

Submission
No 42

INQUIRY INTO ARTS AND MUSIC EDUCATION AND TRAINING IN NEW SOUTH WALES

Organisation: National Institute of Dramatic Art

Date Received: 25 July 2024

NIDA Submission to Joint Select Committee on Arts and Music Education and Training in New South Wales

Commitment: Recognising the importance of the state’s universities, the National Art School, NIDA and the Australian Film TV and Radio School to our cultural ecosystem and strengthening partnerships with them.

(Creative Communities: Putting culture at the heart of the state, page 31)

NIDA welcomes this commitment by the NSW Government to strengthen its partnership with NIDA.

NIDA also welcomes the pointedness of the Terms of Reference for the Joint Select Committee, in particular:

(vi) the contribution of the national performing arts training organisations in New South Wales and the adequacy of the support they receive.

The support NIDA receives from the NSW Government is key to a strong partnership. It is also key to how NIDA can help realise many of the aims of *Creative Communities* and, in particular, enhance arts education, including at primary, secondary, and tertiary levels.

This submission articulates how that support might best be directed.

A What is NIDA and how does it contribute to NSW?

NIDA is Australia’s national dramatic arts training institution and is consistently ranked within *The Hollywood Reporter’s* World’s 25 Best Drama Schools – in 2024 it was 13th on the list and the only drama school outside of England and the USA¹ – and in 2019 was named in the Top 5 of acting schools globally. In 2024, NIDA was named in the Top 10 of Costume Design Schools in the world.²

NIDA trains across the sector – theatre, film, TV, dance, opera, commercial musicals, festivals, live events, interactive gaming – and often for outside the sector. NIDA alumni are actors, directors, writers, cultural leaders, set and costume designers, lighting and sound designers, set builders, costume and prop makers, special effects artists, world builders, and stage and production managers. They win Academy Awards, design and run Olympic Games ceremonies, lead arts companies, write our stories, fill our screens, work live music gigs, crew film and television sets, manage regional arts centres, support festivals, and create start-up XR businesses.

NIDA is an exemplar dual provider. It offers 13 undergraduate, postgraduate and Vocational Education and Training (VET) courses. It also offers the world’s largest suite of

¹”The World’s 25 Best Drama Schools, Ranked”, *The Hollywood Reporter*, 22 June 2024

² “The World’s Top Costume Design Schools 2024”, *The Hollywood Reporter*, 24 February 2024.

dramatic arts-related short courses, with around 22,000 people enrolling in a typical year. 95% of Higher Education (HE) graduates and 97% of VET graduates secure employment within six months of course completion. For both HE and VET students, the retention rate is above 95%. In comparison, national completion rates for VET are 45.9%³.

NIDA is Australia’s national drama school, but it is a NSW prize. It provides NSW with a critical workforce. Its global reputation and the cultural and industrial power of its graduates bring immense prestige to NSW. Most of NIDA’s activity is in Sydney and NSW:

- Typically, around **60% of NIDA’s full-time MFA, BFA and VET students come from NSW.** Despite their geographical origins, many students continue to reside in NSW after graduating, becoming key to the State’s creative sector workforce.
- NIDA Open is a vast community investment enterprise with 16,000 children, youth and adults completing short courses annually. **70% are from NSW.**
- NIDA Corporate offers skills in communication, creative thinking and leadership to individuals, businesses, and government. 6,000 people enrol in these courses annually. **70% are from NSW.**
- NIDA is a significant NSW employer. In 2022, NIDA employed over 900 teaching artists, arts workers and venue staff and over 550 contractors from associated support industries.
- We are a community hub for 330 performances and 80,000 participants and audience members annually.

B How does the NSW Government support NIDA?

Operational Funding

Despite NIDA’s vast contribution to NSW over more than 6 decades, NIDA receives no ongoing funding from the NSW Government.

This is a historical anomaly. At least 3 of the Arts8 national training organisations receive funding from both the federal government and their respective state governments.

There are also federal-state cooperative funding models in other parts of the sector. Most notably, the 39 companies within the National Performing Arts Partnership Framework (administered by Creative Australia in partnership with the states) receive benefit from the stability of up to 8 years of funding from both federal and state governments.

NIDA’s governance model makes it eligible for various kinds of similar collaborative approaches – remember that it is a non-profit organisation, not a university.

Capital Investment

In 2022, NIDA received a \$250k Create NSW grant to install LED lights in two NIDA theatres. This was welcome, but state comparisons are telling. The West Australian, Victorian and Queensland state governments have recently made significant investments in large-scale capital upgrades of their state’s performing arts schools.

³ <https://www.ncver.edu.au/research-and-statistics/visualisation-gallery/latest-vet-statistics>

In Perth, the Western Australian Academy of Performing Arts (WAAPA) is the centrepiece of Edith Cowan University's (ECU) new inner-city campus, due to open in 2026. As part of the Perth City Deal, ECU is investing \$360 million, the Federal Government is investing \$294m, and the WA Government is contributing \$199 million.⁴

In Melbourne, the Victorian College of the Arts (VCA) has undergone large-scale capital works approaching a cost of \$200m.⁵ The new facilities opened in 2019. The campus forms part of the Melbourne Arts Precinct, which is being transformed through Australia's largest cultural infrastructure project with investment from the Victorian Government of \$1.7b.⁶

In Brisbane, the Creative Industries Faculty of the Queensland University of Technology – offering degrees in acting, technical production, creative writing, dance, film, screen, and others – completed an \$80m expansion in 2016.⁷

In Sydney, there has been no similar progress. In fact, our campus at Kensington is beyond capacity. Our theatres are ageing, equipment is stressed and not to industry standard, and workspaces are cramped. A planned, massive redevelopment of the car park site adjacent to NIDA will mean that many of our core functions will be impeded or made impossible for very long periods.

Overall, the inadequacy of our Kensington campus and the threats to it, coupled with the significant capital investment in our competitors, means that there is meaningful risk to our ability to deliver effective training and to remain nationally competitive.

There is a real danger that NSW will lose its competitive advantage.

C What is the broader funding landscape for NIDA?

NIDA is a non-profit organisation governed by a Board of Directors and funded by the Australian Government through the Office of the Arts.

In acknowledgment of the profound sustainability issues facing the national training organisations, especially NIDA, the Australian Government recently ran a Financial Sustainability Review of the Arts⁸ organisations and AFTRS. The result was that in May this year, NIDA received an uplift in annual operational funding. This was a lifeline for which we are very grateful, but it only *almost* sustains NIDA at the status quo. It does not create capacity for progress.

In the Higher Education space, NIDA does not receive any Commonwealth Supported Places (CSPs). This means that students at NIDA pay almost double what they pay at national competitors such as VCA and WAAPA.

⁴ <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2022-03-17/ecu-perth-cbd-campus-gets-158m-funding-boost/100916070>

⁵ <https://www.artshub.com.au/news/sponsored-content/spectacular-investments-at-vca-and-melbourne-conservatorium-open-day-256202-2360330/>

⁶ <https://www.development.vic.gov.au/projects/melbourne-arts-precinct?page=overview>

⁷ <https://www.qut.edu.au/about/campuses-and-facilities/public-venues/creative-industries-precinct>

In the VET space, the only source of funding for NIDA's offerings is student fees. This makes those fees very high. NSW VET funding settings effectively lock NIDA out of developing our VET offering and charging lower fees. There is an opportunity for the NSW Government to unlock opportunities for exemplary private providers such as NIDA to be considered for core operational and per-head support. As a not-for-profit Registered Training Organisation (RTO), NIDA aims to develop a VET program that equals NIDA's other educational offerings, sharing our globally recognised best-practice skills training with the people and industries of NSW.

D What are some challenges facing NSW?

In addition to NIDA's operational funding and capital investment challenges, there are two macro challenges to a healthy creative sector in NSW. Both are directly tied to arts training.

1. Skills and labour shortages

The sector is suffering from acute skills shortages. They are in danger of becoming deeply ingrained. According to Live Performance Australia (LPA), the industry's peak body, consistent feedback prior to COVID-19 indicated a shortage of workers in technical roles, with the problem more acutely felt in regional areas. These shortages have been exacerbated by the pandemic, as many professionals have left the industry for better job security or moved internationally.⁸

Post-pandemic skills shortages have broadened to encompass crew (e.g. audio, visual, lighting, set construction), production (e.g. company management, stage management, event management, wardrobe, and design) and front-of-house roles. Now, the problem is acute in both metropolitan and regional areas.

These skills are in such short supply in regional areas that staff work as 'all-rounders' across technical disciplines and are shared across regions. In worst-case scenarios, in both regional and metropolitan areas, shows are being cancelled due to the lack of suitably qualified workers. The intense workload is leading to remaining workers feeling burnout and at high risk of leaving the industry. These problems exist across the non-profit and commercial sectors, and across art forms, including live music.

These skills deficits affect diversity and inclusion. Many organisations are working to make their offerings more representative of society. However, they are often constrained by not being able to find suitably trained actors and production teams to appropriately realise those ambitions. This is very much the case with First Nations work, but it is also an issue across Asian-Australian work and work representing other cultures. Without new student recruitment initiatives and new kinds of inclusive training, there is danger that the diversity ambitions of the sector will be obstructed.

⁸ [LPA 2023-24 Pre-Budget Submission, February 2023.](#)

2. The Crisis in the Pipeline

At a time of deep skills shortages, the long-term pathways into the sector are broken.

In primary and secondary education, the problem is dire. During the lockdowns, drama and creative arts classes were the first to be jettisoned and have not been fully restored. In 2022, the National Advocates for Arts Education, a coalition of arts and arts education associations representing 10,000 arts educators, called for a “halt to the erosion of support for arts and arts education that has occurred over the past decade.”⁹

In the VET sector, many years of massive cuts to creative programs have left huge holes. The trickle of accredited programs is yet to be rebuilt, despite recent increases in support of TAFE NSW.

In Higher Education, many university dramatic arts courses have recently been closed or cut to the bone. Six universities – Monash, Murdoch, La Trobe, Charles Sturt, Newcastle, and Wollongong – have closed or severely diminished their drama departments, while others have increased their class sizes appreciably.¹⁰ This has had a huge impact on practise-based training in Australia.

In the youth arts sector, funding has been decimated. Funding for the sector has been shrinking for more than 15 years. In 2008, the Australia Council supported roughly 20 youth theatre groups with ongoing funding. In 2022, five were left.¹¹

It is a perfect storm: acute skills shortages, and broken pipelines.

E How can a strong partnership between NIDA and the NSW Government meet these challenges?

The NSW Government has committed to a strong partnership with NIDA. The Joint Select Committee is investigating what that partnership might look like, including the level of support NIDA receives.

NIDA recommends that the most productive way to build a strong partnership will be for the NSW Government to contribute to operational funding and to make capital investment, so that critical challenges can be met, and great opportunities can be fulfilled.

This will enable:

Initiative 1: Fixing the Broken Pipeline – a pathway progression framework for dramatic arts education and training in NSW.

NIDA is well-equipped to help fix this broken pipeline. In addition to our well-known higher education and VET offerings, we also run the largest suite of performing arts-related short courses in the world. 16,000 children and adults enrolled in NIDA Open short courses and

⁹ <https://naae.org.au/news/naae-statement-about-the-2022-federal-election>

¹⁰ <https://theconversation.com/friday-essay-a-world-of-pain-australian-theatre-in-crisis-168663>

¹¹ <https://www.canberratimes.com.au/story/7828273/struggling-youth-theatres-cancel-shows/>

holiday workshops in a typical year – a program that runs at a loss. A further 6,000 adults enrol in our NIDA Corporate training short courses to access professional development in a typical year. In 2023, under a contract-for-service with the NSW Department of Education, NIDA upskilled 324 high-school teachers in partial and full VET qualifications.

In other words, we have the IP capacity to help fix the pipeline, but not the resources.

A new Pathway Progression Framework would build pathways in dramatic arts education from primary school through to high-level, specialist education and training at NIDA. It would include:

- Scaling-up and refocusing some current NIDA Open programs to enhance arts education in primary and secondary schools. In collaboration with the NSW Department of Education, we could bring NIDA into classrooms through a series of curriculum-connected skills development programs ranging from discipline-specific workshops, through to creative thinking and confidence building workshops, and raising awareness of creative career options.
- New programs to open pathways for historically and currently underrepresented communities. This work needs to be in close collaboration with communities and is resource intense. This may focus on Western Sydney and regional NSW.
- Super-charge professional learning and development for primary and secondary teachers, building on NIDA’s success in the delivery of teacher CPD – Continuing Professional Development – through our Certificate III program. These could be delivered on site at NIDA or at other places across NSW, according to need.
- Offer full and partial qualifications in selected NSW areas for urgently needed crewing and operational roles in live production events, including theatre, dance, opera, commercial musicals, exhibitions, festivals, and live contemporary music. This would offer progression pathways in several ways, including directly to industry as well as Higher Education opportunities.
- Offer partial qualifications in targeted skill sets, including environmental sustainability arts practice, career-advancing management skills for mid-career practitioners, and front-of-house staff training.

Investment from the NSW Government would enable us to design and develop the pathway, pilot its implementation, and evaluate its impact.

NIDA has the intellectual property, the industry connections, the not-for-profit RTO status, and a deep commitment to deliver both immediate and longer-term training across NSW. A well-resourced progression framework is key.

Social cohesion

A demonstrable outcome of a healthy progression pathway is greater social cohesion. With a broken pipeline, particularly in the youth arts sector, young people have fewer opportunities to engage in social activity outside sport.

NSW is facing a regional youth crime problem. There is an increase in “posting and boasting” about offences on social media. One of the responses of the NSW Government is a \$13.4m investment into a pilot program in Moree, with plans to build bail and support

accommodation, and improve the delivery of youth services. Project Pathfinder will offer at-risk adolescents one-on-one mentorships with NRL players, sports clinics and trips to Sydney to experience games and training.¹²

Sport is not the only option, and it is not for everyone. There is comprehensive research that shows that engagement with arts experiences leads to social cohesion and better wellbeing. Carefully designed arts-based interventions, in partnership with relevant community organisations, would enhance self-confidence, build relationships, develop awareness and respect for cultural differences, bridge gaps between generations, alleviate boredom, and work to help young people who are at risk of offending. For example, NIDA could significantly enhance the creative arts programs offered in some PCYCs.

As part of a new Pathway Progression Framework, NIDA could contribute to programs that provide young people with arts experiences that can help turn around lives.

Initiative 2: First Nations Pathways

NIDA's First Nations student population stands at 6%. Many First Nations students who come to NIDA from across the country stay in Sydney after they graduate.

We have significant scholarships for First Nations students that offer both financial and cultural support. We are on the path to ensuring that First Nations knowledge, awareness and understanding are core attributes for every student graduating from NIDA, and to ensure that First Nations staff are involved in all disciplines at NIDA, especially in positions of leadership. In 2023, NIDA appointed a full-time Director of First Nations and Outreach, and since then we have enlarged the First Nations team.

We have begun early consultation on possible new programs and courses, determined and led by First Nations artists and cultural leaders. These include a range of pathway initiatives in both metropolitan and regional areas and a Certificate II – Introduction to Stage and Screen, for First Nations students only. However, we are not currently resourced to appropriately develop and deliver these plans.

Initiative 3: NIDA Future Centre

The Centre is about creating the future of entertainment, here in NSW. Breathtaking developments, especially in technology, have forever transformed the ways in which entertainment can be created and delivered to audiences, so the work of this initiative seems critical to unlocking the full potential of the creative industries.

Through a seed donation, we have begun work on this research and innovation lab. It aims to foster ambitious new ideas for entertainment experiences created through new technologies, new forms, and new relationships with audiences. It will take a global perspective and draw on a diversity of influences from arts, media, interactive entertainment, and generative AI. It will help dissolve geographical and economic barriers,

¹² <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2024-04-03/nsw-government-nrl-program-youth-crime-moree/103661790>

unleash new potential for global and multilingual collaborations, amplify disability arts, and elevate the public as co-designers of stories.

The Centre will lead future thinking within NIDA training, create opportunities for artists and technologists to develop bold new ideas, work with industry to innovate, offer workshops to provoke new thinking, and link future thinkers from around the world.

Where creativity meets technology is where great cultural and economic value is going to be derived in the next 10 years. Through NIDA, NSW can be a beacon. But we have only short-term, skeletal resources to achieve these aims. The Centre will die without investment.

Initiative 4: New Courses

We are keen to deliver several new courses identified by the creative sector as being drivers for the future:

- BFA Interactive Digital Performance would produce visionary storytellers with the tools and imagination to create new entertainment experiences and businesses.
- MFA in Creative Entrepreneurship would produce a new generation of entrepreneurial and culturally and digitally literate creative managers and producers. The need for the training of creative producers in NSW has been articulated by many industry employers.
- MFA in Music Theatre Writing. The commercial music theatre is a huge economic and cultural driver, yet there is no training in Australia for its creation.

We see huge potential for courses such as these, but do not have the resources to develop and deliver them.

Initiative 5: Capital Investment

NIDA's ability to scale up to meet the needs of the creative sector in NSW is challenged by the physical inadequacy of its Kensington campus. There are several areas of concern:

- The 700-seat Parade Theatre, which opened in 2001 as one of the Stage II Buildings, needs refurbishment and new equipment to meet industry standards.
- The Reg Grundy Studio, opened in 2004 as NIDA's film and TV studio, is no longer fit for that purpose.
- Much of our equipment – in theatres, seating, cameras, LED screens – has reached the end of life.
- We do not have adequate teaching and office spaces for students and staff.
- Student accommodation is a growing concern in a city where rents are astronomical. NIDA has no affordable student accommodation options.
- We lack adequate storage space. Additional storage space, perhaps at Canal Rd (managed by the NSW Government), would relieve financial pressure and support environmental goals.

There are active conversations about NIDA having a presence at other NSW sites. We welcome an opportunity to scope out these opportunities with business cases.

The issue of our physical infrastructure needs to be faced if NIDA is to be at its best.

F Conclusion

The first step has been made: the NSW Government has committed to strengthening its partnership with NIDA. The second step, this Joint Select Committee exploring (in part) the adequacy of support for arts education at NIDA, has also been made.

We urge the third step: that after 65 years of reaping enormous benefit from NIDA, the NSW Government finally play its part and support NIDA through operational funding and capital investment. This will help realise the aims of *Creative Communities* and cement NSW as one of the world's great creative and educational beacons.

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