discursive and operational pressures are very much at the heart of cultural policy development and implementation, setting up some fundamental tensions between the goal of continuing to support traditional arts activities and organisations at the same time as moving away from a privileging of these forms of art.

So, there is a very real need to confront the definitional issue head on and to formulate a consistent and workable definition of culture and to establish the viable parameters of the new national cultural policy. We do not attempt to offer that ‘conclusive’ definition here – the process of formulating a national cultural policy is necessarily dialogic and iterative. Nor is it our intention to argue against the notion that culture is all encompassing, but it is important that it be defined in such a way as to prevent a cultural policy from being a conventional arts policy by default. It is evident that everything cannot and should not be the object of cultural policy, and that it will only be by adopting a cohesive and rigorous understanding of culture as *something* rather than as *everything* that cultural policy will provide an effective and relevant framework for creative endeavour. At the same time, prioritising core arts in aesthetic terms, creative industries for commercial purposes, and cultural heritage (especially indigenous) as living systems is overly constraining. For example, it enshrines the dominance of some aesthetic practices and conceives others in predominantly economic terms, while its emphasis on heritage underplays the forward-looking cultural complexity of contemporary Australian culture – not least that of its indigenous peoples. These questions of what constitutes culture for the purposes of a national policy remain to be worked through as it takes shape, but we offer one, specific definitional rule: that the formulation ‘arts and culture’ that appears consistently in the discussion document be discarded. There can be no ‘arts and

culture' in a cultural policy if it is not to separate artificially its constituent elements. There can only be 'culture' as the governing concept in meeting the significant definitional challenge of a national cultural policy.

The Challenge of Scope

Scope is interpreted here as encompassing the geographical, governmental and 'aspirational'. The question of scope is a vexed one particularly in a federation such as Australia, where the bulk of 'Arts' funding is provided by state governments and the vast responsibilities for cultural activity of local governments invariably go unheralded, and will almost certainly fall through the cracks of the national cultural policy. There is also the key issue of the place of the regions in any national cultural policy.

So what in this context is the scope of a national cultural policy? The simple answer, of course, is that it is a policy focused on the 'national' 'culture'. A national cultural policy should in some fundamental way be a statement about the nation, its identity, values and beliefs. The challenge lies in deciding what this actually means without resorting to artificial constructions of nation, and what the process should be for determining it. For instance, the Keating government's 1994 cultural policy *Creative Nation* included in its preamble a 'Charter of Cultural Rights', which was a very important part of the policy as something of a statement of national values. It was here that such principles as the rights of individuals and communities to education, creativity, participation, and the 'intellectual and cultural heritage' of the nation were affirmed in a concrete manner.

This charter, which was written by a 'panel of eminent Australians', is an important commencing point, but it never made clear how this statement of principles actually connects with, and informs, the policy document. *Creative Nation* itself oozed a republican and national heritage agenda and, indeed, even the use of the word 'nation' in the title was significant in this regard. But *Creative Nation* was also focused on 'excellence', which it linked quite explicitly to a nationalistic agenda. It was underpinned by the competing (and unresolved) assumptions that, first, governments should support the 'excellent art' and, second, that cultural policy is also in significant ways also an economic policy.

In the 2011 *National Cultural Policy Discussion Paper* there is little sense of a distinctive set of spatial contexts for new policy settings. These could be presented in a number of ways, for example: policy priorities linked to Australia's changing place in the global economy and geo-political environment; the spatial issues that concern the relations between different sections of cities; rural/city issues; the changing regional balance of Australia's economy given the mining boom. There is no reference to an effort of devolution/decentralization (the statistics provided on pp. 8-9, reveal that funding priorities are directed towards federal 'flagships'), and little by way of indication that the federal government will encourage state governments to do certain things. These absences in the document need to be redressed by a clear articulation of the relationships between spatiality and policy.

With specific regard to the provisions of the 2005 *UNESCO Convention on the Protection & Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions*, the discussion paper refers neither to how the cultures of other nations will be shared with Australians nor to how the mobility of Australian artists and cultural operators will be promoted as a policy priority. More importantly, there is little concern with building connections between an arts policy and other domains of policy - the transversal dimension - that the Convention also enjoins upon signatory states. With the possible exception of Canada, no country's cultural policies are about culture in the broad 'systems of meaning' sense, but retain a traditional approach to arts policies. Yet many national policies indicate the need to link policy domains. For example, this discussion paper (p.4) states that 'the arts and creative industries are fundamental to Australia's identity as a society and nation', and then immediately goes on to emphasise their importance to 'our success as a national economy'. It currently lacks a plausible articulation of the 'identity' and 'economic' policy domains in an inter/transnational context.

With regard to the international dimensions of the discussion paper, there is little beyond the measures of financial support, regulation, standard-setting and support for international conventions, with little subsequent elaboration or substantiation. The potential use of cultural policy for the purposes of cultural diplomacy and cultural relations should be explored in this regard. The four-year joint action plan on cultural diversity, cultural heritage and the development of a sustainable cultural and creative economy recently signed by the European Union and Brazil might be a useful pointer in determining the spatial and substantive scope of an Australian national cultural policy.

In summary, the challenge of scope is twofold: first, to determine what the nation means in the context of a national cultural policy, and which national values should be espoused and underpin the policy; and, second, to address the linkages between the national cultural policy and the cultural agendas of the other levels of governance and international domains.

The Challenge of the Social

The question of the social dimension is a major final challenge in formulating the national cultural policy. Traditionally, in arts policies the social is addressed in quite paternalistic ways that are underpinned by the idea of deficit or lack – for example, providing access to excellence or taking art 'to the people'. With the shift to the cultural the place of the social also changes. The challenge, then, is to think rigorously about what the social means and where realistically it fits within cultural policy. Or, to put it another way, what is or should be the social good or outcomes of the cultural policy? The idea of engaged cultural policy is important to explore in this context.

The other notion that is obviously relevant, given the government's broader policy agenda, is social inclusion. Although the current government's approach to social inclusion is not the all-embracing one of the (former) UK Blair Labour government which influenced it, it is, nevertheless, reasonable to assess how cultural policy will contribute to the government's social inclusion agenda. Social inclusion is positioned by the current Australian government as being concerned with participation and

connection. Therefore, it is important to ask how this agenda might be furthered through cultural policy. Education – espoused by the current government as the subject of a necessary ‘revolution’ - stands out as potentially being important here, and not simply as an improvement in arts education. Here enhancements to cultural pedagogy and literacy as vital concomitants of cultural citizenship should be foregrounded in the national cultural policy.

The arts/cultural policy connection to social problems in the discussion paper also has a mostly traditional flavour: there is little of an indication of possible arts/cultural policy links to, for example, environmental issues. There is little sense of engagement with the changing demographic profile of Australia in terms of age, and the difference that this is likely to make for patterns of demand for the traditional elite arts which attract the lion’s share of federal and other funding.

Therefore, the challenge of the social dimension is inadequately addressed in the national cultural policy discussion paper. In analysing in a disciplined way the limits and possibilities of intervention in, and articulation with, the social, a much more cogent cultural policy framework can be established.

Conclusion

The key starting point for framing a national cultural policy for Australia is the foundational examination of underpinning definitional assumptions in order to achieve some clarity of focus, followed by a questioning of what cultural policy can do (and do well) and for whose benefit. It may be that it is unreasonable to expect cultural policy to reconcile the gamut of contradictions and inconsistencies inherent in the concepts of art and culture, and it would be misguided to believe that cultural policy can, equally and effectively, comprehensively address social, economic, and creative concerns. However, as is suggested in our submission, placing some realistic, coherent definitional and strategic limits on culture and its uses is critical to advancing a positive, effective national cultural policy agenda.

The current Minister for the Arts, Simon Crean, has talked of the potential ‘to join the dots between the policy streams’, and a renewed national cultural policy is a most appropriate place to begin this process and foster its beneficial outcomes. Nonetheless, we shouldn’t underestimate the size of the challenge first in determining what the dots are and then deciding how they can effectively be ‘joined’. We think that this is the next critical step in advancing the policy agenda outlined in the National Cultural Policy Discussion Paper.

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On behalf of the Centre for Cultural Research
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