

**Measuring What Matters Treasury Submission:
Appropriately Accounting for the Impacts of Arts and
Culture on Collective Wellbeing**

Aden Date



About Me

I am an artist, academic and consultant. I work with arts and media organisations on social impact projects and assessment frameworks. I sit on the board of the Social Impact Measurement Network of Australia (SIMNA). I also teach Community Psychology at Notre Dame, a unit which focuses on a holistic, multi-level interventions which generate community wellbeing.

I provide this submission as myself, not as a representative of any client, SIMNA, or Notre Dame University.

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I invite any connections and conversations around this topic.

Key Points

In this submission to the Measuring What Matters Consultation, I provide some suggestions as to how we might ensure that the relationship between art, culture and wellbeing is represented in Australia's wellbeing framework. I provide some broader context on the relationship between the sector and measurement, some general principles which can inform indicator selection, a few modest indicator suggestions, and some parting comments on building evaluation capacity through the National Cultural Policy.

Context

The Arts and Cultural sector has occupied a paradoxical place in public policy for some years — it is overmeasured and yet undervalued. The sector has grown weary of measurement and evaluation, which is associated with pecuniary discipline rather than a genuine inquiry into what matters. My concern is that this broader milieu around measurement will mean that the sector fails to engage with the Measuring What Matters consultation process and will ultimately be underrepresented in the final framework.

There are two significant risks here. The risk for the sector, one which is increasingly being actualised in public policy, is that its failure to be accounted for means it is rendered opaque in public policy discussions. We can already see the whispers of this in that the OECD measures for wellbeing include standardised PISA measures on literacy and science achievement, but nothing on the arts.

The risk for policymakers, however, is much greater — that a significant lever for generating wellbeing in Australia is left untouched. There is a growing recognition that arts and culture are foundational for wellbeing. There are significant research initiatives like *Good Arts, Good Mental Health* at UWA and the *Big Anxiety Research Centre* at UNSW which are helping to better understand this relationship. The Australia Council recently joint-published *Valuing the Arts in Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand*. There is also the decades-long history of active engagement with the relationship between culture and wellbeing from Australia's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (ATSI) organisations.

There is an opportunity in the Measuring What Matters framework for policymakers to rediscover the place and purpose of art and culture in Australian life, to reforge trust with the sector, and to appropriately rehome the arts and cultural sector within a policy framework large enough to accommodate it.

I present three points I think should be considered by Treasury in ensuring the framework appropriately accounts for the impacts of arts and culture on wellbeing. These are:

1. *Recognise culture as the foundation of wellbeing.*
2. *Keep indicator selection for arts and culture small, simple, evidence-based and artform agnostic.*
3. *Leverage the National Cultural Policy to support better impact evaluation.*

Recommendation 1: Recognise culture as the foundation of wellbeing

The purpose of this consultation period is to develop wellbeing measures which are “unique to the Australian context.” I would suggest that “the Australian context,” is synonymous with “Australian culture,” and that the desire for a framework unique to the Australian context is a desire for a framework informed by Australia’s unique culture.

Phrased slightly differently, again, it is a recognition that culture underpins wellbeing.

If those words read familiar, it is because it is something which Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have been reminding the rest of Australia for some time. For ATSI peoples, culture is not an ingredient haphazardly thrown in the wellbeing pot — it is the recipe which determines what goes in the pot.

The Australia Council’s *Living Culture: First Nations arts participation and wellbeing* recognised that ‘practising culture, including through arts participation, is the key to improving wellbeing for Aboriginal people in remote Australia.,’ and that cultural practice was upstream from other mainstream indicators of wellbeing — educational attainment, civic participation, access to support, and subjective life satisfaction.

For the rest of us in Australia, we might ask the question: Are First Australians the exception or the rule, or is culture foundational for all peoples?

In his 2022 Boyer Lecture, Noel Pearson gave an answer to that question. He spoke of Australia as a nation of three stories:

“The Ancient Indigenous heritage which is Australia's foundation, the British institutions built upon it, and the adorning gift of multicultural migration.”

Pearson uses the word “stories,” here because he recognises that stories – artefacts of culture – underpin everything else. This is true for all Australians. However, he also adds that the oldest, most foundational stories are those of our ancient Indigenous heritage.

In practice, this means any Australian wellbeing framework must recognise the primacy of culture in general, and Indigenous cultures in particular. Bhutan places primacy on its traditional arts and crafts practices. Vanuatu, the second highest ranking country on the Happy Planet Index, does the same. New Zealand’s Living Standards Framework (LSF) places ‘Culture’ right at the base of the framework in recognition that culture prefigures everything else.

A measure of wellbeing cannot be a train carriage full of ‘nice-to-haves’ haphazardly crammed together. Any set of indicators must sit within a coherent framework, and that framework will be given coherence by being grounded in culture. A framework organised by culture will be one truly “unique to the Australian context.” Of course, nothing is more unique about the Australian context than our rich Indigenous heritage. It is a cultural endowment which has existed since time immemorial, and the Measuring What Matters framework provides a meaningful opportunity to recognise that heritage.

Recommendation 2: Keep indicator selection for arts and culture small, simple, evidence-based and artform agnostic

Art contributes to wellbeing through ‘Arts Engagement.’ It is regular, ongoing engagement with the arts rather than occasional participation which leads to wellbeing. Two hours per week is recommended¹. The exception to this is passive, screen-based engagement which correlates negatively with well-being. Community-based arts and embodied participation with others strengthens the relationship between art and well-being. The literature here is still emerging, but these few trends are good enough to guide us.

I am no expert on the inner workings of the Australian Bureau of Statistics or the Australian Institute for Health and Welfare, so I hesitate to provide too many specific recommendations. However, my general belief is that the indicators should be few, simple, elegant, artform agnostic, and align with what we know from published literature.

With those cautionary notes in mind, the following indicators appear to me to be quite useful measures of arts and cultural practice in Australia and, by extension, the wellbeing of Australians:

- ***Percentage of public expenditure on arts and culture*** and ***Percentage of Australian’s employed in the cultural and creative sectors***. The OECD’s *The Culture Fix* persuasively argues that employment and expenditure in the cultural and creative sectors correlates positively with health, wellbeing, social inclusion, social capital, innovation, and broad economic growth.
- The ABS’ ***Participation in Selected Cultural Activities*** offers several useful indicators. Self-reported hours of participation per week is the strongest indicator of well-being. ***Voluntary participation***, also recorded, would also be a useful indicator. ***Screen-based activities*** could be an indicator of poorer wellbeing, especially in children.
- The ABS’ ***Time Use Survey*** provides a good comparative measure of time spent engaged in various activities. Participatory time use in community contexts (e.g., sport, hobbies, and arts) should be weighted higher than individual consumptive activities (e.g., watching TV).

I do not provide any recommendations around indicators for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. I believe that the *Kimberley Aboriginal Law and Cultural Centre* and the *Centre for Aboriginal Policy and Economic Research* are preparing a submission, so I defer to their expertise on indicators for ATSI peoples.

¹ See [The art of being mentally healthy](#), for example.

Recommendation 3: Leverage the National Cultural Policy to support better impact evaluation

Like many in the sector, I have been buoyed by Tony Burke's vision that the NCP will be "not an arts policy, it's a cultural policy, a whole-of-government policy," and that "a nation with a strong cultural policy is a nation where we know ourselves, know each other and invite the world to better know us." The NCP is due to be released soon, and these comments are based on what information has been shared publicly.

The National Cultural Policy represents an opportunity to build the culture, capacities, structures, and systems to measure its own success and provide data on wellbeing. As an example, The Australia Council states in its *Towards Equity* report that it is working to harmonise ethical collection of demographic data across the states and territories to better understand diversity and equity in the arts. Once these systems and processes are in place, we will be able to demonstrate whether, to evoke Noel Pearson again, we are recognising the 'three stories,' which make up Australia. Data on diverse representation in the sector would ensure that we can truly 'know ourselves' and know that the diversity of our arts reflects the diversity of our nation.

I use diversity and equity here to make a broader point about leveraging the NCP to build the capacity of government bodies, particularly The Australia Council, to collect data that can inform Australia's wellbeing framework. However, depending on the priorities identified in the National Cultural Policy, there may be other areas where evaluation capacities can be embedded across government to ensure that the arts and cultural sector is properly assessed and better valued in public policymaking.

The challenge, however, is to build sector capacity in a way that recognises what Italian artist Franco Grignani calls "the proper rigour of ambiguity." The Arts Council of England's efforts to standardise the measurement of artistic quality is a case of what not to do². An overreliance on narrow frameworks and quantitative measures is not 'rigorous' but a failure to recognise the ambiguity that is a constitutive element of what art is. The ACE is claiming that a jazz quartet at a wedding, an abstract public sculpture, and a therapeutic theatre production for people with disabilities can all be standardised and compared. The only consequence of efforts to standardise what cannot be standardised is a reduction in risk-taking, artistic vision and ambition.

Elegant, simple measures which are fit for purpose will better serve the sector, and Treasury, than seeking precision where precision cannot be found. "It is the mark of an educated man," said Aristotle, "to look for precision in each class of things just so far *as the nature of the subject admits*." The National Cultural Policy and Australia's Wellbeing Framework, working in tandem, permit us an opportunity to look at the arts with such an *appropriate* level of precision, and to develop the capacities, culture, systems, and processes which support that work.

² See [Arts Council to impose quantitative measures of arts quality](#).