



Australian Government

Department of Communications and the Arts

# Response to Productivity Commission issues paper

## The Social and Economic Benefits of Improving Mental Health

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## Introduction

The arts can enable Australians to reach their full potential, and give purpose and meaning to life. Arts participation and cultural experiences can effectively promote mental health, increase social participation, tackle stigma and discrimination, and be a path to economic participation.

This submission will focus on arts and cultural participation as providing effective alternative programs and supports beyond the mental health system. It highlights the role arts plays in individual wellbeing in addition to discussing research that shows possible health care savings can be achieved by using the arts as a tool for preventative care.

This submission draws on work that informed the 2018 *Research Overview of Arts and Disability in Australia*, as well as broader arts and health literature, both Australian and international. Case studies have been included to illustrate the ways in which Australian arts initiatives have successfully promoted mental health, increased social inclusion and opened community conversations about mental health and suicide.

The central premise of this submission is that a greater availability of arts programs to a greater number of people would improve mental health outcomes and provide long-term benefits for particular consumers, carer groups and Australians more broadly.

**74%**

Of Australians agree the arts make for a richer and more meaningful life

**60%**

Of Australians say the arts have a big or very big impact on our sense of wellbeing and happiness

**58%**

Of Australians say the arts have a big or very big impact on helping us deal with stress, anxiety or depression

*Source: Connecting Australians: results of the National Arts Participation Survey, Australia Council for the Arts, 2017.*

From a policy perspective, the Department of Communications and the Arts views arts engagement through three primary, and overlapping, channels. These are: audiences/consumers (termed 'attendance'); participants in the arts, including recreational practice and hobbyists (termed 'participation'); and professional artists and arts workers. While all three can have a connection to social and economic benefits to the community, there is a very clear connection between participation in the arts and mental health and wellbeing.



## 1. Promoting mental health through the arts

There is an established body of research literature that outlines the benefits of the arts to health and wellbeing. This submission will focus on these benefits outside a therapeutic context, but more information on the impact of therapeutic arts interventions can be found in Christine Putland's *Guide to the Evidence* on arts and health, prepared for the Arts and Health Foundation Australia in 2012.<sup>1</sup>

Davies et al. have established that people with high levels of arts participation experience significantly better mental wellbeing than those with medium, low or no participation.<sup>2</sup> They have shown that two or more hours a week of arts participation is needed to achieve this outcome.<sup>3</sup> For children and young people, participating in arts activities can have a positive effect on self-confidence, self-esteem, relationship building and a sense of belonging (all associated with resilience and mental wellbeing).<sup>4</sup> Research into Queensland Ballet's *Ballet for Seniors* program found that participants perceived positive wellbeing outcomes after participating in the program (see case study below).<sup>5</sup>

Hemingway and Crossen-White's review of the arts and health literature summarises the benefits known to accrue from different types of arts interventions.<sup>6</sup> The review looked at 143 articles spanning a range of creative and cultural experiences. The review found that creative expression and cultural activities can improve quality of life, self-esteem, resilience, social engagement and confidence, as well as reduce stress and stimulate an interest in further learning.

In addition to promoting mental health and wellbeing across the population, art making can assist people to improve wellbeing and socially reconnect after an episode of mental illness. A 2009 collaborative research project between La Trobe University, Mind Australia and Prahlan Mission reviewed the evidence about art making by people with mental health conditions. The researchers found that art-making enhanced emotional exploration and expression, participation and learning, thought processes, new perspectives, spiritual growth, political voice and social expression, and the development of interpersonal relationships.<sup>7</sup>

### 1.1 Preventative care

Research from the UK has estimated significant health care savings can be achieved by using the arts as a tool for preventive care.<sup>8</sup> For example, Arts on Prescription is a form of social prescribing that attempts to address underlying psychosocial concerns outside a clinical environment.<sup>9</sup> A report prepared for the UK's Arts and Minds organisation reviewed the evidence for the value of Arts on Prescription programs for mental health and wellbeing. The report found that:

- arts participation is strongly associated with positive mental wellbeing;
- the act of art production is associated with improvements in mood and wellbeing;
- participation in community-based arts programmes results in positive outcomes with regard to mental wellbeing, social isolation, and anxiety or depression for people with mental health conditions;
- art participation programs are likely to be cost-effective from a healthcare perspective, and may result in overall savings for the public sector, and;
- the positive effect of arts-based programs on mental health is evident in the workplace.<sup>10</sup>

Arts on Prescription generally involves community programs often run by professional artists, rather than clinical programs run by art therapists. Previous research has found that an absence of a therapeutic agenda was an important positive factor for arts program participants with mental and physical disabilities.<sup>11</sup> Another study found that 'being an artist rather than a person with mental health problems or other disabilities could bring a new way of identifying with self'.<sup>12</sup> Arts on Prescription programs tend to be person-centred, rather than illness-centred.<sup>13</sup>



The case study below highlights the success of a community art group that promotes wellbeing through connections to culture and community for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people with mental health conditions.

### Case study: NuunaRon Art Group

The NuunaRon art group was established in February 2018, with the goal of addressing wellbeing and social isolation for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people with disability, including people with mental health conditions. Fourteen artists meet every week at the Nambour Community Centre to work on painting projects and share stories with each other. The group also includes some carers of people with disability, some of whom are living with disability and mental health conditions themselves.

The group is organised by Paul Calcott, a Wiradjuri artist and National Operations Manager from the First People's Disability Network. NuunaRon has support from the Sunshine Coast Council and the North Coast Aboriginal Corporation for Community Health. People find out about the group through word of mouth and referral services, such as the North Coast Partners in Recovery program.

*NuunaRon gives people a chance to connect, reconnect with culture, and get strong in their culture. Because of the negative press that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures can get, for someone to come to the group and get the strength in culture and identity to weather the negative stuff is really important. You can't get the cultural connection and stories from a social worker, unless they are also an Elder. You need a culturally safe environment to talk about past experiences.*

Paul Calcott

Paul says of the group, 'It's not coming to an art class and painting a bowl of fruit—you have symbols and styles handed down that have been used by our ancestors for 40,000 years that help to tell your story.' In an urban environment, says Paul, people can be disconnected from their country, their families and Elders. NuunaRon connects people with their community, providing an opportunity for young people to sit with Elders and learn about culture. Through art, the group members learn to use traditional symbols that support conversations about spirituality, ancestral connections and cultural obligations to ancestors.

The group is also an opportunity for the artists to make income from selling their art, and to demonstrate to the community that people with disability can make a meaningful contribution. Some group members say that since joining the group, they have had less need for allied health providers, because the group supports their wellbeing and social connections.

The group has presented their art at the Commonwealth Games Festival of Champions, and two members received awards in the Art from the Margins exhibition in Brisbane, an initiative of Wesley Mission Queensland. NuunaRon artists also exhibited at Novotel Twin Waters Resort for International Day of People with Disability, and are planning an exhibition at the United Nations in Geneva as part of the Permanent Forum on the Rights of People Living with Disability. In appreciation for the use of the space at Nambour Community Centre, the group is working on a mural for the centre, with each artist working on part of the mural to tell their stories.



## 1.2 Improved wellbeing through culture

Analysis of the *National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Survey* by the Australian National University Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research has shown a positive relationship between arts engagement and a range of social outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, such as employment, education and income, and between arts engagement and subjective wellbeing.<sup>14</sup>

Research from the Interplay Project by the Cooperative Research Centre for Remote Economic Participation (CRC-REP) explored this connection further. It showed that practising culture (including art, law and ceremony, caring for country, and hunting/food sources) builds empowerment and strengthens spirituality among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in remote Australia. These outcomes in turn improve wellbeing.<sup>15</sup>

Connection to language and culture strengthens feelings of pride and self-worth for many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.<sup>16</sup> The contribution that knowledge of Indigenous languages has to Indigenous Australians' sense of self could also lead to positive mental health outcomes, as there is an association between knowledge of language and reduced rates of suicide.<sup>17</sup>



## 2. Social inclusion

Creative and cultural activities can be powerful tools for promoting social inclusion and reducing social isolation. People who attend cultural events report slightly higher life satisfaction. In 2014, people with a mental health condition who had attended an event reported an average overall life satisfaction score of 6.7/10, while those who had not attended an event had an average score of 5.7/10.<sup>18</sup>

**64%**  
Of Australians agree  
“the arts allow me to  
connect with others”

Community connections, including connections through culture, create a sense of belonging.<sup>19</sup> Some groups of Australians may be missing out on arts and cultural experiences that could reduce isolation and benefit their wellbeing. Older people, people in regional areas and people in low income households all face additional barriers to accessing the arts. Consideration should be given to policies and programs that enable greater participation in the arts, specifically by people in these groups.

The case study below demonstrates how public investment in arts projects can promote social participation and inclusion, and have positive effects on mental health and wellbeing.

### Case study: *Long Story Short*, Coorong Suicide Prevention Network

The *Long Story Short* men’s arts and mental health project identified local community stories and storytellers through a series of gatherings and meetings with local men and community groups in the Coorong region.<sup>20</sup>

Artist Mark Thompson facilitated the project, which led to art works, signage and digital pathways that connect the Coorong region along the Malee, Princes and Dukes highways through humorous storytelling.

The project engaged community men’s groups, community gatherings and isolated men across the Coorong region, and increased their cultural participation. Participants expressed an understanding of the effects of isolation on regional men, and the importance of connection fostered by this type of project to combat this isolation.

The project garnered wide interest among men in the community, who recognised the value of storytelling and having their stories heard by people travelling through the region.

*Long Story Short* was funded by the Australian Government’s Regional Arts Fund, administered in South Australia by Country Arts SA.

### 2.1 Income and arts participation and attendance

Income has an impact on a person’s ability to participate in the arts and benefit from this participation. In 2014, 75% of people in the lowest quintile attended the arts, compared with 94% of people in the highest quintile.<sup>21</sup> In 2015, 49.5% of people with a psychosocial disability (including a mental health condition) lived in households in the lowest two income quintiles.<sup>22</sup>

Given the income status of almost half of people who identify as having a psychosocial disability, affordability of programs and activities are a central consideration to facilitating a higher number of participants with mental health conditions in the arts.



## 2.2 Age and arts participation and attendance

Older people are at particular risk for social isolation and research from the UK has shown that older people on low incomes are twice as likely to feel trapped and lonely, that isolation accounts for up to a third of GP visits, and that it is associated with poor physical and mental health.<sup>23</sup> Pettigrew et al. have found that a reduced level of structured social interaction in later life is perceived by older people as 'a barrier to the incidental human contact that provides friendship opportunities'.<sup>24</sup> Arts activities provide these opportunities for social contact, both for older people and other groups, as they allow casual social contact at a local level.<sup>25</sup>

However, arts attendance and participation declines with age. People in the 15-24 age group are more likely to attend and participate in the arts than those in the 65+ age group. In 2016, 83% of Australians aged 15-24 attended a live arts event, and 69% engaged in some form of creative participation. For Australians aged 65 and over, this dropped to 65% attending arts events, and 38% creatively participating in the arts.<sup>26</sup>

Based on these figures, more opportunities for older Australians to engage with the arts could lead to a decrease in social isolation, and in turn, has the potential to improve mental health outcomes for older Australians. Queensland Ballet's *Ballet for Seniors* program has shown that participating in dance classes improves mental wellbeing and reduces social isolation for older people.

### Case study: *Ballet for Seniors*, Queensland Ballet

A research partnership between Queensland Ballet and Queensland University of Technology, supported by the Queensland Government's Advance Queensland initiative, evaluated Queensland Ballet's *Ballet for Seniors* program.<sup>27</sup>

Queensland Ballet has run targeted dance classes for older adults since 2013. In 2017, ten participants in the *Ballet for Seniors* program participated in a wellbeing questionnaire at the beginning and end of a three month period. The questionnaire asked participants to report on the impact of *Ballet for Seniors* on their overall wellbeing, emotional wellbeing, social wellbeing, physical wellbeing, self-esteem and coping strategies. Participants also took part in two focus groups.

The key findings of the evaluation highlight the positive impact of arts participation on wellbeing and social inclusion for older people. The research found the primary reasons that *Ballet for Seniors* students were motivated to participate in the classes were social interaction, a love of ballet (particularly for people who had danced when they were younger), and accessibility to older adults. The main wellbeing outcomes identified by the evaluation were that participants felt more energetic/animated, felt in better shape, had better body control/awareness, better posture, flexibility and physical wellbeing, and better overall wellbeing. Participants also said that the challenging movements and sequences led to 'an increased sense of achievement and happiness'.

*I think when you go on a regular basis you get to see the same people each time, and people start to get to know your name, they get to know your face, and we go to coffee afterwards, you know, from time to time. And I think that way you get to know people and you start to form, like, friendships, and people come up to you, "How are you," and they noticed when you're not there on particular weeks.*

*Julie, Ballet for Seniors participant*



### 3. Community engagement and attitudes

Australian artists play an important role in our society. They tell stories that reflect our diverse communities, help to start conversations about difficult issues, and can challenge stigma, negative attitudes and discrimination through their work. By helping to open conversations about mental health and suicide, the arts can engage the community on these issues.

**73%**

Of Australians agree the arts are an important way to get different perspectives on a topic or issue

*Through the arts, people have the opportunity to see themselves and their worlds authentically represented in all their complexity, and to gain insight into the lives and worlds of their neighbours near and far.*

*Connecting Australians: results of the National Arts Participation Survey, Australia Council for the Arts, 2017*

#### 3.1 Attitudes as a barrier to engagement

In 2018, the Meeting of Cultural Ministers ran a national consultation on the renewal of the National Arts and Disability Strategy. As part of this consultation, people with disability, including mental health conditions, were invited to complete a survey. Of survey respondents with a mental health condition or psychosocial disability who work or study in the arts, 52% said that 'other people have negative attitudes about people with disability' and that this was a barrier to their career in the arts. 55% said that another career barrier was 'decision-makers did not include people with disability, or they did not understand disability'. Changing community attitudes about mental health conditions and mental ill-health can contribute to mentally health workplaces and open up economic opportunities for people with mental health conditions.

The case studies below highlight the contribution that Australian artists make to our national and community conversations about mental health and suicide.

#### Case study: Screen stories – *Redfern Now* and *Please Like Me*

Two ABC productions, *Redfern Now* and *Please Like Me*, demonstrate how Australian storytellers can reflect their communities' experiences of mental illness.

*Redfern Now* was the first television drama series written, directed and produced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. The final episode of the second series explored the experience of post-traumatic stress disorder through the character of Ernie (Ernie Dingo), a retired Army drill sergeant, whose screams during recurring nightmares of his time in the Vietnam War cause tension in his community.

The series won an Australian Director's Guild Award, two Australian Academy Cinema Television Arts (AACTAs) Awards and a Logie Award. The second series averaged 870,000 viewers.<sup>1</sup> *Redfern Now* was supported by an investment from Screen Australia.

Written and starring Josh Thomas, *Please Like Me* first aired on ABC2 in 2012. The comedy series presents the semi-autobiographical experiences of a young man coming out as gay while negotiating his mother's bi-polar and her multiple suicide attempts (played by Debra Lawrence). Josh's boyfriend Arnold (Keegan Joyce) experiences panic attacks and anxiety, and their friend Hannah (Hannah

<sup>1</sup> Source: OzTAM and RegionalTAM, 5-city-metro, combined markets, total people, average audience, consolidated 7. Metro viewers totalled 577,000.



Gadsby) has depression. The program has earned praise from mental health professionals for tackling these issues in a realistic yet engaging way.

The series has been distributed on nine services in 24 countries, including Netflix, iTunes, Hulu, Google Play, Universal and the ABC. *Please Like Me* won three AACTA Awards and two Logies, and was nominated for an International Emmy Award for Best Comedy. LGBTQI+ media monitoring organisation GLAAD praised the series for its 'realness and dark comedy' and for being one of the few shows to address mental health in the LGBTQI+ community in a nuanced way. *Please Like Me* was nominated for Outstanding Comedy Series at the GLAAD Media Awards for three years in a row.

## Case Study: Music Feedback in the Wheatbelt, WA

Music Feedback is an innovative anti-stigma mental health campaign for young people aged 12–25 years. It was first initiated in 2009 by the Western Australian Department of Health's Mental Health Division (now the Mental Health Commission) with support from West Australian Music (WAM).

The Youth Affairs Council of WA (YACWA) received funding to help run the project. Music Feedback uses popular music and musicians to encourage young people to talk about issues and to promote positive mental health.

In 2016/17 Music Feedback partnered with WAM on their Wheatbelt Touring Circuit during Mental Health Week. This program included free entry performances in traditional pub venues, community recreation centres and clubs throughout the Wheatbelt region. It featured leading acts from WA combined with a vast array of talented upcoming and established acts from the Wheatbelt. During the performances the acts spoke about their experiences with mental health and music, reducing stigma and opening up conversations around mental health at each event.

*We believe music is something we all can relate to, no matter our backgrounds and experiences. This makes the Music Feedback team excited to be a part of WAM's Wheatbelt Touring Circuit over Mental Health Week to help spread the message to all young people in the Wheatbelt community and beyond.*  
Ashley McPhail, YACWA Music Feedback Project Support Officer

In addition to attending Music Feedback gigs, people could engage through a CD/DVD pack, Music Feedback's YouTube channel, Facebook and Twitter, and take part in workshops held during the tour.

In December 2016, YACWA evaluated the outcomes of the Music Feedback project and found that the CD had been a valuable resource for organisations, enabling them to start conversations with young people around mental health. The respondents mentioned the novelty of the CD and the well-chosen artists involved, which speaks for the partnership with music industry peak bodies such as WAM.



## 4. Economic participation and productivity

Creative and cultural activity contributed \$111.7 billion to the Australian economy in 2016-17<sup>28</sup> and 845,000 people are in creative and cultural employment.<sup>29</sup> The results of the National Arts and Disability Strategy consultation in 2018 showed that people with mental health conditions make economic contributions through the arts. Of respondents with a mental health condition or psychosocial disability, 72% said they volunteered in the arts. Further, of those who work or study in the arts:

**33%**

said they earn an income  
in the arts

**26%**

said they would like to  
earn income in the arts

**61%**

are working as freelancers  
or are self-employed

Australians with mental health conditions or who experience mental ill-health can make artistic contributions to our cultural landscape. They also have the potential to make a significant economic contribution. Careers in the arts can be challenging for anyone, but Australians with mental health conditions face additional barriers, such as workplace discrimination and low income. In order to succeed in their chosen field, this cohort needs appropriate support.



## Conclusion

This submission has outlined the role of the arts in a number of areas relevant to the Productivity Commission's *Inquiry into the Social and Economic Benefits of Improving Mental Health*. These include:

1. **Mental health promotion** – arts interventions have proven benefits to mental wellbeing and have the potential to promote mental health among all Australians.
2. **Social inclusion** – arts attendance and creative participation provide opportunities for people to feel part of their communities, promote mental health and allow people who have experienced an episode of mental ill-health to re-engage with their community.
3. **Community engagement and attitudes** – artists play a unique role in our society by telling stories that reflect the experience of mental illness, starting conversations about mental illness and suicide and tackling stigma surrounding mental illness.
4. **Economic participation and productivity** – people with mental health conditions or experience of mental ill-health make valuable contributions to Australian culture. By improving attitudes and understanding of mental illness among the community and employers, Australians with mental health conditions can realise their economic potential.

The arts are a powerful tool for social inclusion, individual empowerment and as a vehicle to increase community understanding of the experiences of marginalised people. Broadly speaking, arts funding delivered through federal programs are oversubscribed and extremely competitive. With appropriate support, there is potential for the arts sector to expand its delivery of innovative programs and products that maximise the social and economic participation of people with mental illness, promote the mental health of the general population, and change the conversation about mental health in Australian communities.

If you require further information about any issues raised in this submission, please contact [arts.disability@arts.gov.au](mailto:arts.disability@arts.gov.au)



## References

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- <sup>21</sup> ABS, cat. no 4114.0 *Attendance at Selected Cultural Venues and Events, Australia, 2013-14*.
- <sup>22</sup> ABS, cat. no. 4430.0 *Disability, Ageing and Carers, Australia, 2015*.
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- <sup>24</sup> Simone Pettigrew et al., “Older people’s perceived causes of and strategies for dealing with social isolation,” *Ageing & Mental Health* 18 (2014).
- <sup>25</sup> *Creative Health: The Arts for Health and Wellbeing*, 126.
- <sup>26</sup> *Connecting Australians: results of the National Arts Participation Survey*, Australia Council for the Arts, 2017.
- <sup>27</sup> Ali-Haalpala et al., *Ballet Moves*.
- <sup>28</sup> *Cultural and creative activity in Australia 2008-09 to 2016-17*, Bureau of Communications and Arts Research, 2018.
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