

A National Convening on Audiences in Australian Arts and Culture (working title)

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Background and context

Australia's arts and culture sector is experiencing a period of significant transition. Audience behaviours have shifted rapidly, participation levels are under pressure across many artforms, and the skills required to build and sustain audiences have changed materially.

At the same time, the sector is facing a quiet but growing workforce challenge. Marketing and audience development talent is leaving the industry, capability gaps are widening, and many organisations are struggling to respond to change with limited resources, fragmented data, and inconsistent support structures.

While there is broad agreement that audiences are fundamental to long-term sustainability, growth, and relevance, the next challenge is moving from acknowledgement to action. Rather than continuing to describe the problem, the sector needs to actively test and validate:

- What is *actually* driving audience disengagement in different contexts
- Where the most critical structural and capability gaps are constraining progress
- Which interventions deliver practical impact at both strategic and operational levels

Before committing significant investment to new programs, frameworks, or national initiatives, there is a clear opportunity to road-test tangible approaches, share evidence from practice, and build a clearer, collective view of what genuinely works and what does not.

Purpose of convening

This initiative proposes a deliberate national convening of arts and culture leaders focused on progressing audience outcomes through shared learning and practical testing.

Rather than aiming to prescribe answers, the convening is designed to:

- Develop a clearer, evidence-informed understanding of current audience challenges
- Translate lived experience from across the sector into actionable insights
- Stress-test assumptions about where support, investment, and structural change would have the greatest impact
- Identify practical pathways for alignment, experimentation, and next steps

The outcomes of the convening will emerge from the conversation itself, with an emphasis on generating momentum, prioritising action, and informing decisions about what to trial, scale, or invest in next.

Why now

Audience decline, and workforce attrition are structural challenges, not temporary disruptions. Without a shared understanding of the problem, the sector risks continuing to invest in fragmented, well-intentioned activity that does not deliver impact.

This convening represents a considered first step: to listen, to align, and to determine what will genuinely support a sustainable, audience-centred future for Australian arts and culture.

What this convening is (and is not)

This is not a conference, training program, or policy announcement.

- There are no pre-determined outcomes
- There is no assumption of sector consensus
- There is no commitment to a specific post-event initiative.

Instead, this is a facilitated, closed-room conversation designed to support depth, candour, and practical insight. It recognises that the most effective next steps cannot be designed in isolation, but must emerge from collective understanding and sector buy-in.

Possible next steps

Any outcomes or follow-on activity will be determined by the participants. Depending on what emerges, next steps could include:

- Ongoing mechanisms for sector connection and knowledge-sharing
- New approaches to professional development or capability building
- Shared research, tools, or infrastructure
- A longer-term pathway toward national alignment on audience strategy

These possibilities are indicative only and not commitments. However, it is an intention that the key insights would be shared with industry.

Key themes

The convening will span both strategic leadership perspectives, and operational realities. Topics would be built around 5 strategic pillars:

1. The Evolving Audience Landscape

How are long-term shifts in public expectations, cultural participation and community identity creating new challenges and misalignments for artistic, organisational and audience planning?

2. Sector Capacity and System Barriers

What structural constraints (financial, workforce, governance, technological) limit organisations' ability to respond to changing audience behaviours, and where is adaptation most urgently needed? How could economies of scale and/or sector collaboration support this?

3. Redefining Audience Development for the Next Decade

How should the sector collectively reimagine "audience development" to encompass relevance, inclusion, participation, digital engagement and long-term value creation?

4. Workforce Sustainability and Capability Gaps

What is driving the loss of marketing and audience professionals, and what capabilities and conditions are required to sustain and grow a skilled workforce?

5. National Levers, Shared Learning and Strategic Coordination

What interventions (national strategy, shared infrastructure, capability building, research and cross-sector learning) would make the greatest impact, and how should they be structured?

Participants and Format

A cohort will be invited from across the sector, with an emphasis on diversity of role, scale, geography, and artform. This may include:

- CEOs + Executive Directors
- Artistic Directors + Programming Directors
- Heads of Marketing + Audience
- Independent Producers + Self Presenting Artists

Participant numbers will be intentionally limited to approximately 15 per session support productive conversation.

To ensure the sessions allow for candid insight-gathering across artistic, executive and audience functions, Board Directors will be invited at a later stage to receive a structured briefing on the consolidated findings, rather than being included in the discovery process itself.

Proposed Format

Phase 1: Deep-Dive Peer Roundtables

- In person
- 4 x full day sessions
- 15 invitees per session:
 - Day 1 – Marketing Directors
 - Day 2 – Artistic and Programming Directors
 - Day 3 – CEOs and Executive Directors
 - Day 4 – Independent producers and self-presenting artists

Each day:

- Curated provocations and workshops based on the outlined key themes
- Structured breakout discussions
- Facilitated synthesis
- Clear capture of themes, tensions and opportunities

Notes from these sessions will be kept, distilled into key insights and opportunities and used to inform the following sessions. After all roundtables are complete, a phase 1 report will be tabled with key stakeholders, the key insights of which will be stress tested in phase 2.

Phase 2: Cross-Cohort Synthesis (Online – approx. 2 hours)

- A facilitated digital session bringing all cohorts together to:
 - Share key insights from each room
 - Identify alignment and friction points
 - Agree on 3–5 sector-wide priorities
 - Determine next steps or action pathways

A full report and recommendations will then be shared with participants and stakeholders.

Identifying the cohorts

A select group of participants will be approached directly, while the remaining cohort will be confirmed through an open Expressions of Interest process. Applicants will be asked to supply information in that process:

- **About you:** Your role, organisation, and how your work intersects with audience strategy or organisational planning.
- **Top strategic challenges:** The three most significant barriers to growing, diversifying or sustaining audiences.
- **High-impact opportunities:** The three most valuable opportunities, innovations or system-level shifts that could strengthen audience development.
- **Your contribution:** The expertise, perspective or experience you would bring to the convening.
- **Your motivation:** Why you want to participate and what outcomes would be most valuable for your organisation.

Participants will be highly curated and EOIs will be reviewed by PAC, Amy Maiden and two representatives from Creative Australia. The facilitator(s) may also participate in the review, subject to appointment timing and familiarity with the content and applicant pool.

Timeline

MARCH	
Confirmation of budget, format, delivery plan	All
Contracting CA x PAC x Amy Maiden	All
Confirm invite approach (direct invitations and/or EOI process)	PAC x AM
Lock facilitator(s) and high-level roundtable format	PAC x AM
APRIL/MAY	
Issue invitations / EOI call out with initial agenda, expectations, and rsvp deadline	PAC
Confirm participants	All
Prepare and distribute pre-roundtable participant survey	PAC x AM
Prepare and distribute advance materials - briefing pack, pre- roundtable survey results	PAC x AM x Facilitator
Finalise roundtable design with facilitators	All
Finalise logistics, technical, synthesis approach	PAC
JUNE	
Deliver roundtables x 4 – Week commencing 22 June	All
Rapid post-session summaries drafted for internal use	PAC x AM x Facilitator
JULY	
Final participant gathering (online) to test themes and priorities	All
Draft final report + action plan based on consolidated insights	PAC x AM x Facilitator