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Creativity as productivity infrastructure.

Submission to the National Cultural Policy consultation

14 May 2026

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Gledhill Shield makes this submission as part of the public consultation on Australia's next National Cultural Policy.

Australia should treat creativity as productivity infrastructure.

By “productivity infrastructure” we mean the upstream capabilities that improve how value is created: how problems are framed, how systems are designed, how technology is applied in context, and how people and institutions collaborate and make decisions.

Culture has intrinsic value. Artistic expression, cultural memory and creative practice matter in their own right. *Revive* established the current national cultural policy framework and recognises artists as both workers and creators. The next National Cultural Policy should expand the frame by treating creativity as a national capability that strengthens education, innovation, public decision-making and civic life.

Gledhill Shield is a design-led strategy consultancy working at the intersection of place, infrastructure, governance and institutional positioning. Our perspective is informed by work across art, architecture, cultural and innovation precinct strategy, and major public infrastructure, including the Metro Tunnel Creative Strategy.

Australia has deep creative capability. The opportunity is to expand where that capability is recognised, expected and enabled. Creativity is central to cultural expression, but it is also a capability for invention, interpretation, design, judgement, cultural understanding and public problem-solving. The next National Cultural Policy can help enable that capability across more of the systems where national value is created. This is consistent with *Revive's* own logic. As the policy states, “while the Arts portfolio drives cultural policy, it doesn't own it.”¹ At its best, cultural policy reaches across government and shapes how Australia invests in people, places, institutions, technology and national identity.

The challenge

Australia's productivity challenge gives cultural policy immediate national relevance. The Productivity Commission's latest Annual Productivity Bulletin reports that Australia's market sector multifactor productivity declined by 0.5 per cent in 2024–25, falling below the 20-year average. The underlying ABS data also shows market sector labour productivity decreased by 0.2 per cent over the same period.²

In an AI-shaped economy, technology will create more value when it is combined with human judgement, imagination, design intelligence, storytelling, ethical reasoning and cultural understanding. Australia often separates STEM from creative education, but that separation is becoming a strategic vulnerability. The next productivity frontier will be shaped by the ability to frame problems, design systems, interpret meaning, work across disciplines and apply technology in context.

¹ Australian Government, *Revive: a place for every story, a story for every place: Australia's cultural policy for the next five years*, Office for the Arts, Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development, Communications and the Arts, published 9 February 2023.

² Productivity Commission, *Annual Productivity Bulletin 2026*, Australian Government, released 19 February 2026. See also Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Estimates of Industry Multifactor Productivity, 2024–25 financial year*, released 6 February 2026.

Creative education should therefore be positioned as multidisciplinary capability building. Young people and working adults need opportunities to work fluently across design, technology, policy, enterprise, science and community contexts, developing the capacity to translate between disciplines, test ideas, make meaning and collaborate across difference. These capabilities matter to artists and creative workers. They also matter to engineers, policy makers, entrepreneurs, public servants, researchers and institutional leaders.

The opportunity

The consultation paper recognises that cultural and creative activity contributed \$67.4 billion to Australia's economy in 2023–24, employed more than 591,000 people, and fosters creativity, design thinking and problem-solving capabilities. It also identifies arts education, creative skills, lifelong learning and recognition of creators across the broader economy as live policy questions.³ The next policy can build on this foundation by giving creativity a larger role in Australia's future capability base.

Australia needs a cross-portfolio creative capability agenda linking arts, education, industry, digital capability, infrastructure and public sector reform. The National Cultural Policy is the right place to establish that mandate, but delivery will depend on formal mechanisms beyond the cultural portfolio. This agenda should be grounded in First Nations cultural authority, recognising that First Nations knowledge, language, story and connection to Country are foundational cultural strengths.

Several of the world's leading innovation economies treat creativity as part of their productivity ecosystem. They embed design, cultural capability, creative industries and human-centred innovation across education, enterprise, technology and public policy.⁴ Creative Denmark reports that 54 per cent of Danish companies use design systematically in their business models. Denmark ranks ninth in the Global Innovation Index 2025, while Australia ranks 22nd.⁵ The lesson for Australia is that creative capability compounds when it is deliberately embedded across education, enterprise, government and public purpose.

Recommendations

The next National Cultural Policy should:

1. Establish a cross-portfolio mechanism for creative capability

Establish a formal Commonwealth mechanism linking arts, education, industry, digital, infrastructure and public sector reform. It should be led by the Office for the Arts with relevant central and delivery agencies, supported by a published work program, clear accountability and regular reporting. Its purpose should be to embed creativity across policy, investment, service delivery and institutional reform.

2. Position creative education as core multidisciplinary capability

Position creative education as core capability development for an AI-shaped economy. Work with states, territories, tertiary institutions and training providers to embed it in curriculum, assessment and tertiary/TAFE pathways. The result should be stronger workforce capability in problem framing, judgement, collaboration, design thinking and cultural understanding.

³ Australian Government, *Towards a new National Cultural Policy: Public Consultation Paper*, Office for the Arts, Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development, Communications, Sport and the Arts, 2026.

⁴ OECD, *The Culture Fix: Creative People, Places and Industries*, OECD Publishing, 2022.

⁵ Creative Denmark, "Design-driven innovation," Creative Denmark, accessed 9 May 2026; World Intellectual Property Organization, *Global Innovation Index 2025*, WIPO, 2025.

3. Embed creative capability and cultural infrastructure in the innovation system

Embed creative capability and cultural infrastructure in Australia's innovation system. Reflect this in innovation, business support, digital transformation, procurement and mission-based programs through guidelines, eligibility settings and assessment criteria. The result should be a stronger innovation system that better values design, experimentation, communication and public engagement.

4. Require creative and design capability in major public decisions

Require creative and design capability in major public decisions. Update Commonwealth assurance, business case and procurement guidance so major policy, infrastructure, digital and investment decisions include design, creative practice and cultural intelligence from the outset. The result should be better-framed decisions and reduced risk of poorly scoped investments.

5. Require creative scope, budget and governance in Commonwealth-funded public investment

Require creative scope, budget and governance wherever Commonwealth funding supports major community-facing spatial, digital or infrastructure projects. This should include early scoping, dedicated budgets, local creative participation, appropriate Traditional Owner cultural authority, and clear legacy objectives. The result should be stronger cultural and community value from public investment.

The next evolution of our National Cultural Policy

Revive built the foundations. The next National Cultural Policy can now give creativity a larger role in Australia's long term productivity, innovation and social cohesion agenda.

Australia has the creative capability. The task ahead is to enable creativity more strategically through the systems that shape future value: education, enterprise, public decision-making, infrastructure, digital systems and civic life.