


Increase arts budgets to improve school performance, healthcare and exports, says Rupert Myer

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One of Australia's most successful public health campaigns began in the mid-1970s and featured a cartoon bloke called Norm (voiced by Max Gillies) who put down his beer can, turned off the telly and took up exercise. The message of Life. Be in It. was simple and effective, encouraging people to develop lifestyle habits that would improve their health and wellbeing. Individuals benefit by living longer and healthier, and society benefits from a healthier, happier and more productive population.

Maybe it's time we had a campaign to encourage people to participate in the arts because the evidence of art's benefit to the collective body of Australians is almost beyond doubt. Two hours of creative activity a week, according to one study, can improve mood and mental outlook. Group activities involving the arts can help overcome social isolation and loneliness, which are health hazards as dangerous as smoking and obesity. Societies where groups of people are involved in cultural pursuits are more cohesive and economically robust, according to OECD research.

These are some of the arts-assisted social gains in the latest report from arts think tank A New Approach. The report, Transformative: Impacts of Culture and Creativity, was launched at Parliament House in Canberra last week and is an excellent roundup of research into the positive add-ons that come from investment in the arts. It highlights the benefits in seven areas, about half of them related to individual and social welfare, and half to political and economic objectives.

Here are some more ways in which the arts make the world a better place. Cultural investment in towns and suburbs can promote social cohesion. Artist-led projects in regions ravaged by flood

or bushfire may help repair devastated communities.

For the young, involvement in arts and creative pursuits can boost their motivation to do well at school, build their resilience to cope with setbacks, and improve social skills and emotional wellbeing. Older Australians who take part in social and creative activities such as reading, dancing or playing a musical instrument have been found in one study to have a lower risk of developing dementia.

There are advantages for the economy and national interest. In 2016-17, cultural and creative activity was worth \$111.7bn, or 6.4 per cent of gross domestic product, and those sectors employed 593,830 people or 5.5 per cent of the workforce. In other words, goods and services that involve creative input are a significant part of the nation's productivity.

It's not all good news. While the creative industries' contribution to GDP has grown, it has not kept pace with the general economy. Government funding of the arts, the subject of ANA's first report in September, reached its highest nominal level last year of \$6.86bn across three tiers of government, but total funding per capita is less than it was a decade ago.

The latest report also points out we are a nation of importers, consuming foreign design, fashion, music, film and TV streaming services to the tune of \$8.8bn a year. We don't export nearly enough: for every dollar earned from cultural exports we spend \$8 on imports, giving us one of the world's biggest cultural trade imbalances.

These challenges and opportunities are among the reasons Rupert Myer, one of the philanthropic founders of ANA via the Myer Foundation, says the nation urgently must address its commitment to the creative sector. Other countries already have realised, or take it as given, that investment in the arts is in their national interest.

But in Australia, Myer says, we are still struggling with the fundamentals.

"This is what our neighbours are doing," he says. "It's what our trade partners are doing, it's what other countries in the world with high standards of living are doing in similar circumstances to our own. We have to switch the debate, turn evidence into belief, both within the populace itself and also among policy leaders. There is a whole repositioning of the discussion that is critical here."

ANA was launched when three philanthropic foundations — the Tim Fairfax Family Foundation, the Keir Foundation and the Myer Foundation — came together with the intention of advancing

a “coherent, comprehensive policy position” for the arts. The first report, noting the shifting sands of government arts subsidies, suggested that total government arts expenditure as a proportion of GDP be lifted to the OECD average, an increase that would more than double the current budget to \$15.6bn.

The new report does not make recommendations but offers seven main ideas “for consideration”. In reverse order it makes a case for initiatives in rural and regional Australia; foreign affairs and trade; schools and academic performance; social inclusion and cohesion; health interventions; and investment in creative industries to broaden our economic base.

Many of the fringe benefits of a vital arts and cultural sector are no secret to those who already enjoy them. Yet the link is not always made between investment in the arts and positive social and economic outcomes, and does not have cut-through in broader discussions and policymaking.

The report’s most significant point is the first, as it recommends a kind of horizontal and vertical integration of arts and cultural spending: reaching across different portfolios within government, and through the three tiers of government from local to state and federal. This truly would be a new approach to arts funding, no doubt identifying possible efficiencies but also helping to embed cultural thinking throughout the public sector. A similar project called the APS200 has attempted to position scientific thinking in the Australian Public Service to help solve complex policy problems.

A whole-of-government strategy for the arts is not exactly a new idea but is evidently difficult to achieve. Labor previously has envisioned a cross-portfolio approach in its major policy statements: Paul Keating’s Creative Nation — launched a quarter-century ago in 1994 — and former arts minister Simon Crean’s Creative Australia in 2013. The federal Coalition does not have an arts policy.

Myer says ANA’s first two reports have been well received. The research already has contributed to discussion and debate. But as for more active lobbying or advocacy on behalf of the creative sector, Myer says that is not ANA’s role, although he acknowledges that some may wish that it was. The reports are meant to furnish informed debate.

“The awkwardness about having a sophisticated conversation about arts and cultural policy is that inevitably everyone approaches it from a perspective of self-interest,” says Myer, a former chairman of the Australia Council.

“However enlightened that self-interest might have been, it made it very hard to have a dispassionate, independent discussion about what good cultural policy looked like.”

ANA was supported with \$1.65m from the Myer, Keir and Tim Fairfax foundations for three years. Myer says at least three more reports about the arts will be produced before initial funding concludes in 2021. The partners will assess next year whether to continue, and Myer suggests involvement of philanthropic partners from other states would be welcome.

The purpose of ANA, he adds, is to provide a solid base of information that clearly states the arts are central to Australian life and national prosperity.

“In other countries they are no longer having that debate,” Myer says. “They are getting on with the assumption that it is so: building institutions, practices, government policies and industries around the fact that this centrality does exist, and that there is talent to be nurtured, and creative institutions to be maintained and developed.”

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