

Royal Irish Academy Submission to the 'Culture 2025' Consultation

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Key Points

- Recognition of the **intrinsic value of culture and heritage** and the responsibility of the state to properly support and protect Ireland's cultural heritage.
- Adoption of the principle that culture and heritage is **best managed at arm's length from government**, with a reasonable expectation by the state of transparent and responsible management.
- A commitment to clear **principles on conduct and composition of state boards**, including **prohibition on replacing entire boards at once**, **non-remuneration of board members** and the clarification of the roles and responsibilities between directors and their respective boards.
- **Incentivisation of external fund-raising**, introduction of tax-breaks to encourage collaboration and investment, and adoption of **multi-year budgeting**.
- The introduction of a common format system-wide reporting structure to allow for transparent system-wide **proactive planning**.
- Ensuring a dynamic and responsive national cultural policy by tasking a national coordinating body to regularly **review and revise Culture 2025**.

Introduction

The Royal Irish Academy/*Acadamh Ríoga na hÉireann*, is Ireland's national academy for the sciences, humanities and social sciences. Operating as a neutral and independent forum on an all-island basis, the Academy has significant expertise in the culture and heritage sector by virtue of its history, its Membership, its network of multidisciplinary committees and its high-level links with stakeholders.¹

The Academy also has a proud tradition of active participation in the preservation and conservation of Ireland's cultural heritage. Throughout the nineteenth century, subscriptions by Members of the Academy enabled it to purchase priceless cultural treasures on behalf of the Irish public, most notably the Ardagh Chalice and the Tara Brooch. These treasures subsequently formed part of the core of the National Museum of Ireland's collections. By virtue of this unique legacy, the Academy has representation on the Boards of the National Museum and the National Gallery. Today, through the important work of its Library and research projects, the Academy continues the tradition of collecting and preserving Ireland's written and digital heritage.

The Academy's submission is informed by a consultation with its Members and a 2013 discussion seminar which it convened to consider current international practice and recent developments in the governance of cultural institutions.²

In section 1 of this document the Academy posits three key principles which should underpin the National Cultural Policy. In section 2 the Academy sets out its formal recommendations in relation to a select number of specific questions posed in the *Culture 2025 Discussion Document*.

Section I – Key Principles

(a) The Value of Culture

Arguments for the economic value of culture and heritage are well established. A 2012 Indecon Report estimated the gross value added contribution of the total wider arts sector to the Irish economy at €713.3 million, and the number of jobs supported by the sector at 20,755.³ If the contribution of culture and heritage to Ireland's tourist offering is considered, this argument is even stronger. A 2009 DKM report pointed out that 43% of all overseas visitors to Ireland in 2008 engaged in some cultural/heritage activity, and expenditure by these visitors represented 56% of total overseas visitor spend in Ireland, which that year amounted to €2.3 billion. When indirect and induced effects are taken into account, 73,000 jobs depend on the arts and cultural industries, or 3.4% of the total workforce.⁴ In short, there is strong evidence to show that significant investment in culture and heritage yields direct returns. There is equally good reason to believe that such investment produces other real but not necessarily quantifiable returns, in the form of a more confident yet reflective society, a more flexible and imaginative workforce, a more attractive environment in which to live and work, and hence a stronger economy.

Such arguments, on their own, would be sufficient to justify a duty on the state to protect and preserve Ireland's culture and heritage. Indeed, there is scope to articulate these points within the parameters set out by the *Culture 2025 Discussion Document*. At the same time, we must recognise that however much we value opportunities for employment and economic growth in relation to culture, these are *instrumental* arguments, valuing culture only insofar as it produces some other effect (usually economic).

Fresh thinking about cultural policy in Ireland should entail supplementing this instrumental view with a more radical foundational principle: that culture simply has value, over and above any use or impact that it might have on the economy or other facet of Irish society. Whether we are talking about a painting, an archive, a performance, a building, a digital object, an archaeological site, a broadcast, or any of the other manifold works, experiences, or sites included within the Culture 2025 definition of culture, we need to recognise that what makes cultural objects different from other human artefacts is their claim to intrinsic value. Seamus Heaney put this succinctly when he stated that 'the good of literature and of music is first and foremost the thing in itself'.⁵ If we extend this to include all forms of culture and heritage, an acknowledgement of the intrinsic value of culture must form the bedrock of any valid cultural policy.

Culture 2025 should be underpinned by a powerful statement recognising the intrinsic value of culture and heritage, in all its forms, and hence the need for it to be supported by the state.

(b) Definitions of Culture

The *Culture 2025 Discussion Document* begins with a definition of culture, specifically focused on the arts (as defined in the Arts Act, 2003), the ‘creative industries’ and ‘cultural heritage’.⁶ However culture is defined, the starting point for any discussion on the development of a national cultural policy must be the recognition that culture and heritage, in all its forms, is not the property of the state, but belongs in the broadest sense to the people. There can be no fixed or dogmatic definition of culture in a dynamic or evolving society. At best, any individual government is never more than a temporary steward of Ireland’s cultural heritage. In consequence, it is necessary that the state exercise its cultural stewardship through a clear policy of support for cultural endeavour. It is equally the case, however, that culture is best managed at arm’s length from government, with a reasonable expectation by the state that such management be transparent and responsible in return.

Culture 2025 should recognise from the outset the principle that culture is best managed at arm’s length from government, with reasonable expectation by the state of transparent and responsible management.

(c) Multiculturalism

Culture and heritage are central to any society’s sense of self and are widely understood to constitute a key element in the formation of both individual and collective identity. Collective heritage is often imagined in terms of the collections housed in major cultural institutions, such as the artefacts in the National Museum and the Natural History Museum, the living plants in the National Botanical Gardens, or the paintings displayed in the National Gallery. Of course the definition of culture in the discussion document goes far beyond these institutions, encompassing theatre, music, dance and other types of performance. Nor is it confined to what was once considered ‘high culture’, but extends equally to traditional and folk culture, broadcast and televisual cultural forms, cinema, popular culture and the products of digital culture, as well as to our landscapes and the built environment. Cherishing and understanding the totality of Ireland’s culture and heritage, whether that of the people who resided in Ireland in the past or that which migrants have over millennia brought to the island with them, and continue to bring, are inseparable from fostering creativity, imagination and risk-taking in the present and the future.

Until relatively recently, the dominant understanding of Irish culture was the recognition of the uneasy (and sometimes antagonistic) coexistence of two dominant, historically determined cultural identities. It is now clear that this model is becoming increasingly outdated and that the demographic changes that have reshaped Irish society over the past two decades are part of a wider movement of peoples both within and into Europe. The effect of this demographic transformation of Irish society has been intensified by Ireland's rapid embrace of globalisation. Therefore:

Culture 2025 must recognise and adapt to ongoing demographic shifts and foster an ethical multiculturalism contributing neither to forcible assimilation nor to segregation.

Culture 2025 should also endorse the preservation and development of traditional and established forms of cultural expression, while remaining open to new and as yet unimagined cultural forms that will emerge in the next decade.

Section 2 – Recommendations

The adoption of these key principles forms the conceptual basis of the Academy’s specific recommendations in respect of the following three headings outlined in the *Culture 2025 Discussion Document*:

- a) Institutional Arrangements (Governance and Legislation)
- b) Funding and Resources
- c) Infrastructural Provision

(a) Institutional Arrangements

Individual organisations are generally well placed to assess their own needs, and in this regard an element of institutional autonomy is critical. This autonomy has been eroded over the years, and many institutions now have little control over key aspects of their operations, particularly in relation to staffing. There is also a need for a clear policy on the composition and conduct of boards that would apply to all cultural institutions. Such a policy is critical in strengthening boards to safeguard against inappropriate pressure on institutions while they engage proactively with a changing political environment. Hence, there are some areas in which institutional autonomy should be respected, except for the provision of a national policy regarding the constitution and conduct of boards of state-funded cultural bodies.

Practical recommendations include:

- *Culture 2025* should contain a statement defining the arm’s-length relationship between state-funded cultural bodies and the state, balancing the needs of autonomy and accountability.
- Statutory policy in relation to the constitution of boards of cultural institutions should include a provision to preclude the replacement of an entire board in order to preserve the standing, integrity and institutional continuity required of such bodies.
- *Culture 2025* should incorporate a clear statement outlining the relationship and respective responsibilities of institutional directors and their respective boards.
- Board members should not be remunerated for their service, and should be selected on the basis of their expertise.
- *Culture 2025* should facilitate the development of transparent, evidence-based, system-wide planning to assist with proactive decision making. This could be done through the introduction of a common format, short-form annual report for all state-funded cultural institutions, which would aggregate key data for government across common headings. Such annual reports should be published in a timely manner.

(b) Funding and Resources

Culture 2025 must contain unambiguous undertakings on the part of the state to support Irish culture and heritage through durable financial investment. Achieving this fiscal security is not exclusively a matter of increasing state funding directly. Institutions and organisations responsible for preserving and developing Irish culture and heritage should be rewarded for successful external fund-raising, whether through philanthropy, corporate sponsorship or participation in national and European Union programmes, rather than having their core grant reduced when they have secured such monies.

Collaborations across the island, within Europe, and beyond must also be actively encouraged. The effectiveness of taxation measures in encouraging the Irish film industry points to a model that could be considered and implemented for the cultural sector as a means of encouraging inward investment in some fields of cultural production.

There is a compelling argument, where state funding is concerned, for the adoption of multi-year budgets to allow proper planning (and budgeting). Doubts about available finance hinder the possibility of delivering ambitious programming and the formulation of medium and long-term goals. Smaller arts organisations are particularly vulnerable and often only receive funding late in the financial year, making planning difficult and needlessly inefficient. The Academy therefore recommends that the possibility of adopting multi-year budgets be considered as a more effective means of funding Irish cultural organisations.

(c) Infrastructural Provision

The complex network of state bodies and agencies and government departments with responsibility for Irish culture and heritage has had the effect of making this sector peripheral. There is a compelling argument therefore for the development of a new national coordinating body to facilitate cross-cutting high-level strategic planning across the sector. Such a body, with a remit to regularly review and revise the proposed *Culture 2025* policy, would create a different kind of policy: instead of a static document, the policy would itself be dynamic, coordinating the strategies and needs of all the many stakeholders, and thereby responding to a rapidly changing Ireland.

Two options could be considered:

- (a) a new body that would bring together all of the major bodies involved in formulating and implementing culture and heritage policy,
- or
- (b) the repurposing of an existing body to carry out this function on what might be considered neutral ground.

Option (a) would have the advantage of creating a body that would be designed for purpose, would have no vested sectoral interests, and could act as a neutral ground for debate and collaborative policy formation across the whole culture and heritage sector; at the same time, it would potentially run the risk of simply adding yet another name to an already lengthy list of boards. Option (b) would avoid this difficulty; however, it would equally involve significantly restructuring whichever body was selected for the task. While the Arts Council, for example, performs important elements of this coordinating work in relation to the arts, its current remit does not extend to areas of heritage and preservation; similar arguments would apply to most other bodies that might potentially be repurposed. Recognition of these matters, however, does not remove the need for greater sectoral coordination if a national cultural policy is to be dynamic and effective.

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²*Governance of Cultural Institutions, A Royal Irish Academy Seminar* (Dublin: Royal Irish Academy, March 2013)
<http://www.ria.ie/News/Governance-of-Cultural-Institutions-Report>.

³*Assessment of the Economic Impact of the Arts in Ireland: An Update Report* (Dublin: Indecon, October 2012).

⁴*Economic Impact of the Arts, Culture and Creative Sectors* (Dublin: DKM Economic Consultants, 9 October, 2009), p. ii.

⁵Seamus Heaney, "On Poetry and Professing", in *Finders Keepers: Selected Prose 1971–2001* (London: Faber, 2002), p. 70.

⁶*Culture 2025 Discussion Document* (Dublin: Department of Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht, August 2015), p. 5.

