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Ausdance response to the Australia Council Review

About Ausdance

Ausdance is the peak body for dance in Australia, representing practitioners working independently, in companies and in communities, and in education and research. It advocates for dance at all levels, and supports professional development, information networks and dialogue through national forums and publications.

Summary

We are pleased to have this opportunity to enhance the role of the Australia Council for the Arts and its role in the broader National Cultural Policy. We are concerned however, that the complexity of the Review and time allowed for consultation and response has limited our ability to comment in more depth.

Ausdance supports the whole-of-government approach to the new NCP, which of course includes the role of the Australia Council and its funding mechanisms. We are particularly interested in the ways in which arts practice, education, health, research and advocacy can be better located in a diverse cultural landscape, and supported in a way that 'joins the dots' in communities of practice. We note however, that cultural diversity in professional practice and the concerns of regional and remote communities are not adequately addressed in the review.

We support an audit of OFTA and Australia Council funding programs to eliminate duplication and ensure that the principle of arm's length funding is maintained and reinforced. We do not endorse the proposal to empower an Australia Council governing board and executive staff, or OFTA staff, to make funding decisions. This should only be the role of independent peer panels, properly convened and supported by experienced staff who can provide context and a national overview.

We have also identified a gap in the Review to support innovative and sustainable pathways for artists to utilise their extensive skills and knowledge, both within the arts industry and beyond. The recent demise of the SCOPE for Artists program that supported artists' productivity, employment opportunities and the leveraging of creative capital – a successful strategic partnership between the Australia Council, the Australian Sports Commission and Ausdance – is an example of action research that supported artists' productivity, and is a model that requires further consideration as a vital element of the National Cultural Policy.

Audance responses to recommendations

Recommendation 1

The Review recommends that a new purpose for the Council be expressed as follows:

To support and promote vibrant and distinctively Australian creative arts practice that is recognised nationally and internationally as excellent in its field.

This purpose should be supported by four principles for the Council. These are to:

- *support work of excellence, at all stages of the artistic life cycle.*
- *promote an arts sector that is distinctively Australian;*
- *ensure that the work it supports has an audience or market*
- *maximize the social and economic contribution made by the arts sector to Australia.*

These principles need more much articulation, particularly the notion of 'excellence' (which occurs across a range of practices, but is not clear here), and 'distinctively Australian' (which must embrace and articulate cultural diversity). Both 'excellence' and 'distinctively Australian' have the potential to be exclusive in a cultural context.

We are also concerned about supported work needing to have an audience or market. While this is an essential element for producers, presenters and companies, the policy needs to take account of independent practice that is experimental and risk taking and that contributes to the artist's own practice and research.

Maximising the social and economic contribution made by the arts sector to Australia could also be read ambiguously – this needs to note both the intrinsic and instrumental value of the arts, not just the instrumental. However, it's true that the social and economic value of the arts is not sufficiently well understood by governments and voters, and definitely needs to be profiled more effectively.

Recommendation 2

This statement of purpose should be supported by a three year Strategic Plan, agreed with the Minister, which defines the KPIs against which the Council should be measured.

Audance supports this recommendation, but we hope that a longer-term plan might be envisaged by the Government, with appropriate levels of funding identified in the forward estimates. A 3–5 year rolling strategic plan could be effective and would provide the arts industry with more certainty and vision.

KPIs are important for public understanding of the Australia Council's role and function as an effective supporter of the industry.

Recommendation 3

The Review recommends that the Council work to remove duplication through the merger of AbaF and the Artsupport program as recommended by the Review of Private Sector Support for the Arts undertaken by Mr Harold Mitchell AO in 2011. However, this Review recommends the merged functions should sit within the Australia Council, subject to the resolution of the taxation issues surrounding transfer of the Australia Cultural Fund which is administered by AbaF.

Audance supports the integration of AbaF with Artsupport, but we have concerns about how this might be achieved. Some we have consulted suggest that by placing the new merged program within the Australia Council, it could be seen by potential donors as a conflict of interest and just 'another arm of government', an issue also identified by the reviewers who were 'not persuaded' that this would be the case. This issue needs to be further careful consideration by the Government and stakeholders.

Recommendation 4

The Review recommends that the Council and OFTA undertake a joint program audit. This audit would take account of the Council's new purpose and apply the excellence versus access filter to current programs. The agreed program split would then be the subject of sector consultation, before implementation.

Audance supports a joint program audit between the Australia Council and OFTA, a sensible review that will identify gaps in service delivery and efficiency.

However, we are not at all convinced about the proposal to divide the functions of 'access' and 'excellence' between the two organisations. While the reviewers correctly identify that these concepts are not mutually exclusive, there appears to be an assumption that OFTA provides 'access' funding through its touring programs, while the Australia Councils funds programs of artistic 'excellence'.

We do not believe that OFTA should be delivering any funded programs. Its role should be redefined to make it clear that it offers policy advice to the Minister and intervenes strategically where appropriate, rather than running and funding programs that overlap with the function of the Australia Council. We note that while other departments such as Health and Education do fund their own programs, they do not have an alternative arm's length funding mechanism such as the Australia Council.

'Excellence' and 'access' are important elements of all artistic practice. They should not be separated just to accommodate some of the existing programs of OFTA and the Australia Council.

Part of recommendation 4 notes that '*Service delivery, wherever possible, should be devolved to the sector*'. We strongly support this proposal, as in fact this is where much overlap occurs. The Australia Council funds service organisations in particular to deliver services, and we provide an enormous range to our members and non-members alike in the form of professional development, career opportunities and training, national dialogue through forums and publications, online information services and access and participation programs to communities. We strongly recommend that an audit be undertaken to identify duplication across service delivery sectors, including the Australia Council (see recommendation 5).

Recommendation 5

The Review recommends that the Council work to grow the Council's linkages.

We strongly support this recommendation, but make the following comments about sections of it.

... The Council's support in the professional development area should extend to supporting strategic initiatives in the sector as well as specific programs of support.

Audance applauds the work of the Dance Board of the Australia Council in partnering with our organisation in the national interest, including the production of Dance Plan 2012, the 2011 and 2013 National Dance Forums, and its contribution to our Routledge publication *Shaping the Landscape – Celebrating Dance in Australia*.

We understand that these partnerships do not occur across Council with our peer peak organisations, and strongly recommend this model for the development of future linkages, not only with service organisations, but more strongly with the education sector (which has fallen behind as an Australia Council priority in recent years).

Ausdance recommends that the role of peak organisations, which is often undervalued and under-utilised, be upgraded to include a place at the Australia Council table, particularly as part of the suggested 'Ideas Bank'. Collectively we offer deep experience and knowledge in, through and about the arts, and access to thousands of artists through our membership and service delivery programs. This experience and knowledge needs to be better harnessed across the board, rather than being seen as a potential threat (or competition) in some quarters. It's a unique and ready-made Ideas Bank, and must be better utilised (and funded).

... an information portal [should be developed] providing information on jobs, training, education and professional development opportunities for young and emerging artists, especially those that support business development and management and cultural leadership in the arts context.

This is an example of service delivery already being addressed by the field, but which appears to have been overlooked by those interviewed for the Review (which did not include most peak arts organisations). The Artscareer website is managed by NAVA and is contributed to by several key arts organisations, including Ausdance. Peak organisations also have comprehensive websites which offer a great deal of career development information about their specific artforms.

The Review recommends that Council become a member of the Australian Roundtable for Arts Training Excellence in order to engage more directly with the national Arts Training Organisations.

We support this recommendation, but point out that this group is very exclusive and by no means represents the full spectrum of excellence in arts training. We think it's important for the Australia Council to engage much more meaningfully with the whole tertiary arts training sector through organisations such as the Tertiary Dance Council of Australia (which includes members of the Australian Roundtable for Arts Training Excellence).

Recommendation 6

In order to facilitate implementation of the new purpose for the Council, the Review recommends that the Australian Government provide additional funding of \$21.25 million per annum to the Council to cover current funding pressures and changes to its purpose

Ausdance strongly supports a higher profile research and advocacy role for the Australia Council, and additional funding to adequately support it.

Ausdance supports the proposal for a contestable Major Performing Arts (MPA) fund, but not at the expense of their core funding, which must continue to increase in line with the usual measures. We recognise that these organisations are major employers of dancers, actors, composers, designers etc., and are called upon to tour regularly and represent Australia overseas. However, the same can be said for many companies in the small to medium performing arts sector, and we would like to see their role better rewarded for excellence and outstanding performance in fulfilling their goals.

'Unfunded excellence' is a major concern, particularly in the independent sector where so much research, innovation and development occurs. We strongly support additional funding that acknowledges and supports the 'engine room' of the arts – a place of often high risk but high gain in terms of renewal and innovation. In dance, the independent sector operates

outside the key organisations and encompasses everything from solo creators/performers to small companies of performers led by a choreographer/director working with the dancers' creative input. This work not only contributes excellence in choreographic research, but its continued 'unfunded excellence' is leading to the loss of highly trained, talented and committed artists to industry.

Recommendation 7

The Review recommends that, in order to provide the Council with increased funding flexibility, the Australian Government pursue with the states and territories the opening up of the MPA Framework to allow for competitive funding based on peer review.

We have some reservations about this recommendation, although do not agree that appropriate peers would be difficult to find (as reported in the media recently). The States and Territories have different priorities, and it may be difficult to negotiate an appropriate outcome with them, given that Federal-State relations are not always cooperative and may work against consistency in the arrangement. We therefore support further consultation with the MPA companies and the individual jurisdictions, while noting that there is some agreement already with the recently-negotiated arts 'compact'.

Recommendation 8

To arrest the erosion of the Council's funding base, the Review also recommends exempting the Council from any further application of the efficiency dividend.

Ausdance strongly supports this recommendation and has been advocating for this for several years. While we support a lean bureaucracy, heavy staff cuts can also be detrimental to artform development – staff need to be able to travel widely, consult, see work and gain a national overview to support the peer assessment process. We also note that recently the impact of the efficiency dividend has had to be passed on to the sector that can afford it least, i.e. reduced CPI increases for small to medium key organisations. Continual erosion of the funding bases of these companies – which do not have the income-earning capacity of the larger companies – exacerbates an already fragile funding environment in this sector.

Recommendation 9

The Review recommends that new enabling legislation for the Council clearly provide for a conventional, skills-based Governing Board. The new Act should limit membership of the Board to nine, with all appointments made by the Minister after receiving advice from the Chair. The Chair should be appointed by the Minister. The Board should be composed primarily of people with a deep experience in and passion for artistic practice who can bring a balanced blend of skills and expertise to the Council and through it, to Australia's cultural life.

Ausdance supports this recommendation but is concerned about the possible loss of arts-based expertise. We support the mechanism for appointments to the board, and hope that it will be broadly representative of all professional arts communities, and inclusive of cultural diversity.

Recommendation 10

*The Review recommends that this new Board set its direction and develops its vision with management through its strategic planning processes. Its Board sub-committees (for example, Audit, Finance, Risk, Nominations) should operate to contribute to the governance of the organisation **but not to approve funding** or dictate the Council's strategic priorities.*

The Review then goes on to recommend that the Governing Board 'approves grants of >\$100,000 for organisations, informed by a peer assessment process' (p.31).

Ausdance does not support the Governing Board approving any grants, whatever the amount. The role of the Governing Board should be to provide expert governance for the Australia Council and oversee strategic planning processes.

Recommendation 11

The Review recommends that the CEO should be appointed by the Board following consultation and agreement with the Minister.

Agreed.

Recommendation 12

Sector Advisory Panels, which would be the principal agents for engagement with the artforms and custodians of artform practice within the sector, should support and inform the work of the new Board and management, as directed by that Board. Specifically, the Panels should provide sectoral expertise and advise on and inform the Strategic Priorities of the Board. The Board may constitute any number of Advisory Panels and determine their mandates based on the needs of the Board in developing and executing its Strategic Priorities. It may conclude the activities of any Panel as it sees fit.

We strongly support artform expertise being maintained. However, we are not sure how this vision will be realised, and what specific function the Sector Advisory Panels will have, given that the reviewers recommend that the artform boards be abandoned, but then noting that peers will be 'custodians of artform practice within the sector, able to keep the Board abreast of innovation, excellence, challenges and opportunities within artforms (p.32)'.

Recommendation 13

A new governance structure for the Council should be put in place, described in the figure 'Proposed Governance Structure' on p.27, that allows for clear lines of responsibility and functions for the Board and executive under the Minister, in consultation with OFTA. New operational structures for the Council's executive and staff may flow from the implementation of this model.

The Governance structure makes lines of responsibility clear.

Recommendation 14

The Review recommends that a new model for grant allocation be implemented that:

- a) Replaces the standing Artform Board structure with a general stream for grant applications across all artforms; and*
- b) Maintains the centrality of peer assessment but promotes flexibility and breadth by adopting, but adapting, the model employed by the Canada Council for the Arts that allows for more peers to become involved in assessment and thereby diversifying the mix of peers*

We strongly support maintaining the centrality of peer assessment, but not sure that 'there is overwhelming support for a more flexible approach to funding away from the artform board structure'. While more flexibility is required in such areas as closing dates and short-turnaround grants, expert artform boards are fundamental to maintaining and growing each art form. Our members tell us that combining dance, theatre and music into a performing arts panel in NSW, for instance, led to an absolute dearth of small to medium dance funding in that State, and pointed to the very problem identified in section 5.1 of the Review, 'an inconsistent approach to the sector' (p.29).

Section 5.2 (p.29) makes some broad generalisations which we find difficult to support, or even verify. Some seem extremely naive, and would amount to a severe loss of artform expertise. Each of these so-called Action Areas needs solid testing and review before being adopted or adapted in a new Australia Council structure.

Increasing the number of peers and reducing the time spent on panels seems (a) expensive and (b) a recipe for loss of necessary national overview, only gained by peers after a year or so on an artform board. People come to these board processes generally only aware of their own environment, but a national funding body requires long-term vision for the sector, and experience in assessing applications over a period of time. Calling on different peers for different applications means there will be inconsistencies in funding decisions and little understanding of the investment necessary to develop an artist over the longer term. However, we do support the need for transparency and diverse representation in the peer assessment process.

The Ideas Bank would be a very useful addition to the Council's structure, and we have already commented that we think the peak arts organisations could have a strong presence here, with their collective years of experience in successful program design and delivery, evaluation and research.

Recommendation 15

To support these reforms the Review recommends a new operational structure for the Council which would cover key areas set out in the figure on page 33, "Overall Structure for the Council". These aspects of the Council's recommended governance structure are included to show how the Board and Executive would interact, especially noting the role of the Sector Advisory Panels.

The reforms noted in the diagram on p.31 empower the Governing Board and Executive to make funding decisions. We do not support this.

We strongly recommend that 'board-directed initiatives' be implemented only after consultation with appropriate artform peers and/or peak organisations.

Recommendation 16

The Review recommends community consultation to inform the Council's finalisation of its new operational structure.

There definitely needs to be more (timely) consultation before the Council's new structure is finalised. The time allowed for this response is not enough for the field to fully understand, assess and then respond to the recommendations and the accompanying explanations of this complex Review.

Recommendation 17

The Review recommends development of an entirely new Act for the Council, based on the templates provided by the enabling legislation for the National Film & Sound Archive of Australia and Screen Australia, for introduction to Parliament in 2014-15 financial year.

We support this recommendation after an appropriate consultation period and a further response from the Government, the Australia Council and the field. Without sufficient time to fully understand the relationship between the NFSA/Screen Australia model and potential changes to the Australia Council Act, it is difficult to comment further at this stage.

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On behalf of the Australian Dance Council – Ausdance Inc.