



Australian
Rural Leadership
Foundation

REGIONAL
arts
AUSTRALIA

Collaboration canvas

Catalysing creative industries partnerships

A Creative Industries Leadership Action Initiative
presented by the Australian Rural Leadership Foundation
in partnership with Regional Arts Australia





ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF COUNTRY

The Australian Rural Leadership Foundation and Regional Arts Australia acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of all the Lands on which we work and live. We also wish to acknowledge the sacredness of the Land and the continued spiritual presence and cultural practices of Elders past, present and emerging. We also acknowledge that this always was and always will be Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Land.

The work of both organisations would not be possible without the generosity of First Nations Australians who welcome us on their Land, waterways and into their communities and lives. We remain committed to growing and sustaining our relationships, walking side by side with individuals and communities, and will continue to do so for future generations.

Through our shared work we strive for truth-telling about our history and the dispossession of First Nations to create positive change and reconciliation between non-Indigenous Australians and First Nations peoples.



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Forewords



Regional Australia is changing. The role and value of the regional arts sector is changing.

Regional Arts Australia is proud to be an active voice in this changing environment, supporting artists, communities and the creative sector in rural and remote Australia.

Through our national approach we are committed to maintaining strategic, collaborative relationships for the benefit of arts and creative practice across the country. Our priorities are to strengthen artistic and creative practice and to improve opportunities for the access and participation of regional artists, organisations, communities and audiences. We connect across industry and policy sectors to build a stronger, more diverse and sustainable arts and creative industries sector. We work to unlock the cultural ambition of regional, rural and remote Australia.

Regional Arts Australia in partnership with the Australian Rural Leadership Foundation are dedicated to fostering leadership and creative innovation in regional Australia. Through the Creative Industries Leadership Action Initiative, we are committed to work for the betterment of regional Australia nurturing leadership and empowering regional communities and creative practitioners.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Simon Spain".

Dr Simon Spain
Chair, Regional Arts Australia



In 1943, our founder, Miss Dorothy Helmrich, affectionately known as Dot, envisaged a nation where people living in regional, rural, and remote Australia could contribute, participate, and enjoy the arts just as much as those in the big cities. For 80+ years, Regional Arts Australia (RAA) has built upon this vision by creating opportunities, increasing access, providing timely support and fostering collaborative relationships that celebrate unique Australian stories across diverse art forms and landscapes.

In 2022, RAA launched its Regional Strategic Framework, voicing our belief that a sustainable and adaptive regional Australia was made possible through bringing industry and policy sectors together in new and creative ways. Importantly, this positions a 'whole of' regional creative ecology that values the diversity of contemporary practice, is inter-generational and importantly regionally unique.

RAA remain committed to unlocking cross-industry partnerships that demonstrate capacity building. The Leadership in Action program provides a clear process for knowledge exchange that, by design, is embedded in place-informed creativity and industry best practice. Aligning with the National Cultural Policy, 'Revive: a place for every story, a story for every place' - the program champions a vibrant, creative ecosystem.

We thank the artists, creative practitioners, industry representatives, and organisations for the role you are all playing in the creative ecology. A thriving creative ecosystem requires a united regional approach, and the Leadership in Action program is dedicated to exploring and supporting this vision. We look forward to continuing our work together to sustain a creative ecosystem that is supported, contested and reimaged.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Ros Abercrombie".

Ros Abercrombie
Executive Director, Regional Arts Australia



As Chair of the Australian Rural Leadership Foundation, I'm proud to present this report on the Creative Industries Leadership Action Initiative. This initiative represents a powerful collaboration between the Australian Rural Leadership Foundation and Regional Arts Australia, bringing together the creativity, resilience and leadership that define our regional, rural and remote communities.

For over four decades, the creative industries have played a vital role in shaping the social, environmental, cultural, and economic fabric of our nation. The examples highlighted in this report are a testament to the transformative impact that creativity can have, even in the most challenging of contexts. The Creative Industries Leadership Action Initiative is not just a project; it is a call to action. It challenges us to rethink how we approach regional development and invites us to see creativity as a central pillar in building vibrant, sustainable communities.

This report outlines the high-level recommendations, key themes, and actionable steps that emerged from the initiative's forums and national gathering. These insights will guide us as we move forward, ensuring that the creative industries continue to be a driving force in our regions.

I extend my heartfelt thanks to the participants, partners and supporters who contributed to this important work. Together, we are paving the way for a future where creativity and leadership go hand in hand, leading to thriving communities across Australia.

Rick Sawers
Chair, Australian Rural Leadership Foundation



The Creative Industries Leadership Action Initiative marks a significant milestone in our efforts to support regional Australia through innovative, collaborative leadership. As CEO of the Australian Rural Leadership Foundation, I am excited to share the findings and recommendations of this groundbreaking initiative, which brings together leaders from diverse sectors to explore the immense potential of the creative industries.

In partnership with Regional Arts Australia, we embarked on this journey with a clear vision: to harness the power of creativity to address some of the most pressing challenges facing our regions today. From climate adaptation to economic recovery, and from social connection to cultural sustainability, the issues we face are complex and require new ways of thinking and acting.

This report captures the rich discussions, innovative ideas, and actionable strategies that emerged from our focus groups and national gathering. It is a roadmap for how we can integrate the creative industries into regional development in a way that is both impactful and enduring.

I would like to thank all of the participants, our partners at Regional Arts Australia, and our generous supporters, including the JIBB Foundation and Tim Fairfax. Your contributions have made this initiative possible, and your ongoing commitment will ensure its success.

As we move forward, I am confident that the Creative Industries Leadership Action Initiative will serve as a catalyst for positive change, inspiring new partnerships and driving meaningful impact across regional, rural, and remote Australia.

Matt Linnegar
Chief Executive Officer, Australian Rural Leadership Foundation

Introduction

Right now, dotted across regional and remote Australia, there are inspiring examples of creative industry partnerships generating transformation in the most challenging of contexts.

There are countless examples of the social, environmental, cultural and economic benefits of the creative industries to the nation and its regions.

"...artists are part of economically motivated politics of culture-led change in the urban AND rural, whether it is called regeneration or development . . . A different reading of the rural, (and) looking for rural relations of production allows us to stretch the space we experience in art, to set up new modes and models of using our resources."

Kathrin Böhm & Wapke Feenstra
The Rural, 2019

In the Pinnaroo Arts in Health Project, which occurred in Murray Mallee region of South Australia in the community surrounding Pinnaroo with a population of 2,223, the evidence is compelling.

"For those who added art into their lives there was a:

- > Reduction in depression
- > Lower smoking rates
- > More healthy eating (higher adult and child fruit and vegetable consumption)
- > Better overall self-rated health in The Pinnaroo Project arts group in both adults 2022 and 2023 and children in 2023."

The aim of the Creative Industries Leadership Action Initiative is an innovative approach aimed at generating partnerships to enable more creative industries activity in more regions.

Many of the challenges facing our regions are complex and require structural transformation. They include:

- > adaptation in the ways we produce food, generate energy and consume resources in the face of climate change
- > recovery from floods, bushfires, severe weather events and ecological disasters
- > finding new economic opportunities and community identity following the loss of a major industry
- > reimagining ways to build social connection and care for vulnerable and unwell people in our communities
- > innovating what and how we manufacture things to realise economic, environmental and social sustainability
- > building infrastructure in ways that care for Country and honour Traditional Wisdom

They require new ways of listening and sense-making, new ways of thinking, new ways of combining skills and resources, new ways of mobilising people to rise to the challenge of shaping futures together.

Over recent years Australia's creative industries have been impacted by several tectonic shifts, not limited to:

- > the persistence, and then the long tail, of the COVID-19 pandemic
- > a contracting economy
- > increasing impacts of extreme weather events
- > significant shifts in government, corporate and philanthropic creative industries funding priorities

One of the critical issues faced by some segments of the nation's creative industries is the collapse of income streams. For regional, rural and remote creative industries practitioners, there also remains a dearth of professional development opportunities that connect the sector to diverse and mutually beneficial sectors, such as health, disability, agriculture and education.

PURPOSE

Regional Arts Australia and the Australian Rural Leadership Foundation have come together to explore new ways to build vibrant and sustainable regional communities. We recognise that out of necessity, both regional and creative industries have learnt how to be resourceful, innovative and adaptive. We believe that by working together more strategically and systemically, we can discover novel ways to support regions through transition towards more thriving futures.

The vehicle for this was the Creative Industries Leadership Action Initiative – a process of convening a series of conversations leading to a national gathering of key regional, rural and remote industry leaders to challenge and test their assumptions with creative industries leaders.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Key recommendations

Convene a national round table that places creative industries at the centre of regional development

We invite the Australian Government Minister for Regional Development, Local Government and Territories and the Minister for the Arts to co-convene a national round table that identifies opportunities to shift thinking and practice on the place of creative industries in regional development.

This includes and is not limited to:

- > the opportunity to inform and engage regional development agencies, local government
- > authorities and industry sectors through national and state peak bodies;
- > the opportunity to inform and engage industry bodies and the corporate and philanthropic sectors;
- > exchange between the key networks and organisations that operate in the creative industries sector and in regional communities;
- > an agenda that will weave stakeholders' needs together to drive broad ownership of solutions.

Replicate the Creative Industries Leadership Action Initiative in targeted regions

Replicate the Creative Industries Leadership Action Initiative process in targeted regions, including those impacted by significant change or disruption caused by energy transition, industrial change, market collapse, ecological disaster and community disturbance.

This provides real opportunities for creative industries and other sectors to collaborate at a regional level and imagine new ways forward for their communities.



Further recommendations

PARTNERSHIPS MADE IN THE REGIONS – MECHANISMS TO SUPPORT PARTNERSHIPS WITH CREATIVE INDUSTRIES

Find ways to bring regional industry/community representatives/leaders together with creative industries representatives/leaders and practitioners to tackle issues facing regional communities.

- > Develop a “tool kit” for those regions wanting to collaborate with artists in regional initiatives.
- > Establish a national network of regional arts navigators or arts advocates, who can assist with on-the-ground identification of industry needs requiring creatives.

PROMOTE THE REGIONAL PARTNERSHIP MODEL

- > Seek endorsement from the Australian Government, state and territory governments, regional development authorities, local government authorities, and the corporate and philanthropic sectors for the creative industries partnership model.
- > Identify exemplary cases of successful collaborations and create media assets that highlight this successful model (eg. website materials, videos, social media assets, leaflets).
- > Government and industry peak bodies should promote the model, using such exemplars and promotional assets.

HELP MAKE COLLABORATION WORK

Support collaboration between regional communities (and local industries) and creative industry practitioners.

SKILLS AND TRAINING

- > Explore how collaboration between regional communities and artists can foster the exchange of skills and insights, including:
 - appointing arts practitioners to regional corporate boards, industry advisory bodies and community consultation bodies;
 - encouraging regional development proposals to consider the involvement of creative industry exponents;
 - encourage the understanding and expression of regional life and issues through residencies.
- > Consider the training needs of creative practitioners in order to set them up to meet the challenges, and maximise the mutual opportunities, of regional collaborations.

- > Provide relevant training for creatives (including in business, entrepreneurship and other skills) to be successful in collaborations with regional communities.
- > Explore opportunities to include regional creative industry leaders in broader industry leadership programs.
- > Support programs that expose regional Australians, especially young people, to culture, arts and creativity, including through:
 - school curriculum and activities
 - pathways for emerging regional artists.

INFRASTRUCTURE

- > Assess the built, portable and technological infrastructure that can support the delivery of culture and the arts in the regions, with a view to:
 - identifying the preparedness (or otherwise) of particular regions to undertake creative partnership projects;
 - addressing infrastructure issues that arise in the development of projects.
- > Establish a framework for creative hubs and precincts in regional areas as providers for skill development and creative collaboration.
- > Support the development of infrastructure and resources within these spaces.

FUNDING

- > Explore sustainable funding from a range of sources to support creative partners.
- > Consider incentives for business to invest in regional partnership-based projects.
- > Create a national standard for evaluating partnership projects.

Draft principles for partnerships

Forum participants identified these guiding principles for partnerships:



PLACE-BASED

grounded in context, connected to Country, centred in care for Country



CO-DESIGN

willingness to share power, embrace complexity and discomfort, contribute equitably



WHOLE OF ECOSYSTEM

generative not extractive, constructive, focussed on potential not problems, sustainability not unmitigated growth



SHARED RELATIONAL VALUES

common good, equitable, accessible, inclusive, ethical



FAIR VALUE EXCHANGE

symbiotic, reciprocal, mutually beneficial



ENDURING

long-term investment and connections, benefits now and for future generations

Additional recommendations can be found in the June 2024 report *Partnerships for Our Cultural Life*, produced by A New Approach, Australia's national arts and culture think tank.



PARTNERSHIPS

Recognising the value of creative practice

There has never been a better time to recognise the value of creative practice. Participant discussions highlighted how creatives, whether it is through storytelling to innovative thinking, contribute to positive social and economic outcomes - benefits that can be amplified by cross-sectoral partnerships and collaboration.

STORYTELLING AND IDENTITY

Across the many discussions, an abiding theme among participants is the importance of storytelling. Storytelling can:

- > be a way for communities to make sense of change, disaster or trauma;
- > capture and communicate the experience of individuals and communities to outsiders;
- > enable mutual understanding;
- > portray and celebrate identity;
- > help in healing and growth for individuals (and communities) facing adversity;
- > provide a means for people to reimagine their future.

Storytelling can also be a tool for promoting ideas and for evaluating action.

"Governments deal with incremental change; art enables transformational change through the power of storytelling"

– One participant

UNDERSTANDING AND RECIPROCITY

Partnerships are built on sharing skills, values, insights, experience, ambitions and much more. Participants believe that successful relationships do not just bear dividends for each of the partners but engage them in a shared higher purpose.

"Deeper transformative initiatives, built on genuine pairing for mutual benefit, require reciprocal understanding – industry understanding the value and process of art, and creative industries understanding the value and process of industry"

– Travis Tiddy

ARTS AND CREATIVITY ENLIVEN A COMMUNITY

Forum participants recognise that the arts and creative pursuits contribute to the liveability and cultural amenity of the communities they live and work in. They are vital to the social and cultural fabric of a community, as vehicles for sense-making, truth-telling, inclusion, connection and expression.

CREATIVITY CAN TRANSFORM A PLACE, BOOST THE ECONOMY

Creative ideas and projects can transform and provide a new focus for post-industrial communities. There are examples in Australia and abroad where arts and cultural places, artefacts or events inject new life into a town or region.

Culture and the arts contribute to the economy of a region – directly and with a multiplier effect.

VALUING CREATIVE CONTRIBUTION

The gathering touched on a number of aspects that related to the notion of the artist in society. Some of them are outdated and unhelpful "myths". Others deserve recognition and accommodation in any enduring partnership with industry or community.

Creative industries practitioners and artists commonly struggle for proper value recognition. This often is reflected in inadequate wages and terms of employment, but it extends to intellectual property, moral rights and less tangible notions of the value of art to a community or society.

Recognising success in cultural and artistic programs needs to broaden beyond financial measures and attempt to account for the benefits to cultural inclusion, social cohesion, collective identity, resilience, recovery and wellbeing.

The group discussed the artist mindset and skill sets. Participants thought partnerships would demand an entrepreneurial outlook for creative industries partners, including the application of business knowledge and practices. Where training needs were identified, partnerships should include appropriate training as an element of projects.

Guidelines for investing in creative industry partnerships

WHY SHOULD GOVERNMENTS, PHILANTHROPISTS AND INDUSTRIES INVEST IN CREATIVE INDUSTRY PARTNERSHIPS?

“Governments deal with incremental change; art enables transformational change through the power of storytelling”

“The outcome of creative industries partnerships will generate thriving regions”

A model for partnership between regional industries and creative industries provides the nation with the capacity to transform.

- > Arts inspire communities to rise to the challenge of shaping futures together.
- > The arts weave interconnection between people, places, industries and governments in ways that few sectors of society can.
- > The arts can define and communicate who we are, and create stories of what is possible.
- > Creativity cultivates collective understanding, participation and contribution.
- > Arts and culture bridge divides, build cohesion, activate energy and enthusiasm to execute.
- > Arts generate a shared identity and a sense of common good.
- > Creative industries create both economic return on investment and intangible value.
- > Creativity is regional Australia’s secret sauce for social, cultural and economic revolution.

WHAT PRINCIPLES SHOULD UNDERPIN PARTNERSHIPS?

1. **Place-based** – grounded in context, connected to country, centred in care for country
2. **Co-design** – willingness to share power, embrace complexity and discomfort, contribute equitably
3. **Whole of ecosystem** – generative not extractive, constructive, focussed on potential not problems, sustainability not unmitigated growth
4. **Shared relational values** – common good, equitable, accessible, inclusive, ethical
5. **Fair value exchange** – symbiotic, reciprocal, mutually beneficial
6. **Enduring** – long-term investment and connections, benefits now and for future generations

HOW MIGHT CREATIVE INDUSTRY PARTNERSHIPS BE ENABLED AND NURTURED?

Structural shifts

Both regional industry and government (at all levels) could have an impact on partnerships if there were structural changes, particularly in areas of funding, employment, education, infrastructure and governance.

Employment opportunities for artists could be opened up by multi-year (3 years and up), artist-in-residence-type schemes that attach an artist to a community or region (rather than being limited to engagements with companies or organisations).

Creative industries practices could be embedded in K to 12 school curriculum (eg creative thinking, problem solving, design thinking, navigating complexity).

Funding for partnerships should be considered in multi-year agreements. Governments should also consider:

- > tax incentives for corporate/philanthropic support for partnerships;
- > levies and other tax reforms that direct revenue to social investment funds that include arts among beneficiaries;
- > mandating creativity expenditure in all capital works;
- > recognising partnership bids (as opposed to individualistic bids) for grant funding.

Reforms to governance, in both government and industry sectors, should recognise the value of creativity as social capital in LGA targets and regional development strategies. And the skills of creative industries appointees would benefit skills-based corporate boards.



Relational / cultural shifts

Participants saw partnerships thriving if the partners shifted their focus away from their own interests to that of a shared interest, underpinned by common values and language.

Through the promotion of successful creative industries partnership projects, regional communities would appreciate the value of creativity as integral to a thriving community.

The creative industries sector could facilitate partnerships by making it easier for regional industry to find creatives (a register or app was suggested). Likewise, finding “arts champions” in regional industry and communities would foster relationships and formal partnerships.

Decisions on government funding in the creative industry sector should be trusted to regional decisionmakers.

Behavioural and psychological shifts

The creative industry sector would benefit from skills development in business skills, strategic thinking and entrepreneurship. Reciprocally, regional industry would benefit from the insights and practices of creatives (storytelling, creative thinking, etc).

Participants said there needed to be a re-evaluation of the worth of creative industries and their practitioners, both by outsiders and by themselves. This would engender a more confident and optimistic outlook by creative partners that embraces the opportunities that partnerships might offer.

The same shift in perspective could be asked of government to:

- > properly value the arts’ contribution to community (economic and beyond); and
- > recognise storytelling as a legitimate evaluation tool.



Creative partnerships in action

Focus group participants were asked to share examples of existing creative industry partnership initiatives that align with the principles described.

Between them, they identified 31 unique and inspiring exemplars, including:

- > place-based public artworks and storytelling projects (eg: silos, light shows, murals);
- > Large-scale, industrial, connection-to-country, digital design project utilising machine learning;
- > transformation of post-industrial communities, including a degraded mining town and a post-sawmill timber town;
- > ambitious, industry-led circular economy design projects engaging artists in new ways;
- > a plethora of festivals including music, dance, theatre, murals and sculptures, celebrating diversity, recovering from disasters and reimagining futures;
- > environmental disaster recovery, sense-making and storytelling programs, theatre productions, public sculptures and more;
- > high impact arts-in-health initiatives in partnership with Traditional Owners;
- > multi-partner environmental protection and restoration initiatives;
- > innovative employment models, enriching the lives of vulnerable people through artists-in-residence in aged and disability care environments.

When asked to identify the features that made these partnership initiatives successful, the following themes emerged:

- > the people involved – mobilisers, networkers, arts advocates, innovators, wisdom-holders, change champions, people with skin in the game and in it for the long haul;
- > connection to place, co-designed with community and shaped in and by the context;
- > long-term thinking, forward-thinking, clarity of vision;
- > they leveraged opportunities and thresholds of change;
- > application of creativity to communication and storytelling;
- > a genuine value exchange, symbiotic relationships, shared power, co-contribution and mutual benefit;
- > diverse perspectives being brought together in safe spaces with careful stewardship, so there is cross-pollination of ideas and learning from each other;
- > enduring commitment and long-term funding;
- > deep respect for Traditional Owners and the environment.

POTENTIAL IMPACT AT SCALE

When asked to describe what might be possible if creative industry partnerships like these became more widespread and consistent across regional Australia, the following themes emerged.

- > **Improvements in social and community health and wellbeing:**
 - increased inclusion, connection, trust, belonging, participation, prosperity;
 - greater attraction and retention of diverse people in regional communities;
 - greater community vibrancy, vitality and resilience.
- > **A recalibration of our relationships with each other and the places where we live:**
 - values lift to greater good, common good, shared values, collective benefit;
 - shared sense of place, shared identity, shared purpose;
 - redefine contemporary regional Australia.
- > **Long-term transformative impacts (socially, environmentally, economically, culturally):**
 - increased social capital, active citizenship, co-investment, contribution;
 - more generative, less extractive ways of doing “industry” in regional Australia;
 - structural change to the way arts and creative industries are funded and understood for the value they generate, from grant funding to social entrepreneurship;
 - innovation brokerage, bringing diverse stakeholders together to leverage off each other’s skills, knowledge, resources for mutual benefit;
 - new and dynamic systems of regional production and distribution.
- > **The creative industries sector would be valued more and feel central to a community thriving (not fringe)**

WAYS TO NURTURE AND NUDGE PARTNERSHIPS

Focus group participants started to explore ideas and opportunities for nurturing and nudging the development and sustaining of creative industry partnerships. These ideas and the question of “where to start” were developed further at the workshop, so will be described later.

Case Study: Creativity Connects Resilient Communities

In the heart of Australia's vast landscapes, a new approach to leadership is emerging—one that recognises the power of creativity to build resilience and adaptability in regional, rural, and remote communities.

Through the Creative Industries Leadership Action Initiative, a partnership between the Australian Rural Leadership Foundation (ARLF) and Regional Arts Australia (RAA), creative leaders are exploring how art and storytelling can address some of the most pressing challenges these communities face.

This initiative brought together creative practitioners from across the country, including Travis Tiddy, Mikaela Jade and Vic McEwan, who share a common belief: creative industries are not just about art—they are about survival, connection, and change.

The Creative Industries Leadership Action Initiative uncovered a widening gap between the creative sectors and government, philanthropic, and corporate sectors in recognising what's needed to create place-based art and the lasting value these projects bring to rural, regional, and remote communities. At the same time, it showcased successful examples of creative projects delivering hyper-local solutions to the challenges faced by these communities.

Storytelling, as explored in this initiative, became a powerful tool for disaster recovery, the Covid-19 pandemic, and ongoing socio-economic disparity in rural, regional and remote areas. For over 60,000 years, stories have connected Australians to their past, grounds them in their present, and offers a way to reimagine a future beyond disaster. Through this lens, communities find the strength to heal, to rebuild, and to grow stronger. This is where the Creative Industries Leadership Action Initiative shines light: in recognising that communities need more than infrastructure to rebuild—they need stories that help them make sense of the chaos and trauma they've endured.

CREATIVE SOLUTIONS FOR HYPER-LOCAL ISSUES

Travis Tiddy, a fourth-generation resident of Queenstown, Tasmania, knows that the land shapes the people who live on it. Queenstown is a town with an infamous story, defined by its mining history and the environmental degradation that followed. But, for Travis, this tough landscape is also a source of creativity and resilience.

"Whenever I explain who I am, I tell the story of my region," Travis says. "The dynamics of growing up in Queenstown build resilience and a hyperlocal attitude towards getting things done."

In 2008, Travis and other residents launched the Queenstown Heritage and Arts Festival as a community-driven response to the town's need for renewal. The festival quickly became a beacon for change, bringing together art, industry, and community. After several successful years, the festival was reimaged as The Unconformity, an ambitious, experimental festival that now attracts artists and audiences from across Australia.

The event offers opportunities for Australian and international artists to embed themselves as artists-in-residence through programs designed to unearth the cultural voice of the region and conceptualise and develop creative works with the local population from that engagement.

In that space, artists work with students and other residents to create experiences that include dance, music, live art, sound art poetry and other literary interpretations of what it means to live within the Queenstown district.

The Unconformity has brought new skills into the region, and by engaging youth in creative industries the festival has been a vehicle for re-imagining a future that is beyond industrialisation.

An ongoing partnership with the Victorian College of the Arts supports third-year theatre students to engage with the region with site-responsive practice each year. Since 2018, 1,289 artists across all art forms have applied for the residency, comprising 25% from Tasmania, 54% nationally and 21% internationally.

The festival has connected traditional and non-traditional corporate supporters to the region, as diverse as the AFL and renewable energy companies, securing \$9.13 million in direct funding investment and attracting a visitor spend of up to \$600,000 following each iteration.

The subversive arts-led approach to turning perceived disadvantages into sources of inspiration has attracted PhD candidates, academics and international festival leaders, and influenced international cultural magazine, *Time Out*, to nominate The Unconformity as one of the top 40 most exciting experiences in the world in 2020.

"The Unconformity's highlighted how festivals and creative projects can transform post-industrial towns, not just economically, but socially, by fostering community pride and strengthening social ties," Travis explains.

CONNECTING SONGLINES AND TECHNOLOGY

Mikaela Jade is a Cabrogal woman from the Dharug-speaking Nations of Sydney and the founder and CEO of Indigital, an Indigenous-led social impact and community engagement company. Mikaela was invited to the roundtable as a graduate of the Australian Rural Leadership Program.

Through their Connecting with Country program, Mikaela and her team at Indigital collaborate with Elders and Knowledge Holders to incorporate Indigenous ways of knowing, being and doing into the development of critical technology infrastructure being built on Country. They do this in a way that is meaningful for both Indigenous Communities and the businesses operating on their Lands.

“Our goal is to mobilise First Nations communities and development partners to learn together what it means to place infrastructure in the community, on Country, while respecting the oldest continuing cultures in the world,” Mikaela explains.

“We work with Traditional Custodians to share their story of Country and of culture through artwork embedded in the architecture of the building and landscaping design.

“The methods we use to connect our culture to development are as old as time.

“We come together on Country, speak to ancestral beings, imagine what Country was like before colonisation, and imagine colour schemes, stories and relationships. We bring this forward to the present and explore how Traditional Owners and Custodians interpret Country now, and imagine what this site will be like in 40 years’ time.”

In Western Sydney, Indigital worked with the Dharug community and Microsoft, to share their story and connection to Country in the development of a data centre.

Indigital and a group of 30 Traditional Custodians used traditional imagery to train a machine-learning algorithm to understand interpretations of the Dharug Nation’s resilience. The algorithm created culturally recognised patterns and imagery to be reflected in the data centre site’s exterior artwork and landscape design.

In addition to design, the community meet regularly to build their knowledge and skills in using new technologies and to work together to develop partnership goals and opportunities for long-term reciprocity. This includes working together to share traditional ways of caring for Country.

“We see a lot of synergy between creativity, technology and how they overlap and integrate,” Mikaela says.

“Creativity helps people communicate concepts and the reasons why we should invest in new technologies, industries and people.

“Storytelling exposes us to new ways of thinking.”

REBUILDING COMMUNITIES THROUGH CREATIVITY

For Vic McEwan, art has always been about more than aesthetics—it’s about confronting the difficult realities communities face and finding a way through. As the artistic director of The Cad Factory in Narrandera, NSW, Vic has used art to bring people together around some of the most challenging issues, from environmental disasters to social trauma.

One such project involved the mass fish kills in the Darling River system. Vic brought together scientists and First Nations custodians to create a performance that helped the community process the ecological and cultural trauma of these events. “This collaboration allowed different knowledge systems to explore their grief,” Vic explains.

The power of this project lay not just in the final performance, but in the process of storytelling that helped people make sense of their pain, process trauma and build resilience by reimagining their futures.

Vic’s work also reflects a deeper truth about the role of artists in regional Australia. Too often, funding models focus on short-term outcomes, neglecting the time and resources needed to build meaningful relationships within communities. Vic notes, artists are increasingly being called upon to help rebuild communities after disasters—but without the long-term support needed to do the work effectively.

Similarly, discussions from the Creative Industries Leadership Action Initiative found that socially engaged artists need to be valued not just for their finished work, but for the process of engagement that leads to community healing and transformation.

“We need to allow space and time for artists to sit with communities in trauma until they are ready to participate,” he said.

A NEED FOR NEW FUNDING MODELS

Both Travis and Mikaela agree that the current funding models for creative industries need to evolve, and greater opportunities for cross-sectorial partnerships are crucial in achieving this.

Traditionally, creative projects are evaluated based on immediate economic impact, like visitor numbers. However, the discussion outcomes from the Creative Industries Leadership Action Initiative emphasises that true value lies in the broader social and cultural benefits that creative industries bring to communities. These benefits include cultural inclusion, social cohesion, and the creation of resilient, thriving communities.

Participants in the initiative further advocated for new policy framework that empowers artists to understand the commercial value of their work and further develop cross-sector partnerships needed to create change in rural, regional and remote communities.

“First Nations creatives shouldn’t be applying for small grants and then over-delivering to compete. It’s soul-destroying. This initiative calls for long-term investment in creative partnerships, recognising that the impact of creative work goes far beyond what can be measured in dollars and cents,” explains Mikaela.

THE PROOF IS IN THE STORYTELLING

At the heart of the Creative Industries Leadership Action Initiative is a simple yet profound truth: partnerships that create opportunities for storytelling through creative expression is essential for communities facing change. It helps them make sense of the past, heal from adversity, and imagine new possibilities for the future.

Through cross-sector partnerships and long-term investment in creative collaborations, Australia can not only drive economic growth but also foster cultural inclusion, social cohesion, and community wellbeing. As the stories of Mikaela, Travis, and Vic show, creativity is more than a tool for survival—it is a path to thriving, resilient communities across rural, regional, and remote Australia.



PROJECT REPORT

Initiative background

The Australian Rural Leadership Foundation and Regional Arts Australia started a discussion about collaborating to form a partnership as early as 2022.

In May 2023 the ARLF and RAA signed a memorandum of understanding formalising the partnership that commits, through leadership development and action, to build sector capacity and ensuring long-term positive impact across the regions.

The Creative Industries Leadership Action Initiative was designed to bring a group of the nation's leaders together, through the RAA's national network, to collaborate with select ARLF alumni, who work in seven key focus industries. The purpose of this facilitated process was for key regional rural and remote industry leaders to challenge and test assumptions with the creative industries leaders.

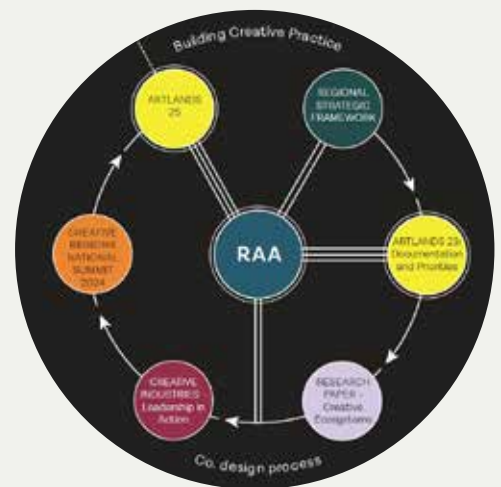
During the development of the Creative Industries Leadership Action Initiative between the ARLF and the RAA, it became clear that the context and purpose of a joint project needed to sit on a foundation of the strategic work done by RAA in recent years.

THE SEVEN STAGES OF THE LEADERSHIP ACTION INITIATIVE

- 1 Establishing a working relationship and formalising a partnership between ARLF and RAA

Pre-Creative Industries Leadership Action Initiative information and data gathering included reviewing the work that emerged from RAA strategic initiatives:

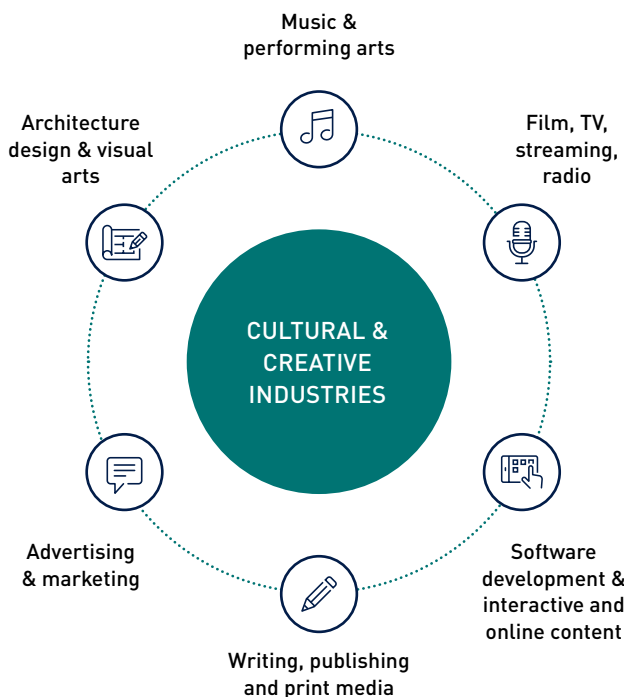
 - > Regional Strategic Framework
 - > ARTLANDS 2023 documentation and priorities
 - > Creative Ecosystems Research Paper
- 2 Selection of suitable delegates from both organisations to add value to the purpose of the initiative
- 3 Distributing reading material to provide context and then scheduling eight facilitated focus groups with combined RAA and ARLF delegate and summarising the themes to emerge prior to the national gathering in Canberra
- 4 A national gathering in Canberra on 7–8 May 2024
- 5 Collaborating to draft and review the collaboration canvas report
- 6 Launch of the collaboration canvas report at RAA's Creative Regions National Summit on 8 October 2024



SEGMENTS OF THE CREATIVE INDUSTRIES¹

For the purposes of this initiative the segments of the creative industries include:

- > music and performing arts
- > film, television, streaming services, radio
- > software development (start-ups), interactive and online content
- > writing, publishing and print media
- > advertising and marketing
- > architecture, design, and the visual arts



AUSTRALIAN RURAL LEADERSHIP FOUNDATION PROJECT TEAM

- > Erin Chesney / Project Officer
- > Jaiden Kearns / Project Administrator
- > Vivienne Johnson / Philanthropy Manager
- > Jorunn Lorenzen / Marketing Communications Manager
- > Nicky McMillan / Media and Government Relations Manager
- > Matt Linnegar / Chief Executive
- > Lockie McDonald / Director Corporate Services Director

REGIONAL ARTS AUSTRALIA PROJECT TEAM

- > Ros Abercrombie / Executive Director
- > Scott Howie / General Manager

TANYA LEHMANN

Facilitator



I have more than two decades' experience leading large-scale organisation and systems change within the rural health sector in South Australia and nationally. A clinician by background, I am also an experienced project manager, executive director, board chair, coach, mentor, trainer and leadership program facilitator. I run a consultancy specialising in organisational change and leadership. I am an ARLF Associate and a graduate of the Australian Rural Leadership Program.

FUNDING ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The Australian Rural Leadership Foundation and Regional Arts Australia wish to acknowledge that the 2024 Creative Industries Leadership Action Initiative would not have been possible without the generous funding support of the Jibb Foundation and Tim Fairfax.

We would also like to acknowledge and thank both the JIBB Foundation and Tim Fairfax for their ongoing support as benefactors for the creative industries and for leadership development in regional rural and remote communities.

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1. ARC Centre of Excellence for Creative Industries and Innovation 2010, Centre for International Economics, June 2009, Building a Creative Innovation Economy, 2008.

Initiative methodology

SELECTION OF PARTICIPANTS

Thirty participants (15 selected by RAA, 15 selected by ARLF) contributed to the eight focus group workshops and then travelled to Canberra from across the nation to contribute to a one-day Creative Industries Leadership Action Initiative on Tuesday 8 May 2024.

RAA selected creative industries leaders to participate from three different cohorts of stakeholders following an expression of interest in their newsletter. Two participants were selected from RAA's First Nations Knowledge Circle. Another cohort was derived from Artlands 2023 participants which ensured strategic develop continuity. The remaining participants were selected from across RAA's programs and initiatives.

The ARLF direct marketed an invitation to submit an expression of interest to 1008 Alumni from a base of over 2600 Alumni, with a specific focus on the following industry sectors:

- > Agriculture
- > Environment and Sustainability
- > Tourism and Hospitality
- > Healthcare and Social Assistance
- > Food, Fibre and Forestry
- > Education and Training
- > Digital Technology

RAA identified the seven industry sectors from which to draw the ARLF Alumni delegates based on their strategic needs derived from the work they had undertaken in the past two years.

A selection panel was formed, and applicants were selected based on their responses to the Expression of Interest applications. Where a gap was identified, individual approaches were made to several alumni who the ARLF considered could offer significant value to the conversation.

FOCUS GROUPS

Eight focus groups were conducted via MS Teams between 12 and 19 April 2024. The focus groups brought together a mix of leaders from regional and creative industries to begin exploring opportunities that were ripe to catalyse collaborative partnerships. Focus group questions were designed using appreciative inquiry, to invite constructive engagement, strengths focus and optimism.

1. Why did you say yes to the opportunity to participate?
2. What principles should shape the collaborative partnerships between creative and regional industries?
3. Can you think of and share examples of existing partnerships between creative industries and regional industries that are consistent with the design principles?
4. What is it about these examples that makes them work?
5. If we could do these things more often, more consistently across regional, rural and remote Australia, what might be possible?
6. How might we nurture and nudge relationships and formal partnerships between creative industries and regional industries?
7. Where would you start? Specific locations, partnership opportunities?

NATIONAL GATHERING

Thirty delegates from every state and territory in Australia converged in Canberra on 7 and 8 May 2024. The group convened for dinner on the first night. This was a relaxed and informal event designed to focus intention, facilitate introductions, encourage networking and invite ideation. Well primed by focus group discussions, participants enthusiastically engaged in this opportunity.

The next morning, delegates arrived at the Arboretum early and excited to participate in the workshop. Following a warm welcome in the crisp Autumn air from Traditional Owner Paul Girrawah House, delegates were led through a series of conversations centred on the following lines of inquiry:

- > Why should governments, philanthropists and industries invest in creative industry partnerships?
- > What principles should underpin these partnerships?
- > What can we learn from existing examples of such partnerships about what is required to make them successful?
- > What structural, relational, behavioural and psychological shifts are required to enable the creative industry partnerships model to scale?
- > How might we generate such shifts?
- > Where could we start? Pitch a shovel-ready idea.



Joining a movement for change

MOTIVATIONS

In response to the question about why they said yes to the opportunity to participate in the Creative Industries Leadership Action Initiative, the following recurring themes emerged:

- > recognition of arts being vital to the social and cultural fabric of community, as vehicles for sense-making, truth-telling, inclusion, connection and expression
- > identification of the arts and creative industries as powerful catalysts for transformational change in post-industrial communities
- > understanding that creative industries and practices are generative and essential to sustainable economic development in regional Australia
- > appreciation of the value generated by creative practice and expression that extends well beyond economic measures of success (eg: cultural inclusion, social cohesion, collective identity, resilience, recovery and wellbeing)
- > recognition of the arts and creative practice as essential to thriving communities
- > a desire to be part of a movement that brings diverse people together to tackle the unique challenges facing rural, regional and remote Australia

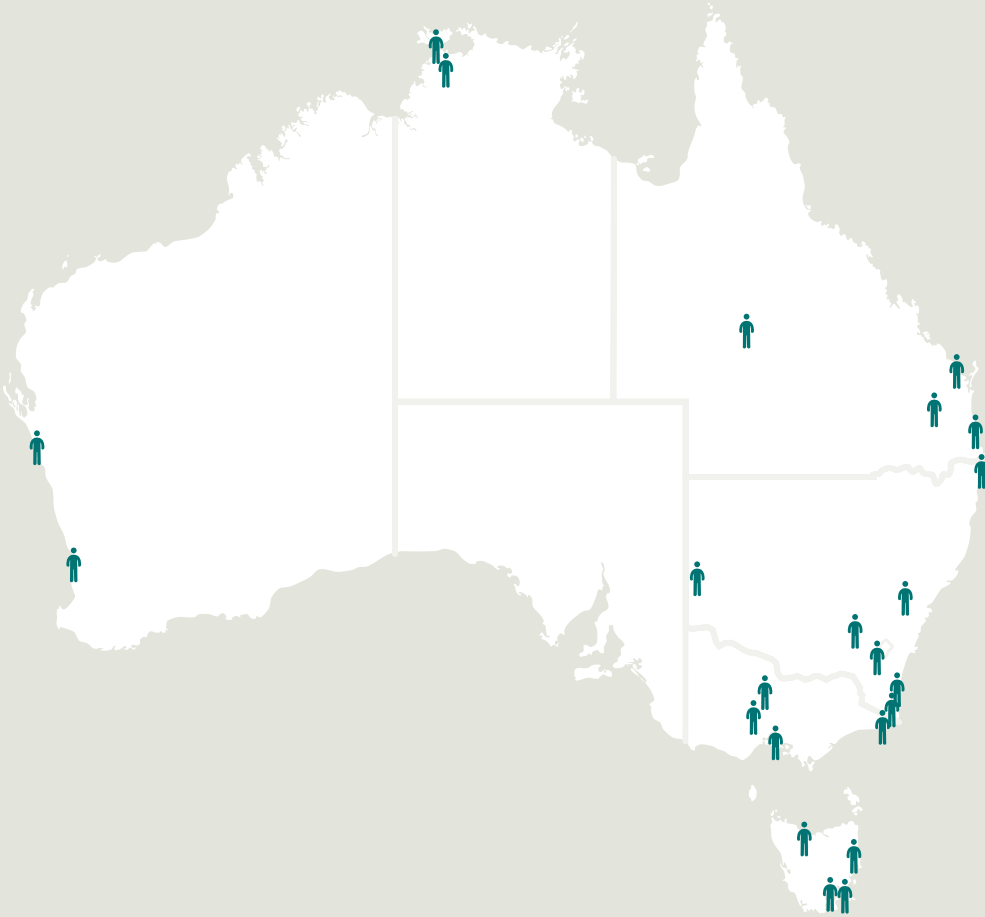
"This is an opportunity for artists to move out of the agitator role and step fully into their capacity to be innovators, creators and enablers of change."

"Art plays a vital role in busting myths; we have an opportunity to interrogate legitimising myths that exist in rural and remote communities".

"We can advocate all we want but we need a plan for a way forward."



Participants



JUDE ANDERSON

Founder | Punctum Inc

Castlemaine/ Dja Dja Wurrung Country, VIC



I champion new models of contemporary performance and audience engagement in regional settings in Australia and internationally. With artists and researchers, I founded regionally based live arts organisation Punctum on Djaara Country, central Victoria. Punctum is research led and artist centred, creating works and programs which give arts experimentation a central place in regional culture. A common thread is their questioning of systems through shared cultural adventure. Productions are collective rehearsals of change. Audiences and communities connecting with their work welcome each proposition as an expression of a possible future and an invitation to gather and think differently.

ANNA WEEKES

Executive Officer and Creative Producer |

Darwin Community Arts

Mediator | Community Justice Centre

Darwin/ Larrakia Country, NT



I have a Community Arts and Cultural Development practice, directing arts projects for social justice on community, in Australia and internationally. I have worked in Cambodia for 18 months with a local arts and social wellbeing NGO and in Vanuatu working with a group of women to nurture and support their ideas on women's community development projects. I have spent the last 14 years working in the Top End with Darwin Community Arts, Larrakia Nation Aboriginal Corporation and Katherine Regional Arts. I won the Kirk Robson award for Community Arts and Cultural Development practice.

ELLEN NIGHTINGALE

Treasurer | Kalbarri Development Association WA
 Owner | Kalbarri Quadbike Safaris
 Kalbarri/ Nanda Country, WA



I am a tourism business operator and leader in the Kalbarri Development Association. Since the impact of Cyclone Seroja in April 2021, I have been involved in activities to build community connection through gaining a better understanding of the community’s needs and priorities, and advocating for them. As a member of a very small, remote community, I aim to offer a perspective of the lived experience here and the challenges faced by residents to participate in creative activities. Even though the health benefits of such activities are well known, it is hard to access support in a competitive environment.

DR PILAR KASAT

Chief Executive Officer | Regional Arts WA
 Perth/ Whadjuk, Noongar Country, WA



I am the CEO of Regional Arts WA, where I lead efforts to strengthen Western Australia’s regional arts sector across a vast state. With 20 years of experience in community cultural development and diversity advocacy, I am passionate about the power of the arts to transform individuals and communities. In 2022 I completed a PhD, with research focusing on the relationship between creativity, cultural equity and social justice.

MELISSA BROOKE

Deputy Chair | Regional Development Australia
 Vice President | Queensland Rural Regional and Remote Women’s Network
 Project Manager (Sustainable Futures)| Economic Development Queensland
 Bundaberg / Bailai, Gurang, Gooreng Gooreng and Taribelang Bunda peoples, QLD



I have more than 25 years’ experience in public sector leadership, including holding extensive board positions. My background spans state, federal and local government, working across areas such as Sustainable Futures, economic development, local government, social services, emergency services, transport and roads, and primary industries. I am committed to driving economic prosperity, building resilient communities and championing diversity. I advocate for fairness, equity and inclusiveness in representing rural, regional and remote communities, women, and minority groups.

JEN KEIOSKIE

Rural Mental Health Coordinator | Rural Adversity Mental Health Program
 Pambula/ Yuin Country, NSW



I work in health, predominantly mental health, with one foot in environmental health and another in trying to find creative solutions for complex social, emotional and economic needs during times of adversity. I employ education, community development and strengths-based empowerment models. I believe passionately in the power of creativity. Complex problems can be solved through creativity, community connectedness and the power of storytelling – the drivers of change. Rural communities have a powerful and inspiring story to tell. Through adversity, positive change is possible.

MELINDA McCROHON

Grazier & Managing Director | Billabong Angus
 Lecturer | Charles Sturt University
 Holbrook/ Wiradjuri Country, NSW



In addition to my roles at Billabong Angus and Charles Sturt University, I am a board member of Holbrook Landcare Network. I advocate for the development of strong, resilient communities in regional, rural and remote Australia. I am a champion for undergraduate mentoring, and support the development of early career teachers so they are equipped with early intervention teaching practices in literacy. These practices integrate the use of creative industries to support learners. My work demonstrates the power of embedding creative practices into lifelong literacy learning, which filters into all aspects of the community, and enhances social connection, cultural practices and shared understandings.

CLAIR MUDALIAR

Tourism Manager | Eden Visitor Information Centre
 Eden/ Dhurga Country, NSW



I am a champion for the sustainable, independent, non-profit tourism centre model. This entails innovative revenue-generating concepts, strategic stakeholder relationships and community involvement. A crucial aspect of this approach is collaborating with the creative sector to increase visitation and enhance visitor engagement, and supporting and promoting local artists and creatives. With a strong passion for collaboration and cross-sector relationships, I am committed to advocating for the needs of regional communities.

CARMEN NIEVES

Festival Director | Orange Chamber Music Festival

Orange/ Wiradjuri Country, NSW



I am a Venezuelan-born professional musician and have worked in the arts sector from the age of 15 as a performer and educator. My passion lies in providing access to fine music for youth, regional communities and audiences of all backgrounds. I am an experienced music educator and curator, with qualifications in music education and arts management. I have experience in planning, developing and delivering world-class events in our community, and am committed to bringing the very best of Australian arts and culture closer to the people of regional NSW.

DAN WALKER

Chief Scientist | Australian Centre for International Agricultural Research

Canberra / Ngunnawal and Ngambri Country, ACT



I have established a research career in agricultural and natural resource management. I'm involved in research management both in Australia and across the Indo-Pacific region. I believe deeply in the power of excellent applied research to generate the innovation that can underpin sustainable agri-food systems and the livelihoods associated with them. I have held senior leadership roles in the CSIRO and at the Australian Centre for International Agricultural Research. I am a graduate of the Australia Rural Leadership Program.

KELLY LEONARD

Artist and community volunteer

Broken Hill / Wilyakali Country, NSW



I am an artist whose work responds to the environment through weaving, installations and performative actions. I live in a remote location impacted by climate change, extractivism, bio-diversity loss and colonial settler mindsets. Historically, narratives about the extractive zone have been economic ones: how much wealth has been generated. I aim to present other stories to give voice to the environment. I am passionate about people's rights to practise and access culture and creativity in a remote region undergoing change. I also believe creativity leads blue sky thinking in developing solutions and connections for communities.

TANYA GREENWOOD

Project Officer | Fingal Valley Neighbourhood House

Gray/ Lutruwita, TAS



In my role as project officer, I am involved in the delivery of community programs for children, young people, wellbeing and the arts across northeast Tasmania. I have a background in social welfare, and early childhood education and care. I'm passionate about giving every child and young person in Tasmania the opportunity to thrive and grow, and to see all families with the support they need to care for their children. I am also a member of Break O'Day Regional Arts, bringing creative arts and cultural events to our region, and supporting positive social change.

SHELLEY PISANI

Business Manager | Bridges Health & Community Care

Bundaberg/ Taribelang Bunda/ Gurang/ Gooreng Gooreng Country, QLD



I work for a mental health service, dedicated to a proactive approach through an Arts-led Wellbeing Program Strategy. The aim is to engage communities in co-designing programs and projects that foster stronger connections, a sense of belonging and deeper understanding through creative health methodologies. Throughout my career, I have witnessed the transformative power of the arts on individuals and communities. I am a passionate advocate for the crucial role of artists and arts workers as catalysts for change and healing.

BEN BARLOW

Investor, Company director

Woodend / Dja Dja Wurrung Country, VIC



With over 19 years of experience in business investment management, I have driven investment and change in high potential agribusiness and Agbiotech enterprises, making them profitable and "investor ready". I am a non-executive director of Australian Wool Network, a leading wool marketing and brokering company. I hold a Master of Business in Agribusiness from Monash University, a Bachelor of Economics from Latrobe University, and am a member of the Australian Institute of Company Directors and a fellow of the Australian Rural Leadership Foundation. I believe creative thinking is good for business and regional development more broadly.

TONY SCHNEIDERS

Professor of Health Science | Central Queensland University

Bundaberg/ Taribelang Bunda/ Gurang/ Gooreng Gooreng Country, QLD



I am a university academic and health professional who is passionate about the health and wellbeing of regional, rural and remote communities. As an academic leader I manage allied health courses across the university's regional footprint. I am a board director for Bundaberg Health Promotions Ltd and Impact Community Services. I recently completed the ARLF Leading Australian Resilient Communities program.

NICOLE FERRIE

Executive Leader | Bendigo Community Health Services

Bendigo/ Dja Wurrung and the Taungurung Country, VIC



I am a former journalist and daily newspaper editor. Over more than 25 years in the media, my multi-award-winning career has been acknowledged for highlighting social justice issues and helping shift community attitudes, in particular around gender inequality. I won the Our Watch Walkley Award for reporting on violence against women and children. I now work in executive leadership roles in the not-for-profit sector, with a strong focus on the social determinants of health. This work embraces diversity and inclusion, especially the voices of people with lived experience.

ALISON MOBBS

Regional Strategist

Bell / Wakka Wakka, Jarowair and Barrumgum Country, QLD



I am a regionally-based strategic planner and community developer in the Western Darling Downs. I am deputy chair of the Queensland Music Festival and work in local government to develop community and agricultural assets. I strive to facilitate thoughtful and informed decision-making and innovation to leverage collective impact, particularly across and with regional communities. The creative industries hold immense possibilities for strengthening and delivering positive impact across regional Australia. Telling our stories enables connection and creativity, and improves visitation, liveability, health, education, economic and environmental outcomes. I am a graduate of the Australian Rural Leadership Program and was the inaugural John B Innovation in Agriculture scholar.

MIKAELA JADE

Chief Executive Officer | Indigital

Canberra / Ngunnawal and Ngambri Country, ACT



I'm CEO of Indigital, Australia's first Indigenous edu-tech company. As a proud Cabrogal woman from the Dharug-speaking nation, I come from the world's oldest storytellers and am widely recognized as a leader in the technology space.

Beginning my career as a park ranger, I leveraged my background in environmental biology to initiate a project in remote Northern Territory, which evolved into Indigital. Through Indigital, I innovate ways to digitise and translate Indigenous Knowledge, fostering pathways into the digital economy. Recognitions include the Schwab Foundation Social Innovators of the Year award and speaking at the United Nations. I am committed to showcasing Indigenous tech leadership, I also contribute to global governance discussions on the metaverse and Indigenous issues.

MICHAELA NUTT

Senior Manager, Arts Policy | ArtsNT

Darwin/ Larrakia Country, NT



I am an arts advocate from *Naarm/ Melbourne*, currently working in the Northern Territory. I work to widen access to creative leadership for people from marginalised backgrounds and am passionate about contemporary, participatory practice that achieves social and economic outcomes whilst delivering innovative experiences for audiences. I have a background in theatre, dance and large-scale participatory events. I was the inaugural graduate of the WA Academy of Performing Arts' Professional Masters of Arts Management. I have worked with Regional Arts Victoria, National Institute of Circus Arts, the Victorian College of the Arts, and in the UK for the National Theatre Wales and Luton Council.

TRAVIS TIDY

Festival Director

Queenstown / Lutruwita Country, TAS



For 15 years, I have been invested in positioning the arts centrally within regional communities. As founding director, I guided the biennial Queenstown Heritage and Arts Festival from its genesis into a celebrated international case-study for regional development, place-branding and cultural activation. Following festivals in 2010, 2012 and 2014, I was Artistic Director/CEO of The Unconformity (2015–2024). I have a Bachelor of Fine Arts in Visual Communication (UTAS, First Class Honours). I have won the Gallagher Bequest Churchill Fellowship, the Premier's Young Achiever in Tourism Award and the Claudio Alcorso International Arts Residency.

SAM ARCHER

Theatre maker and experiential facilitator
Castlemaine / Dja Dja Wurrung Country, VIC



My creative world path has been shaped by diverse influences, from classic theatre to British comedy. As an actor, director and facilitator, I have contributed to productions across Australia, with a passion for inclusion and mixed abilities theatre. Beyond theatre, I have been involved in the environmental, Indigenous, agricultural and leadership sectors, founding social enterprise curious&curious to create immersive experiences that challenge perspectives, foster imagination and influence change. My passion for connection has taken me from remote Aboriginal communities to the Himalayas and Antarctica. I am a graduate of the Australian Rural Leadership Program

REI CHEETHAM

Arts worker
Brunswick Heads/ Bundjalung Country, NSW



My mob is Euahlayi and Ngemba, from out near Brewarrina, NSW. A former dancer, I have worked on regional festivals, such as This Is Not Art and Bluesfest. I have worked at the Australia Council for the Arts and have been involved with the arts and community sector for nearly two decades. I currently serve on the Regional Arts Australia First Nations Knowledge Circle.

CINDI DRENNAN

Founder and director | illuminart
Medlow Bath / Gundungurra and Dhurag Country, NSW



I am a multimedia artist and creative director, who has specialised in projection art for over 25 years. I pioneered techniques for pixel mapping, video art and painting with light in the 1990s, before establishing the company illuminart stories in light, in regional South Australia. Community building is at the heart of my digital arts practice. The illuminart team works with regional communities to create large-scale, multimedia public art and storytelling, providing artistic and technical guidance to artists and organisations. Such projects – like the award-winning Quorn Silo Light Show – support the economy of small towns, employ regional artists and enlighten tourists about local heritage.

ANDREW GRAY

Executive Director | South East Arts
Bega/ Youin Country, NSW



I am a recognised leader in the Australian regional arts sector, with experience in education and public programs for major institutions, such as the National Film and Sound Archive, Museum of Australian Democracy and the Australian War Memorial. As Executive Director of South East Arts I have instigated key cultural initiatives for the South Coast, including Headland Writers Festival and Giiyong Festival. I am also a business advisor for Creative Plus Business, which provides arts business advice and guidance to individual practitioners and arts organisations across NSW.

JESSIE PANGAS

Manager of Arts and Culture | Central Coast Council
Ulverstone / Lutruwita Country, TAS



I am an artist and cultural producer dedicated to fostering creativity and connection in regional and remote communities through the arts. My work spans studio and community-engaged practice, collaborating on impactful projects with organisations, including Ten Days on the Island, Urban Theatre Projects and The Song Room. In my current role I lead the development of Hive, the municipality's innovative cultural precinct. Hive encompasses a visitor centre, community arts and craft studios, a museum, art gallery, science centre and planetarium. It is a hub for community connection and creativity.

TRACEY BENSON

Creative Agitator
Bribie Island/ Yarun Country, QLD



I am the founder of Treecreate, based on Yarun Bribie Island in regional Queensland. Treecreate champions transdisciplinary place-based approaches to creative industries by facilitating local and international forums, including exhibitions, workshops and interdisciplinary residency and educational programs. My passion is supporting creative research, cultural awareness and the playful exploration of tech to focus on environmental awareness of place. My work demonstrates how working across disciplines can build social connections, locally and internationally, across knowledge systems and cultures.

MICHAEL LLOYD

Sports Coach

Longreach / Ininigai Country, QLD



I work in western Queensland, covering an area the size of Victoria where I coach a variety of sports in schools and local clubs. I also work for the local newspaper, keeping alive an important communication tool for our community. I have undertaken a number of projects for the Queensland Writers Centre over the past five years. I believe the connection between arts, sport and the community is important, and should not be seen in isolation. I hope I can work at making western Queensland more liveable for those who want to stay, while creating pathways for those who would like to one day move on.

WARREN MASON

Musician, poet, artist

Forcett / Mimirimina Country, TAS



I am a proud First Nations man with lines to the Yorta Yorta and Yuwaalaraay people. Forming connections both with land and people through my art and music is central to my work. Access to land is a must in order for one to feel a sense of belonging and connection. As a self-taught artist, I use the opportunity to reflect myself into the art and music that I create, showing who I am and where I come from. It also allows me to experiment and create new and innovative art pieces, rather than conform to the status quo. I currently serve on the Regional Arts Australia First Nations Knowledge Circle.

VIC McEWEN

Artistic Director | The Cad Factory

Narrandera / Wiradjuri Country, NSW



I am a contemporary artist whose practice involves sound, photography, video, installation and performance. My work explores socially engaged and site-specific art, with a deep interest in the creation of cross-sector partnerships. I am a board member of MusicNSW and an executive member of the Arts and Health Network NSW/ACT. I recently gained a PhD from the University of Sydney, becoming the first artist to graduate from the Faculty of Medicine and Health.

ASHLEY BLAND

Founder and Managing Director | Constructive Energy

Bathurst/ Wiradjuri Country, NSW



With a background in engineering and ecology, I have over 25 years' experience working within the agriculture, mining, construction, energy, water, waste, natural resource management and entertainment sectors. After a decade developing environmental programs for an NGO, I established Constructive Energy in 2018 to help advance the uptake of renewable energy technologies, particularly in regional Australia. I have instigated multiple successful projects and programs for government, private and not-for-profit organisations. I am a graduate of the Australian Rural Leadership Program.



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