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Pivoting Post-Pandemic: Not-for-Profit Arts and Culture Organisations and a New Focus on Social Impact

Andrew Wearing, Bronwen Dalton, Rachel Bertram

University of Technology Sydney

Corresponding author: Andrew Wearing, University of Technology Sydney, 15 Broadway, Ultimo NSW 2007, Australia. Andrew.Wearing@uts.edu.au

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Abstract

While the Australian arts and cultural sector has been adept at shaping the national conversation around its economic significance, the COVID-19 pandemic has brought multiple and serious challenges. Weakened by years of government defunding, the sector now faces the shocks of shutdowns and social distancing on their bottom line. Post-COVID we propose that arts and culture organisations in the Not-for-profit sector express their contribution to society as social impact, in order to access more diverse sources of funding. This paper looks first at established ways of assessing economic value, then discusses the broader social value of arts and culture organisations. It then explores methods by which this can be measured and reported. Lastly, a review of relevant literature and best practice approaches to social impact measurement is provided, outlining a framework to produce evaluations that both strengthen their programs and enhance their ability to communicate their value to funders.

Keywords

Social Impact; Evaluation; Arts and Culture; Not-for-Profit; COVID-19

Introduction

Australians are aware of the importance of the arts, and regularly participate in arts and cultural activities. According to a survey of 3,000 people conducted by the [Australia Council \(2014\)](#), some 95 per cent of Australians engaged in the arts in some way in the 2013. In addition, nearly half participated as creators in at least one art form. Some 85 per cent of people agreed the arts makes for a richer and more meaningful life.

While the arts and cultural sector has been adept at shaping the national conversation around its economic significance, the pandemic brought multiple serious challenges. Weakened by successive years of government defunding, Not-for-Profit (NFP) organisations face the enormous challenge of surviving the immediate consequences of COVID-19 pandemic shutdowns and social distancing on their ability to operate, as well as the longer-term effects of an economic recession that is affecting the capacity of consumers to pay and influencing government funding priorities.

The central role of arts and culture has rarely been more evident than as the world responded to the COVID-19 pandemic. People turned to arts and culture to cope – not just to pass time in isolation or while socially distanced but, fundamentally, to feel more connected. Perhaps more than other fields of activity, arts and cultural organisations create experiences that have a deep and emotional impact on individuals, communities and society. At a personal level, arts and culture can illuminate our inner lives and enrich our emotional world. At the local level, they can be a source of social connection and community renewal. More broadly, arts and cultural organisations make a crucial contribution to creating shared experiences that build a sense of common identity and, by extension, a more vibrant and connected society.

Like so much of Australian life, many arts and cultural activities need subsidies in the form of government grants or private or corporate donations. This means that governments and donors can find themselves in the position of making judgements about whether arts and cultural activities are deserving of funds relative to other public goods, and which types of arts and cultural programs merit support. This places organisations under constant pressure to articulate their value to society, extending beyond statements regarding the broader, less tangible notions of arts and culture enriching daily life. Increasingly, funders expect organisations to demonstrate their economic contribution as well as specific social impacts.

In terms of the overall economic contribution, the statistics are impressive. In 2016-17, cultural and creative activity – referred to variously as cultural industries, arts and culture or the ‘experience economy’, and including activities related to the arts, media, heritage, design and fashion – contributed \$111.7 billion to GDP in Australia, representing 6.4 per cent of economic activity ([BCAR 2018](#)). Even so, the sector must constantly fight for government support. According to Christopher Farrell ‘artists are significantly and vastly underestimated contributors and generators of local economic growth’ ([Farrell 2003](#)). That means it is critical to build capacity to make compelling, evidence-based cases for support – cases that go beyond economic statistics ([Browne 2020](#)). This requires empowering the sector to work towards a stronger advocacy position and profile within the broader economy. Now, more than ever, is time to ask: What is behind the numbers? What do we need to know to be able to communicate the true depth and breadth of our social impact?

With declines in the ability to generate revenue from patronage, post-COVID we propose that Australian arts and culture organisations in the Not-For-Profit sector pivot to expressing and demonstrating their contribution to society by rigorously measuring their social impact in order to gain greater access to more diverse sources of funding. This paper looks at the established ways used to assess the economic value of arts and culture, discusses the broader social value of arts and culture organisations, and explores methods by which this social value can be measured and reported. We begin by defining arts and culture: two separate, but inextricably linked, ideas. We then explore the political and economic landscape driving evaluation practice within the sector. Lastly, we provide a review of the literature on the measurement of

the social impact of arts and culture programs and activities. It is envisioned that the main audience for this paper will be practitioners in arts and culture programs, often not-for-profits (NFPs), interested in measuring the outcomes and impact of their programs and to help build a case for funding. Other interested parties may include government and other funders interested in how to assess potential grant recipients or developing arts and culture policies. Lastly, evaluators and academic researchers may find such a review useful.

Defining Arts and Culture

To Picasso art was ‘the lie that reveals the truth’; for Goethe it was ‘the magic of the soul’ – other definitions focus on particular artistic forms ([Ramachandran 2004](#)). Philosopher John Dewey defined art as encompassing a range of human activity that creates modes of expression such as visual arts, literary arts and performing arts ([Dewey 2005](#)). ‘Culture’ is perhaps an even more contested concept. Anthropologists use the term to refer to the universal human capacity to classify experiences and to encode and communicate them symbolically ([Ingold 1994](#)). Holden defined culture in terms of institutions and funding: ‘the arts, museums, libraries and heritage that receive public funding’ ([Holden 2006](#)). Problems with institutional definitions arise when we try to distinguish cultural activity from the arts, however. For example, in Australia the public institutions we generally refer to as state and national art galleries are in countries such as the United States referred to as ‘art museums’, to distinguish them from commercial, sales-focused galleries. While the content of ‘art museums’ remains visual art, the term itself raises questions around the motivations of visitors – are they there for the educational opportunity or to appreciate art? These are important questions as the purpose and intent of a program within a cultural institution determines which measures of success should be evaluated – especially when the intent extends beyond art appreciation into achieving social outcomes such as education or social inclusion. A recent study by the think tank A New Approach found that people in their focus groups responded best to the term ‘art and culture’ as a single idea, concluding it side-stepped any elitist notions associated with just ‘the arts’ ([Fielding & Trembath 2020](#)). For the most part this report will treat arts and culture as intertwined and overlapping.

Much of the debate around defining arts and culture very quickly turns to the debate about their ‘value’ – a debate that shifts between economic, social and aesthetic understandings. The arts are often perceived as luxuries worth supporting in good times but hard to justify when the economy takes a turn for the worse. This has been evident in the COVID-19 induced recession in Australia. How best to challenge this attitude? One way is to change the question being asked from ‘how much is this benefit worth?’ to ‘what is the impact of this?’.

[Holden \(2006\)](#) argued for a broadening of how we value the arts highlighting three areas of value: intrinsic value, being the subjective effect arts and cultural experiences have on someone; instrumental value, including outcomes such as employment, tourism, education or wellbeing for individuals and communities; and institutional value, placed on arts and culture by society as a whole and reflected in how arts and cultural institutions interact. While instrumental value may be the focus of government funders, arts and culture proponents need to consider methods through which they can accentuate intrinsic and institutional value as well.

It is clear that instrumental value is the main focus of government funders. However, arts and culture proponents might want to accentuate intrinsic and institutional value. Organisations can make the intrinsic value of their activities less abstract by conducting methodologically robust evaluations, evidencing a relationship between intrinsic value and tangible, beneficial outcomes such as improved education, mental and physical wellbeing, and social cohesion – in a sense, making the intrinsic also instrumental. The next step is to make a clear case that arts and culture can change lives and communities for the better, and that they are needed more than ever during economic downturns.

The Social Impact of Arts and Culture

The concept and practice of social impact and its assessment has developed and matured over the last decades. It is generally understood as the sum effect of any intervention or program implemented to address social disadvantage or an environmental issue. Impact is distinct from ‘outputs’ – which are the direct products resulting from the implementation of intervention activities – and from ‘outcomes’. Outcomes are sometimes broken down into immediate, medium and long-term changes in the target group(s) who have been engaged in the intervention and which precede, and are usually a pre-condition for, impact. Despite this growth, confusion still exists with respect to definitions of social impact, as well as which tools and frameworks are most appropriate. Central to the concept and practice of social impact is a focus on outcomes ([Onyx 2014](#); [Grieco 2015](#); [Ormiston 2019](#); [Zappalà 2020](#)).

With roots in the early program evaluations of the 1970’s ([Sharp 2003](#)), evaluations of the social impact of arts and culture came into their own at the turn of the millennium. An early influential contribution to the measurement of social impact in arts and culture was completed by François Matarasso for English research consultancy Comedia, ([Matarasso 1997](#)). Based on a previously completed pilot ([Landry et al. 1993](#)), this comprehensive study surveyed 60 European projects including 600 participants through interviews, focus groups and observation. While acknowledging the pioneering nature of this work, [Eleanora Belfiore \(2002\)](#) points out that, though Matarasso had stressed in a prior working paper from the project the need to establish a causal link between activity and outcome ([Matarasso 1997](#)), he waved away any responsibility to do so in the final report.

In what should be an unsurprising turn given the name, ‘social impact assessments’ by arts and culture researchers are usually focussed on the social, and rarely consider aesthetic or artistic outcomes. Belfiore suggests this is because the assessments are reporting against funding objectives, which tend to be aligned with social inclusion strategies ([Belfiore 2002](#)), but another factor is how meaningful the results will be to stakeholders: most often the general public.

An example might be a majority government-funded feature film. This is especially relevant during the pandemic, as Australia’s less severe pandemic environment has meant that several large budget films have been attracted here over the last 12 months ([Donoghue 2021](#); [Nothling 2021](#)). Typically, the film’s success would be measured in economic impact: jobs created for creatives, crew and support staff, box office earnings, and so on. An evaluator, however, may ask what would aesthetic impact look like? Favourable reviews from critics? Is favourable too loose a criterion? Should it be restricted to reviews which deemed it to have artistic merit? Would you need to consider influence on subsequent film makers, and how might that be assessed objectively? The subjective, uncertain nature of these issues goes some way to explaining why assessors prioritise instrumental value over intrinsic value.

Some studies are only interested in investigating the positive, indirect impacts of programs. One study of the impacts of a college choir used a questionnaire to ask participants about how participation improved their physical, mental, emotional and spiritual health, but asked no questions about the creativity of singing. The same paper raised the possibility of negative health impacts of producing music, albeit for professional musicians. All items in their survey however skewed towards discovering positive impacts, relegating the only discussion of negative impacts to the study’s limitations ([Clift & Hancox 2001](#)).

This is not to say neutrality is necessarily the ideal, or simple to accomplish. Matarasso noted the consequences of simply neutralising the tone of questions asked with the example of a question about whether a particular cultural event had changed people’s feelings about the place they lived. Some answered no, but luckily the researchers followed this with the question ‘if so, in what way?’ These participants replied that they had always loved where they lived, in part because of such cultural events ([Matarasso 1997](#)). So, impact should not only be considered in terms of change but can also be about the important work done

to maintain good situations and environments. This episode also highlights the importance of extra data, especially descriptive, qualitative data, in order to interpret the other results one obtains.

Some authors describe a tension between research that is ‘purely academic’ and adheres to the rigours of correct methods, and research that is used for primarily advocacy, either by the sector to seek funds or by government to deny them. [Belfiore \(2016\)](#) cites examples of this zero-sum thinking, such as Jim McGuigan ([McGuigan 1996](#)) and Oliver Bennett ([Bennett 2004](#)), but point out that they underestimate the impact that research has been demonstrated to have ([Bastow et al. 2014](#); [Lingard 2013](#)).

The Sector

THE SHAPE OF THE SECTOR

Arts and cultural organisations assume many forms, from collectives and co-operatives through to companies limited by guarantee. They may be incorporated as public, private or NFP entities. Government-run institutions include national galleries, libraries, war memorials, sites of historical importance and local government arts programs. Arts and cultural organisations in the private sector include for-profit commercial galleries, theatres and music venues. NFP entities include Opera Australia, the Sydney Symphony Orchestra and the Australian Ballet.

Australian statistics are difficult to unpack because the Australian and New Zealand Standard Industrial Classification describes ‘Arts and Recreation’ very broadly, including creative and performing arts but also sport and gambling. At the same time, it does not include publishing, broadcasting, film and sound recording, library and other information services or heritage activities, as these fall into the Information Media and Telecommunications classification ([ABS 2013](#)). According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics, in 2019 there were 40,822 arts and recreation businesses, representing 2 per cent of all businesses. But given the imprecise classification the percentage that are arts and cultural organisations is not immediately clear.

The Australian Charities and Not-for-Profit Commission includes a category for organisations whose activity involves ‘advancing culture’. In 2018 there were 1,208 organisations registered with the stated purpose of ‘advancing culture’, including theatre groups, orchestras and charities promoting Australian Indigenous culture and customs, among others although, by definition, this only covered registered charities and NFPs. These organisations had a combined revenue of \$1.13 billion ([ACNC 2020](#)).

Between January 2017 and December 2019: \$300 million was cut from the Federal Government’s cultural budget; 65 arts organisations lost Australia Council funding; the Book Council lost \$6 million in funding; and national broadcaster the ABC lost \$100 million a year in direct and indirect funding (ANA 2019).

THE STATE OF THE SECTOR

The arts and cultural sector has been hit by successive years of significant cuts to its government funding. Other policies have had an indirect but serious negative impact – from the decision in 2014 to no longer fund the Australian Bureau of Statistics to collect arts and sport data ([Darcy & Dalton 2014](#)), through to the virtual exclusion of arts and cultural workers from the JobKeeper program ([PMA 2020](#)). Aimed at supporting people during the COVID-19 pandemic, JobKeeper was problematic for the sector because its structure focused on traditional forms of employment.

The Australia Council has described the impact of COVID-19 on the Australian arts community as ‘catastrophic’ ([Australia Council 2020](#)). Venues had to shut their doors with little or no notice and organisations had to cancel programs and activities. As a consequence, hundreds of thousands of arts workers suffered significant negative effects on their immediate and future livelihoods. Artists are the

original ‘gig’ workers. According to the Making Art Work Study, the vast majority (81 per cent) are self-employed or freelancers, mostly relying on contracts for fixed amounts (43 per cent) along with royalties and advances (35 per cent) ([Throsby & Petetskaya 2017](#)).

By April 2020 a reported \$330 million was lost in work and contracts, with 470,000 workers being affected across arts and entertainment and related sectors ([I Lost My Gig Australia 2020](#)). A national, cross-industry survey by the Australian Bureau of Statistics in March 2020, as COVID-19 shutdowns took hold, showed that more than half of all arts and recreation businesses had ceased trading – the highest proportion of the 17 industries analysed. Some 73 per cent of arts and recreation businesses reported their business had been adversely affected by COVID-19 in the previous two weeks, second only to accommodation and food services businesses (78 per cent). The most common adverse effect was reduced local demand (93 per cent of those affected) followed by staff shortages (49 per cent) and reduced international demand (32 per cent) ([ABS 2020](#)).

Support for federal relief is strong across all states and voting intentions ([Browne 2020](#)). In April of 2020, the Morrison government announced a \$27 million emergency relief fund for the arts ([Fletcher 2020a](#)). The package targeted regional and Indigenous organisations and included the ‘repurposing’ of \$5 million of the Australia Council’s existing pool for small, quick-release grants. After intense lobbying from the sector, in June 2020, the government announced a further \$250 million that included \$90 million in government-backed concessional loans for new productions ([Fletcher 2020b](#)). There have also been initiatives at local, state and sector levels, such as the ABC’s Fresh Start Fund to support Australia’s production industry ([ABC 2020](#)). This may go some way to ease the pain but, at the time of writing, thousands of arts and cultural organisations are still struggling to survive.

Many of the issues facing organisations are not new. Organisations are familiar with lack of funding, the true value of their work being underestimated and the assumption that art and culture will always be there. The fallout from the pandemic has intensified a longer-term pattern of decline in support for the arts in Australia. As we emerge from COVID-19, NFP arts and culture organisations need a new strategy in order to revive and thrive.

The Landscape

Most social impact measurement occurs because it is required by government funders, so it is important to understand government structures and motivations. Governments have a long history of intervention in the field of arts and culture, and a propensity to exert influence through levers ranging from tax policy to signals on sector wages. Another way they influence policy is through the individuals that the government places in charge of art and culture, and even where the portfolio sits within the assigned ministry.

After a ministerial reshuffle in 2019, Arts was demoted to an ‘office’ within the Federal Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development and Communications – a portfolio title that provides no indication the arts portfolio is to be found there. Many in the field, including the Australian Writers’ Guild, Live Performance Australia and the National Association for the Visual Arts, argued strongly that this showed the Government assigned little importance to arts and culture ([Watts 2019](#)). In state and territory governments, the location of the arts and culture portfolio varies. In Western Australia, for example, it falls into the Department of Local Government, Sport and Cultural Industries, while Tasmania’s Cultural and Tourism Development division is part of the Department of State Growth.

DEMAND FOR ACCOUNTABILITY

In this neoliberal age there is an impulse among governments and management to emphasise accountability. At its simplest, this can be an accounting for dollars spent. More broadly, there is pressure to be able to

explain the benefits of funded programs and to establish the legitimacy of particular approaches to specific problems. However, a tension exists between accountability, resourcing and program delivery. Whitney Watriss, director of Smithsonian Organization and Audience Research, the central planning, research and evaluation office of the Smithsonian Institution in the United States, makes an observation that will be familiar to many in the arts and culture sector:

The two major measures right now are audience numbers and fundraising, and right now [this museum] has very little capacity to raise money. Instead, what should be measured is: What has changed as a result of what you are doing? Is the world a better place? Have you inspired people? When they leave do they continue to research the exhibition or follow up on things they want to know about? Do they have a different perspective on how they see the world? (Francis 2018)

For many, the things more easily measured do not necessarily tell us much about what is important. There is a sense that not only are the impacts of arts and culture greater than the economic, but they are also more meaningful. With this increased demand for accountability and reporting, an opportunity exists for government to shape measurement by providing standardised frameworks and guidance on measures for social impact evaluation. Many initial forays encountered resistance, however, with the criticism being that the frameworks were too prescriptive, resulting in a poor fit for measures. One solution government funders are exploring is the use of broad, generalised frameworks within which specific, often bespoke, measures can be used. It is an area where the Cultural Ministers Council, now disbanded but still convening as the Meeting of Cultural Ministers ([MCM 2011](#)), developed some policy. They established a statistics working group to work with state and national bureaus of statistics to establish common indicators of output. The framework they produced can be divided into three major themes: economic development, cultural value, and engagement and social impact. These indicators are set out in [Table 1](#).

Table 1. Common indicators of output

Economic development	Cultural value	Engagement & social impact
Cultural employment	Cultural assets	Cultural attendance
Economic contribution of cultural industries	Cultural identity	Cultural participation
Government support for culture	Global reach	Access
Household expenditure on cultural goods and services	Talent (human capital)	Education in arts and culture
Private sector support for culture	Innovation (new work/ companies)	
Visitor expenditure on cultural goods and services		
Voluntary work in arts and culture		

Source: Adapted from [CMC \(2010\)](#)

The annual Australian State and Territory Meeting of Cultural Ministers has also influenced policies adopted by individual state and territory departments. For example, in 2019 Western Australia's Department of Local Government, Sport and Cultural Industries published *Social Impacts of Culture and the Arts WA*, which refers back to the Council framework and provides a guide to measuring social impact in arts and culture ([DLGSCI 2019](#)).

SECTOR RESPONSE

In this environment, arts and cultural organisations have dual motives for measuring impact. On the one hand, they have a sense of the importance of their work to society and seek to demonstrate this to facilitate greater exchange and play a more integrated role in the community. On the other hand, measurement often comes down to the very practical need to convince funders, especially government, to continue supporting this work. As the authors of one paper put it somewhat cynically: ‘What the cultural sector really wants from research is the killer evidence that will release dizzying amounts of money’ ([Scullion & García 2005](#)). The sector should be careful, however. Assuming that proof of social impact will secure funding can have unhelpful consequences. [Belfiore and Bennett \(2007\)](#) argue this approach just validates and perpetuates the argument that arts and culture need to have a larger social impact to be worthy of funding, and incentivise organisations to hunt for proof of assumed or desired impacts rather than understanding what the impacts really are. This has steered arts and culture evaluations towards financialised metrics of success. Governments value and encourage this approach, but it can result in practitioners neglecting the opportunity to measure other impacts. This is consistent with the current trends in outcome measurement such as in Social Return on Investment (SROI) approaches, to monetise outcomes while ignoring the qualitative and relational aspects of outcomes ([Onyx 2014](#)).

ECONOMIC MEASURES

It has been suggested that, even for economists, the conviction that arts and culture improve society is ‘visceral as much as analytical’ ([Goodwin 2005](#)). While economists often acknowledge the positive externalities of arts and culture, they still find it difficult to explain the sector’s impact on society beyond economic terms ([Belfiore & Bennett 2007](#)). Figures tracing the economic footprint of arts and culture, such as the [Bureau of Communication and Arts Research, Department of Communications and the Arts \(2018\)](#) statistics cited above, are important to highlight the impact of the sector, although even they are always open to criticism. A similar accounting of arts and culture in the UK revealed that the heaviest concentration of arts and culture jobs were in the metropolis ([O’Brien & Feist 1995](#)), leaving critics to complain that it mostly served inner city elites.

Funders often advocate a holistic assessment of the benefits of arts and culture that goes beyond the economic to encompass the wellbeing, social and educational value. Even then, however, the consideration of the wider contribution of arts and culture investments becomes a cost-benefit analysis of sorts, as it still weighs the cost of something against its benefits – however defined. To compare ‘apples with apples’ the units of measurement tend to be standardised into monetary terms, assigning a dollar value to arts and culture that is incomplete at best, crude and damaging at worst. The arts and culture sector can be especially suspicious of this kind of bean counter who knows, to borrow a description from *Lady Windermere’s Fan*, ‘the price of everything and the value of nothing’ ([Wilde 1893](#)).

Social impact measurement is complex and highly contested. Experts do not all agree on which approaches are correct and valid, but stakeholders still expect providers to decide on an approach and allocate resources to it ([Onyx 2014](#); [Grieco 2015](#); [Ormiston 2019](#); [Zappalà 2020](#)). Arts and culture organisations should also keep in mind the sometimes Faustian bargain they agree to when considering the economic worth of their output. It could be argued that, in agreeing to describe the impact of a program in economic terms, organisations acknowledge the validity and priority of economic concerns, which are not always aligned with a program’s goals. One study examined figures from the Cultural Data Project, which contains records from around 5,000 NFP arts and cultural organisations, to assess the use of financial measures in evaluating program success. It found that financial attributes are indeed linked to program outcomes, but that some of the factors that contribute to financial stability and efficiency have no or even negative relationships with program outcomes ([Kim 2017](#)).

Measuring Social Impact

It is in this environment that the sector and individual organisations must build a body of evidence demonstrating their social impact. It will not be enough to assume this contribution is self-evident, and it will require overcoming the challenge of measuring and articulating this sort of impact. Making a valid, reliable and rigorous case for the true value of their work will not only enhance organisations' ability to secure government or philanthropic funds, but will also reinforce the sector's broader social licence to operate.

There is a growing preference among government and other funding bodies to express arts and cultural value in terms of the sector's contribution to the economy. Instrumental value may be the main focus of government funders, but arts and culture proponents are likely to benefit from accentuating their intrinsic and institutional value as well. While metrics-based approaches and the provision of a set of numbers are often expected, in many cases it is not feasible or methodologically valid or reliable to express social impact in quantitative terms.

Having a clear understanding of the intended outcomes of a program is the starting point for designing an evaluation that will collect useful and meaningful data. What is being done and why? The aim is to produce an evaluation that both strengthens the program and enhances the ability of the organisation to communicate value to funders.

While a comprehensive guide to conducting a social impact evaluation is beyond the scope of this paper there are resources available online, including the Social Impact Toolbox which the authors of this paper have contributed to and which can be found at <https://www.socialimpacttoolbox.com>. Aimed at building the social impact evaluation capacity of small to medium NFPs, the Social Impact Toolbox provides free access to information, learning and validated tools, allowing organisations to measure the impact of their work regardless of their size or resourcing. The suite of resources available includes online courses, interactive evaluation templates and a repository of reliable, verifiable and validated measures, collated in an open digital platform.

WHO IS BEING IMPACTED?

The impacts of arts and cultural programs extend from the individual to society as a whole, from improving individual health and wellbeing to building community cohesion and the cultural and economic strength of communities. When we speak of the value and impact of art and culture it is vital to be clear about who is being impacted and how. This allows us to refine our evaluation scope and target our evaluations appropriately. While some literature looks specifically at social impact and arts and culture it is, however, limited when it comes to focusing on the subject of impact. As such, we propose the following stakeholder typology. When considering the impact of arts and cultural programs, stakeholders can be segmented into three categories: creators, audience and society.

First, let us talk about the 'Creators'; the people who participate in creating arts and culture. They could be an artist, actor, curator, arts teacher, museum guide – someone who has played a role in producing the end result. We will call this group the Creators and consider them separately because the effect that creating a work has on them will be different and much more personal than for the audience. A creator might be referred to as an 'artist', as they contribute directly to the production of art. But professional staff, who might be referred to as 'facilitators' to distinguish their role, can also be considered creators, in helping to deliver the overall experience.

Next, we can consider the impact on the 'Audience'; the people who attend an event, visit a venue, view a film, and so on. This segment captures those who are present to consume arts and culture – those who are in the theatre audience, visit a museum or attend a festival. It should be noted that these first two segments can

become blurred when we consider program participants who may fall into creator, audience or both. This will depend on the intended program outcomes.

Finally, we can consider the impact of a program on ‘Society’ at large. This segment is much harder to define but very important when considering social impact which is, by definition, concerned with larger, longer-term effects and which is usually of interest to government funders who want to know the instrumental value. While scope may need to be limited in some way, impact could range from a consideration of the effect on very local areas all the way up to state and national outcomes such as the contribution to economic activity, employment and tourism.

One way of thinking about these segments is to use an example from the work of Australia’s public broadcaster, the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC). In 1987 the then managing director famously announced that the ABC costs each of us 8 cents a day, a value everyone was able to understand and generally willing to pay – although after years of swingeing cuts, the ABC’s chief financial officer recently put it at the equivalent of half that in 2018 ([Thomsen 2018](#)). Now consider a report by its current affairs program, Four Corners, on live-baiting in the greyhound racing industry. It can be seen that one piece of art and culture output had wide ranging impacts across these three segments, the effects of which are still being felt today. The Creators of the story ‘Making a Killing’ included the journalists, crew and interviewees, all of whom were directly impacted by the story – some receiving the Walkley Award for Excellence in Journalism ([Burrowes 2015](#)). The audience who watched the program were moved by the animal cruelty portrayed in video evidence and recounted in interviews. Society was impacted by the ensuing public debate and political to-and-fro, as New South Wales first banned greyhound racing then backflipped to reinstate it after intense lobbying by the industry and intervention by talkback radio host Alan Jones ([Kembrey 2016](#)).

HOW ARE THEY BEING IMPACTED?

A range of qualitative methodologies are available to measure the change that has occurred for those in an arts or cultural program. Researchers break down the impacts of arts and culture in a number of ways but Matarasso’s early and comprehensive list is still useful, with 50 impacts in six domains as outlined in [Table 2](#) ([Matarasso 1997](#)).

In the domain of personal development, improvements to self-esteem and related psychological constructs are often cited in relation to arts and cultural programs, as well as to employment and education – but it is important to be careful when attributing cause to effect ([Winner & Cooper 2000](#)). With regard to social cohesion, we have already touched on inclusion in general, but there are studies that focus on particular aspects, such as criminal justice ([Hughes 2009](#)), community development ([Kay 2000](#)), and urban renewal ([Evans 2005](#)). It could be argued that what Matarasso categorises as community empowerment and self-determination, local image and identity, and imagination and vision are just different aspects of social cohesion. Wellbeing is an umbrella term used to encompass everything from happiness to physical and mental health but is more theoretically defined as including hedonic wellbeing, or ‘feeling good’ and eudaimonic wellbeing, or ‘functioning well’ ([Meeks et al. 2017](#)). This is usually measured subjectively by asking someone how they feel and relying on their answer. There are a number of issues with this, but it is still considered useful and some iteration of wellbeing will appear in nearly every social impact assessment ([Wheatley & Bickerton 2017](#)). One study sought to prove a causal link between cultural engagement and physical health. Researchers asked a large pool of Swedes questions about their cultural engagement and health, then followed up with them after about a decade to measure any variance in perceived health. Controlling for things such as income and education, they found an increased risk of impaired health for those who decreased their cultural engagement ([O’Neill 2010](#)). Other studies have considered the impact on participants of health ([Staricoff 2004](#)), with some focusing on mental health ([White & Angus 2003](#)).

Table 2. Domains impacted by arts and culture

DOMAIN	OUTCOME
Personal Development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increase people's confidence and sense of self-worth Extend involvement in social activity Give people influence over how they are seen by others Stimulate interest and confidence in the arts Provide a forum to explore personal rights and responsibilities Contribute to the educational development of children Encourage adults to take up education and training Help build new skills and work experience Contribute to employability of people Help people take-up or develop careers in the arts
Social Cohesion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reduce isolation by helping people to make friends Develop community networks and sociability Promote tolerance and contribute to conflict resolution Provide a forum for intercultural understanding and friendship Help validate the contribution of a whole community Promote intercultural contact and cooperation Develop inter-generational contact Help offenders and victims address issues of crime Provide a route to rehabilitation and integration for offenders
Community empowerment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Build community organisational capacity Encourage local self-reliance and project management Help people extend control over their lives Be a means of gaining insight into political and social ideas Facilitate effective public consultation and participation Help involve local people in the regeneration process Facilitate the development of partnership Build support for community projects Strengthen community cooperation and networking Provide reasons to develop community activities
Local image and identity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Develop pride in local traditions and cultures Help people feel a sense of belonging and involvement Create community traditions in new towns or neighbourhoods Involve residents in environmental improvements Provide reasons to develop community activities Improve perceptions of marginalised groups Help transform the image of public bodies Make people feel better about where they live
Imagination and vision	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Help people develop their creativity Erode distinction between consumer and creator Allow people to explore their values, meanings and dreams Enrich the practice of professionals in the public and voluntary sectors Transform the responsiveness of public service organisations Encourage people to accept risk positively Help community groups raise their vision beyond the immediate Challenge conventional service delivery Raise expectations about what is possible and desirable

Table 2. continued

DOMAIN	OUTCOME
Health	Have a positive impact on how people feel Be an effective means of health education Contribute to a more relaxed atmosphere in health centres Help improve the quality of life of people with poor health Provide a unique and deep source of enjoyment

Source: adapted from [Matarasso \(1997\)](#)

Conclusions

Australia's arts and cultural organisations are familiar with having their true value underestimated yet live with a broadly held assumption that they will always be there. The fallout from the COVID-19 pandemic, however, has accelerated a longer-term pattern of decline in support for the arts in Australia.

There is a growing preference among government and other funding bodies to express arts and cultural value in terms of the sector's contribution to the economy, yet the impact of programs extends beyond the economy to society as a whole –from improving individual health and wellbeing, to building community cohesion, to contributing to our collective cultural strength.

Just as the arts and cultural landscape is dynamic and constantly evolving, so too is evaluation theory and practice. Social impact evaluation is a relatively young field and, as such, it is complex and highly contested. Experts do not all agree on which methods are valid, but stakeholders still expect providers to decide on an approach to measurement and allocate not inconsiderable resources towards it. Research supports the crucial role arts and cultural organisations play in our communities.

Social impact evaluation of arts and culture often responds to political and economic drivers, with the current trend of financialised methods of analysis being championed by government and funding bodies. Social impact measurement is important, not just because it is expected by government and philanthropic funders, but also because it is a way to be transparent with participants and staff. Organisations need to make more informed choices about social impact evaluation. Instrumental value may be the main focus of government funders, but arts and culture proponents might want to accentuate intrinsic and institutional value as well. While metrics-based approaches and the provision of a set of numbers is often expected, in many cases it is not feasible or methodologically valid or reliable to express impact in quantitative terms.

It is vital organisations are clear on what they are doing; why they are doing it; and assess whether it is working using metrics that are relevant to community. Having a clear understanding of the intended outcomes, and of evaluation practice itself, empowers organisations to collect useful and meaningful data, avoid resource wastage, and enhance their ability to communicate the value of their work to funders. When these align, social impact measurement can help programs realise deep and lasting positive social change.

Given the exogenous shocks of COVID-19 on pre-pandemic revenue streams, it is critical for arts and cultural organisations to adopt a new strategy in order to revive and thrive within a post-pandemic context. The arts and culture organisations in the Not-For-Profit sector pivot to expressing and demonstrating their contribution to society in order to gain greater access to more diverse sources of funding. Social impact capacity building will be crucial for organisations, particularly the acquisition of core evaluation competencies. Further, the embracing of rigorous methodologies across the sector, and developing a culture of meaningful evaluation, will facilitate this. It is in the interest of government, corporations, and individual supporters of these organisations to help resource this capacity building process.

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