



Office for Youth: Federal Youth Engagement Strategy

Submission by TNA

Executive Summary

Arts and cultural programs and practices utilise best practice methodologies for deep and genuine engagement of diverse young people, while also offering effective solutions to some of the top issues facing young people today. The Australian Youth Arts and Theatre for Young Audiences (YA/TYA) sector is ideally placed to help young people develop their voices, provide a safe platform for those voices, and can work with both young people and government to connect the two. The sector is open to collaborations that make use of the services it provides to young people that address issues of mental and physical wellbeing, skills for the future, social connection, sense of belonging, and voice and agency.

TNA recommends the following proposed outcomes for inclusion in the Federal Youth Engagement Strategy:

1. A Federal youth engagement strategy should champion arts engagement as a solution to challenges faced by young people and government.
2. The Federal Government should invest in arts and cultural engagement for Australian children and young people through:
 - a. a new youth arts engagement fund to provide equity for young people in the Australian arts and cultural landscape.
 - b. a national youth development program that connects young people to businesses, community, governments, and jobs and employment pathways through arts engagement.
 - c. A national program to help schools increase young people's participation in the arts and connect them with community arts opportunities.
3. Enhance the Youth Engagement Model by utilising artistic and creative engagement practices.
4. Create an Arts and Culture Advisory Group to complement the five existing advisory groups.
5. Facilitate stronger implementation and accountability of the Australian Curriculum by requiring states to publish compliance reports.

Background and Context

[TNA](#) is the leading national industry development organisation for the contemporary performing arts, with a particular focus and priority on supporting independent creative practitioners and small to medium companies. TNA is also the Australian centre for [ASSITEJ International](#), the International Association of Theatre for Children and Young People, and



provides specific advocacy, services, and support for the youth arts and theatre for young audiences (YA/TYA) sector.

In Australia, we have a large and rich sector of organisations and creatives that create artistic work and opportunities specifically with, for, and by children and young people across genres of theatre, dance, circus, music, and hybrid/multi arts. These organisations are non-profits, and most receive some investment from federal, state, and/or local government funding bodies to provide essential community services. As well as providing arts experiences for and with young people, YA/TYA organisations support and nurture children and young people holistically, providing spaces for skills development, increased physical and mental wellbeing, and social connection, through creative practice and art making.

TNA has compiled [a database and map of many YA/TYA organisations in Australia](#).

TNA has convened a number of representatives from the YA/TYA sector to contribute to this consultation submission, convened by TNA General Manager, Joshua Lowe:

Fraser Corfield (Australian Theatre for Young People, NSW), Kate Duncan (The Push, VIC), Lesley Graham (Dance Educator, National Advocates for Arts Education, TAS), Ché Skeen (Digi Youth Arts, QLD), Sue Giles AM (President of ASSITEJ International, VIC), Kevin du Preez (Monkey Baa Theatre, NSW), Belinda Kelly (Terrapin, TAS), Romi Kupfer (Independent, VIC), Fleur Kilpatrick (Riverland Youth Theatre, SA), Zoe Scogings (Corrugated Iron Youth Arts, NT), Joshua Maxwell (Jopuka Productions, NSW), John Marc Desengano (Western Edge, VIC), and Fiona MacDonald (Imaginary Theatre, QLD).

Research and Evidence

In order to place the YA/TYA sector within the national context as impactful and essential contributors to youth engagement, the following research and summary of evidence was undertaken by [The Power of Youth Arts](#), a report by Patternmakers and ATYP.

Youth arts provides a platform for young people to explore important ideas and boosts civic engagement.

- A [12-year longitudinal study](#) of 12,000 American students found that young people who participated in arts were more likely to be involved in political participation and volunteering.
- Young people from socio- economically disadvantaged backgrounds who participate in youth arts were also more likely to participate in student government, volunteer, and vote in local and national elections - according to [a correlational analysis](#) of four national longitudinal datasets in the US.

Arts participation provides socio-emotional benefits for young people that can act as protective factors against mental illness.

- [Systematic reviews](#) of the literature show that arts participation builds resilience and contributes to confidence, self-esteem, self-expression, happiness, mindfulness, improved coping mechanisms, and higher life satisfaction.
- Around half of serious mental health issues in adulthood begin [before the age of 14](#), and the socio-emotional benefits of arts participation are known [protective factors](#) against mental illnesses like anxiety and depression.
- A study by [Cirkidz and Uni SA](#) of 54 young people found that participating in circus improved stress levels, self-esteem, confidence, and socialisation – and calculated that for every \$1 invested in youth performing arts, \$7 could be generated in social return.

Arts participation is associated with better educational outcomes for students, including stronger academic performance.

- An [Australian longitudinal study of over 600 students](#) showed that arts engagement significantly predicted class participation, educational resilience (the ability to deal with academic setbacks and adversity), and educational aspirations (e.g., intention to finish school).
- An evaluation of the [Creative Arts Indigenous Parental Engagement](#) program, involving 155 Indigenous students, found that the program ‘closed the gap’ between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students’ NAPLAN scores by more than 20% in reading and 17% in writing.
- Since the 90s, there’s been a [strong international evidence base](#) to suggest that arts participation is associated with higher academic performance – including literacy, numeracy, and higher-order problem-solving skills.

The Top Issues

Australian children and young people have numerous challenges to overcome in their lives, many of which have been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic:

- Maintaining/improving their **mental and physical wellbeing**; this is the [third most important issue identified by young people](#).
- Learning **skills for the future**, including critical thinking, creative problem solving, resilience, and leadership; [41.8% of students](#) said there are barriers to achieving study or work goals.
- Finding opportunities for **social connection**, to be a part of a community, and to feel a **sense of belonging**; [23.5% of young people](#) reported feeling lonely all or most of the time.
- Having a platform for their **voice to be heard** and **agency** over their own lives.



Children and young people need the Federal Government to acknowledge, support and engage with a breadth of essential services they use that overcome these issues, ensuring they are supported in the spaces they feel a sense of belonging and safety. These spaces include school, sporting clubs, online communities, youth hubs, and arts and cultural programs.

Thousands of children and young people engage every day in creative arts and cultural programs and activities, many through Youth Arts and Theatre for Young Audiences (YA/TYA) organisations. For many, arts and cultural spaces are the ones that align closest with their identity, and provide the resources, networks, and support to fulfil their needs.

Currently there are several **key challenges** that create barriers to children and young people accessing these services:

- Arts and cultural organisations are constantly working while overcapacity and under resourced, meaning they cannot provide the number and breadth of services children and young people need.
- Equitable access to children and young people from low socio-economic, regional/remote, and culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds is expensive and logistically difficult.
- Awareness and understanding within government of the role and benefits of arts and cultural activities and organisations for children and young people is low, leading to missed opportunities for mutual benefit and cost savings.
- A complex system of government including numerous Federal, state and territory departments, and a diverse ecology of arts and cultural organisations, makes communication and collaboration difficult.

Engaging Young People

1. Help young people develop their voice

The first step to engaging with government successfully and meaningfully is providing young people with opportunities and spaces that:

- Encourage them to identify, articulate, and critically examine their values and points of view.
- Develop the confidence to stand up for these values.
- Teach them the creative and critical thinking skills to envisage and design solutions to problems they see around them.

If government is genuinely interested in hearing from young people, then there must be investment in helping them develop their voice, so that they can provide clear and considered input that will provide value and positive outcomes for both parties. The absence of this is the very thing that leads to poor engagement, miscommunication, and distrust, and creates barriers of inequity for young people that have not had these opportunities, who also want to



be heard. This is particularly salient for historically marginalised young people, such as those from First Nations communities.

As clearly demonstrated at the in-person Office for Youth consultation of young dancers in Canberra in July, arts programs that engage young people excel at this. The basis of youth arts practice is co-creation with young people, which centres their contributions within a rigorous process involving conversation, inquiry, problem solving, and communication.

2. Support platforms for young voices to be heard

The way that young people express themselves today is multi-modal, and includes innovative and creative new forms using technology, large social networks, and artmaking. Young people are finding their own ways to communicate and make themselves heard, which exist outside traditional forms and encompass a range of non-traditional literacies (musical, kinaesthetic, etc.). Examples include creating social media content, play (for younger children), and many forms of art such as musical, theatrical, and dance performances.

Support and investment in such platforms will amplify young voices, build trust between young people and government, and provide easily accessible avenues for discourse between young people and government.

3. Go to where young people are and listen

The most effective way for government to engage young people is to use methods and attend the spaces where young people are already using their voice (mentioned above), rather than expecting young people to use additional, outdated channels provided by government.

Youth arts organisations are led by professionals that specialise in engaging young people to create artistic work that shares the young peoples' views with public audiences. Not only is there an opportunity for government to interact with and listen to the voices of young people that are already being presented, but it should collaborate with arts organisations (that have existing specialists and communities of young people) on specific outcomes. These organisations are also able to work with the younger members of society who are often excluded and considered 'too hard' to include in engagements where young people's opinions are sought.

Best Practice Models

Arts Council England

[Arts Council England](#), as the national development agency for the arts in England, has been committed to ensuring the active participation of young people in policy-making processes. Recognising the valuable insights and perspectives that young people bring, the organisation



has developed various strategies and programs to engage them effectively, which the Australian Office for Youth could learn from.

The organisation emphasises co-creating policies with young people rather than simply consulting them. It engages young people in collaborative workshops, discussions, and forums to ensure their ideas are integrated into policy development. Arts Council England have created programs that aim to develop young leaders in the arts, offering mentoring, training, and networking opportunities, empowering young people to influence cultural policies that directly impact their age group.

FReeZA

Established by the Victorian Government in 1997, [FReeZA](#) is a youth development program that currently provides 84 teams of local young people aged 12-25 across Victoria with opportunities to access and stage live music events and other cultural, recreational and artistic events that are drug, alcohol and smoke-free in supervised and safe venues.

Through grants provided by the Victorian Government, community organisations or Local Government youth service providers support a team of young people to lead the staging of events, whilst also broadening networks within the community by connecting with local businesses, schools, and other organisations. Being a part of a FReeZA team also builds self-confidence, creates and develops professional relationships, and provides opportunities to explore various education and employment pathways in the music industry.

Sporting Schools

[Sporting Schools](#) is an Australian Government initiative designed to help schools increase children's participation in sport and connect them with community sport opportunities. Sporting Schools programs are provided free to children and their families to help students build the confidence and capability to be active for life. To help achieve this, Sport Australia has partnered with more than 35 national sporting organisations (NSOs).

Grants of between \$1,000 and \$3,600 are available per primary school for each term, and schools use these funds to engage the NSOs to deliver sports activities for students. This ensures students have access to free, high-quality sport programs at school, establishes partnerships between sporting organisations and schools to promote involvement in sport outside of school, and builds capabilities in both schoolteachers and coaches in the sport workforce.

Sporting Schools is an excellent youth engagement model because it provides accessible services for young people in spaces they already attend, connects schools and young people with community organisations, gives agency to schools and local communities, and is a cost- and resource-effective, devolved method of government spending.

Proposed Outcomes/Recommendations

1. A Federal youth engagement strategy should champion arts engagement as a solution to challenges faced by young people and government.

A Federal youth engagement strategy should acknowledge the research that indicates that arts and cultural engagement (and existing arts infrastructure in Australia) can help address some of the top issues for young people, such as mental and physical wellbeing, skills for the future, social connection, sense of belonging, and voice and agency. Young people need the strategy to coordinate and facilitate cross-department activities and initiatives, paving the way for innovation, cost savings, and benefits. All programs within the strategy that aim to address these top issues should include an element of arts and cultural engagement.

2. The Federal Government should invest in arts and cultural engagement for Australian children and young people.

Direct financial investment into core and new activities of the YA/TYA sector, which provide essential services that young people need, can be delivered through collaborations between the sector and government departments. Specific programs could include:

- A new **youth arts engagement fund** to provide equity for young people in the Australian arts and cultural landscape. The single most effective way to reach more young people and provide the services they need is to directly fund YA/TYA organisations to maintain and grow their specialised hubs and programs. Given that a core aim of YA/TYA organisations is to help young people develop their voice and provide platforms for that voice to be heard, investment in this sector will also contribute directly to more effective engagement between government and young people.
- A **national program using the FReeZA model** (detailed above). Government departments including The Department of Health in collaboration with Creative Australia can work with the sector on new, exciting, youth-led initiatives. Devolved funding such as this ensures better youth engagement and better outcomes for young people.
- A **national arts program modelled on Sporting Schools** (detailed above); the Department of Education in collaboration with Creative Australia can partner with YA/TYA organisations to help schools increase children and young people's participation in the arts and connect them with community arts opportunities.

Investment from this strategy can be delivered by Creative Australia (formerly the Australia Council for the Arts) through arms-length, peer-assessed, targeted funding rounds specifically for arts organisations who primarily work with young people. Creative Australia has the existing infrastructure and networks to administer this most effectively and with minimal overhead costs.

3. Enhance the Youth Engagement Model by utilising artistic and creative engagement practices.

The current model provides an excellent framework for greater engagement with and representation for young people. The ethos and initiatives from Arts Council England (detailed above) demonstrate that co-creation and collaboration are far better ways to engage young people than simply consulting them. The YA/TYA sector has skills and resources that can be utilised within the Model to boost engagement:

- The sector has established youth hubs and communities of diverse young people, particularly from marginalised communities, particularly LGBTQIA+, gender diverse, and neurodiverse people. OFY, AYAC and the Youth Steering Committee should partner with TNA and the sector to quickly and easily reach these diverse young people who already exist within programs/frameworks that can support them to articulate and share their opinions.
- Professionals and young people in the arts are excellent communicators; the sector can assist with communicating important messages to young people by young people, through creative and innovative means as well as through artistic work for audiences.
- YA/TYA professionals are uniquely skilled in designing and delivering safe and inclusive programs that build confidence, trust, and creativity in young people, as well as assisting them to find and strengthen their voice. The Youth Engagement Model should engage such professionals to improve its processes and outcomes.
- Arts and cultural activities are ideal platforms for making key announcements and celebrating wins for the government and young people. TNA and the sector can work with OFY and AYAC to deliver these events and opportunities.

4. Create an Arts and Culture Advisory Group to complement the five existing advisory groups.

Arts and culture are a significant part of young people's lives, and one that government decisions have a huge impact on. It makes sense that the government should have an Arts and Culture Advisory Group as a part of the Youth Engagement Model to consult when making decisions that affect young people.



While it has the potential to advise the whole of government, this group could work specifically with the Office for the Arts, Creative Australia, and the National Broadcasters. This group can provide advice on funding decisions and provide feedback on the impact of arts initiatives on young people.

5. Facilitate stronger implementation and accountability of the Australian Curriculum by requiring states to publish compliance reports.

The Australian Curriculum has been well designed to deliver the best educational outcomes for Australian children and young people. The Curriculum acknowledges the real benefits and learning outcomes in the arts for students and includes a direction that all students from Foundation to Year 8 have the opportunity to engage with at least one arts experience per year.

The reality is that there are huge discrepancies between each state and territory in how this is delivered, and little to no accountability or oversight to ensure it is even delivered at all. Today, many young Australians still do not have access to the basic entitlements outlined in the Curriculum.

Strategies should be put in place to ensure the Australian Curriculum: The Arts is implemented in full, so that all young people, regardless of where in the country they live, or what kind of school they're at, can benefit from engagement in the arts, driving greater skills development, job readiness, and social connectedness. The best way to begin this process is to require state governments to publish reports detailing how many of their schools are achieving basic entitlements for schools.

More Information

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