



INSIDE THE GALLERY PODCAST – SERIES 7 EPISODE 2 (Late Feb 2025)

Prof Dr Anne Bamford OBE

Australia's PISA ranking

Tim Stackpool: Anne, thanks for joining us on the podcast.

Prof Anne Bamford OBE: Oh, great to be here.

Tim Stackpool: First of all, I do want to discuss with you the nature and Australia's world ranking in creative thinking, but you've been pretty busy, right?

Prof Anne Bamford OBE: Yes, I have indeed been busy. So, I've spent the last 22 years away from Australia. I've only returned to Australia in the last few years. And so have been doing a lot of both global work. and work within the United Kingdom. The reason I originally went away was to do work for UNESCO regarding their Education for All initiative and looking at the quality of education and the role of arts and culture and what it plays within having a quality provision of education.

And that sort of meant that I left Australia in 2004/ the end of 2003 and although I intended to come back quite promptly after that work, which was due to take two years, I then found myself doing a lot of work in Europe and the UK. And so it took me actually 20 years to get back. ,

Tim Stackpool: It's a big leap from a job at UTS, isn't it?

Prof Anne Bamford OBE: Oh, UTS was a great place to work and I think it gave a great grounding. And there was opportunities there because I was both working within arts education and teacher education, importantly, and also within innovation and technology. And so I think it gave a really good grounding for the sort of work that was needed to be done. When I did the work in originally the sort of two years of work for the report that ended up the wow factor was really looking at lots of different countries. So it gave you that perspective to be able to look both in detail, but also look in the broad sense.

Tim Stackpool: You've had great success. I've written here in my notes, you bouncing from one job to another, but I'm sure it was more involved than that. But what's it like in that scenario in Europe? Is it like the competitive warfare we have in Australia for such positions?

Prof Anne Bamford OBE: I think it's different in different countries.

So it's not easy to be able to generalise in that sense. What I would say is I've done a lot of. work, for example, in the Nordic countries, and they have very strong support from the Nordic Council for the value of arts and culture and creativity within their sort of identity as a group of countries, and also in their how they link it with education at all ages, right from very early years through to people at university and so on. So, if you take, for example, the Nordic countries, it's very well-funded and there's growing because of the success of those countries as well. You've had other European countries taking a strong interest in arts and culture and also more progressive approaches, I would say, in terms of experimentation around arts and culture.

So you've got countries like Portugal doing really interesting work. You've got emergence of for example, a renewal of curation and museums within places like the Netherlands and Italy, although they've obviously had museums for a long time, but thinking what is the role of those as contributing to

the society and its values and a lot of connection in Europe between the role of art and civic development, citizenship, and even democracy.

So it has a sort of slightly different focus as well.

Tim Stackpool: It's, and what you've been doing, is reflecting the value of such creative thinking. How much does it perhaps put back, not just into the culture of the country, but into the economy of the country?

Prof Anne Bamford OBE: It's absolutely vital for both employability and for the economy, and this is often overlooked, and I think it's one of the areas that we really need to discuss a lot more and see the impact. So arts and cultural education and more broadly the arts and cultural availability within a country has an enormous impact on the development of creative thinking and innovation. And what we know is it's a case of all good things go together in that when you have a strong offer to the public of arts and cultural provision. It leads to a lot of positive benefits. Now, some of those benefits are fairly well documented. For example, improvement in the feeling in an area or the sort of provision of opportunities in an area. It's also known that it has positive health impacts, so it can improve people's both physical and mental well being.

But there's other impacts that are also very apparent. And these are, some of these may be less known, like things like reduction in crime more likelihood of people caring for the environment. There's also interesting ones around, for example, people voting more. And in Europe, of course, it's not compulsory to vote.

And to get people to actually vote is a positive benefit for them. But one of the key benefits is in the development of a really flourishing economy, and we know that there's an exact link, almost a, country by country match between the quality of the arts and cultural provision within a country and their ranking in terms of innovation and their economic growth. And they talk about innovation inputs and outputs. And the inputs include things like arts and cultural education, the provision of arts and cultural facilities, for example, are in, they're measured as part of the innovation inputs, and then the outputs are things like patents and new companies and long-lasting entrepreneurs and generation of wealth and productivity.

And there is a correlation between those two elements. And so this is not accidental. And some of this is due to the fact of the development of talent, because we also know that the art, that engagement in arts and culture is very good at developing what are known as fusion skills, which are these broad skills that mean you're able to perform higher order functions, which then directly improves productivity, which then directly improves economic success, which leads to better innovations and so on.

Tim Stackpool: That's right, you don't necessarily have to be an artist to make use of creative thought.

Prof Anne Bamford OBE: No, in fact, what we now start to see is that these capacities operate in a very long lasting and stable way, across many different disciplines and different occupations. For example, one of the research big studies that was, I conducted during the time in the UK was to actually look across 101 different industry groups. And what we could see was they were very, the skills, the fusion

skills were very consistent. And people say some of those skills you can get in other ways. So things like creativity, collaboration, communication skills, and so on. But what you find in arts and culture is they're in an, in a very intense way.

So it's if you like a real multi vitamin of these skills, it has all of them in it. And also it develops a community that is interested in and appreciative of these. And so it's a sort of a perfect circle because it keeps then more reinforcing the need to develop those skills and rewarding those skills.

But it also then that further generates the skills. So it's a wonderful cycle of good for a country and has a lot of positive benefits.

Tim Stackpool: How hard is it though to have governments take notice of this research and these results. I'm guessing it would be easier in places like Europe than it would be in places like Australia.

We have a huge focus on the economics of natural resources and sport, for instance. But perhaps not such a concentration or an appreciation of what creativity can bring to our country.

Prof Anne Bamford OBE: I think that's such an important question. And it's particularly relevant in the Australian context because recently you've had the OECD conducting its first ever, what they call PISA testing, looking explicitly at creative thinking. Well, Australia came in equal third place. So number one is Singapore, number two is South Korea, and number three in equal place with Australia is Canada. So it's something we do extremely well, yet it's undervalued. Now, the link between creative thinking, and business innovation is really strong. And so what you start to see is if we can really promote that further, you will also result in getting the development of the arts. And you asked the question about how is it in different countries in Europe. So different places have an appreciation or not for the value of this.

But in Asia, if you look at that list, you've got the two top players existing very much in our region. We've got Singapore and South Korea. And if you look at those, in both cases, the government has explicitly had a targeted set of actions to promote arts and culture. So in South Korea, they developed the Korean Arts and Cultural Education Service. They did that in 2005 as a result of the UNESCO work, as a result of things like the Wow Factor. So they looked at the evidence. And then they set up a whole, like a corporation, but it's a government run initiative, to really promote that. And it's not surprising, some of the outcomes of things like the fantastic growth in things like K Pop, which is now one of their largest economic earners for the country.

The growth in Korean films and the quality and breadth of their film industry. So you, and there are areas like fashion and all sorts of other creative areas. So when a government takes this in a serious way and invests in a deep way at all levels, so it's, it was about investing in. museums, about investing in arts education, about promoting and supporting street culture or emerging art forms that were in the area.

So it's about taking a very strategic approach to it. And both, both Singapore and South Korea have taken a very organised, very implementation impact focused. Approach to transforming the creativity of their people.

Tim Stackpool: you've worked a lot in government with government. So you can answer the political questions, although I don't want to corner you here, how do governments such as those you've mentioned? How do they justify that sort of spending when there are people who are suffering with the cost of living crisis, as it's been coined, or can't find a place to live?

Prof Anne Bamford OBE: It's one of those cases where you get a lot of value for the money you spend. The benefits are very big compared to what you actually need to spend. In terms of where it has success, it's also about when ministries work together rather than working in silos, to see it as a way of transformation. And for example, in the new UNESCO framework for culture and arts education, there is an explicit agreement, and Australia has signed up to this agreement, for the ministries of education.

And the ministries or organisations in charge of culture to work in a joined-up systematic way in a lifelong way. So they're, in other words, they're all pulling in the same direction rather than sometimes seemingly you know, pulling against one another or wasting money by overlap and gaps and not really seeing it in its full picture.

And where you have that joined-up working. So another great example of that is in the Netherlands, where it is the same person is the Minister for Education as they are for the Ministry of, Minister of Culture. And so culture is completely embedded. in their education system, but equally learning is completely embedded in their broad conceptions of culture and the arts. Every museum is a place of learning and every school is a place of culture, and then you've got a country that performs. very well educationally, their children have high standards, they have greater quality, which is something that's missing in a lot of other countries in education, including in Australia, that level of equality.

Plus they have wonderful arts and cultural provision. And so it is that thing of, it's not, it's about the seeing the value of this becoming a part of, a core part. of how you think about policy, how you think about health, how you think about justice, all these other areas, having it as always putting that filter of how do we get the power of arts and culture to help improve these policy areas as well as develop in its own right and become something in its own right.

So K Pop wasn't at the, it wasn't at the expense of a whole new art form developing. To also have a focus on the need to have this, for example, in care for the elderly in, in South Korea.

Tim Stackpool: Do we have to look at it here in Australia from a different perspective because we are so far from the rest of the world, if I can put it that way, and comparatively that's true. People don't necessarily come to Sydney as tourists for the culture. Do you think we can ever change that perspective?

Prof Anne Bamford OBE: I think you can absolutely change that perspective and you see that has happened in lots of places. So an interesting one in recent years, there's been enormous growth in tourism to Japan and it used to be a very small part of the economy.

It's now a very big part. And that was a growing recognition of the value of Japanese culture. And it's all sorts of culture, high culture to street culture, to pop culture, to even things in Japan, like nail art,

there's all, a whole range of experiences that people now take as being, taking it for granted is part of the experience of going to a country.

Now, I think the Japanese example is a good one because they also do have, you know, interesting geographic or natural scenery and they've got historical elements, but they also have a rich and vibrant contemporary cultural scene, and a lot of people go for that. So I think it's having it in the mix of the offer.

People now, as tourists, want to have a broader offer of what's available to them. So I think it's part of the whole experience and you look at some of the cultural events that we have here in, in Sydney and there's so many. And in Melbourne, you've got so many events in the countryside, even, they recently had the sort of event that was about Elvis, but they still had something like a hundred thousand visitors or something like this to that event.

So culture does definitely attract. And it attracts in large numbers and so I think it's about perhaps recognising that and supporting it in an equal way of, I've spoken about perhaps what we need a cultural football pitches or, cultural, parks where people can come and very freely develop and experience arts and culture in a non-threatening way. And then that's what leads to having the excellence. That's why Australia does do well in sport, but also does well in creative thinking, is the opportunity to have a place where you can freely experiment and develop your skills and practice these things.

Tim Stackpool: We've swung back about talking how creativity enhances the arts, but just want to explore a bit more about how it can enhance so many other aspects of a country, a culture and an economy. I harp on this quite a lot, but we do know that. The arts sells more tickets in Australia than sporting events across the year. The arts employs more people than the Australian mining sector. But beyond all of that, as you said earlier on, are you able to give me some examples of perhaps where creative thinking has enhanced or improved or developed other parts? of the working economy?

Prof Anne Bamford OBE: Yeah. A very clear one is the link between creativity and health outcomes. Health takes an enormous percentage of the Australian budget, and we know that people who engage in arts and culture feel, other than being actually sick, feel a lot better. So it has a really positive impact on people's perception of health and wellbeing. So even before they go to a doctor, they're less likely to go if they actively participate in arts and culture and, or appreciate arts and culture.

Participation can include going to the theatre, it may include making theatre as well. There was a very big study undertaken in the UK during COVID about the health and wellbeing of people. And even people who just watched cultural programs on television or listened to cultural programs had much better outcomes during that period of COVID.

And they found that they actually then started to proactively look at it. So they found, for example, online group singing was a really beneficial thing for people in that difficult circumstances that the UK was in during that period of COVID. So we were able to get a very big data set of implications of participation in arts and culture on both physical and mental well-being at a very difficult time.

And the results were quite stark. You get some benefit from going to cultural things, but you get even more benefit from doing them. It's that really active engagement is the most beneficial. And so there's, that's an example just in the health area. It also made people not only get sick less, but even when they were sick, where they were hospitalised, it made them recover quicker.

For example, people who do dancing following a major illness get much better, quicker than someone who doesn't. So the activity, the artistic activity, the social activity, the physical activity in the case of dance, led to very much improved results. But even people who created artworks, so we had with adolescents creating artworks that were called hashtag mood, just to express their mood, and even when they were angry, when they were sad, and whatever, the creation of the artwork. The act of creation improves their mood outcomes. So health is a really obvious, direct one. But as I said, there are other ones that are less obvious. So for example, you can design by the incorporation of arts and culture. You can design against crime. You can actually reduce incidents of anti-social and criminal behaviour by having good arts and design in, in public spaces in, in music where people are, in car parks, better lighting, so you can introduce this in transport, you can introduce it in the cityscape and some of the monitoring software now has been able to provide an evidence that even quite reasonably small artistic interventions can have a quite dramatic effect on reduction of antisocial behaviour and incidences of crime.

So that's a, once again, another savings, because if crime's not happening, then people feel happier in their environments, but it also means the criminal justice system is not having, you know, and then once again, if people do end up in prison or in criminal justice, having the arts in those contexts enables people to have much better outcomes.

They're much more likely to not re-offend. They're much more likely to fulfill their parole requirements. So once again, you can use it preventatively, but you can also use it to improve the outcomes following it. And we, I could keep going through a range of other, you're more likely to recycle. If you actively also participate in the arts and culture.

You're more likely to win a Nobel Prize if you also have a strong interest in arts and culture and a practice in arts and culture. So you can see these benefits are layered and layered.

Tim Stackpool: That's the result. Is there any study into why that is? Is it a chemical thing in the brain that is released perhaps when we undertake these activities?

Prof Anne Bamford OBE: Yes, there's a lot of work coming out of neuroscience at the moment that gives some pointers in evidence. I think there's always an element of mystery, which is wonderful. There's sometimes we don't quite know why something works as wonderfully as it does, but that's also the magic of the arts. And I don't think we should take that away, cry when we hear a really beautiful love song or when we see a play or something. It's something that's deep within us. But we do know that it's benefits around creative thinking is through neurotransmission.

And neurotransmission is a thing that will really allow it's fired up by creativity. So if you look at brain scans of people during moments of heightened creativity, it's like watching a sort of really busy London tube map, because everything's lit up and it's bringing lots of areas of the brain working.

Interestingly, when we're very young, so until about the age of eight, most children live in that heightened state of neurotransmission. So they're constantly being creative. Sadly, once they enter school, and we don't know if this is a cause or effect or a developmental thing, the research doesn't tell us that yet, but we start to see a decline in that happening.

And so there's a reduction and a reduction over time in that neuroplasticity, the capacity to move thoughts very quickly around the different parts of the brain. The other thing we know from a neuroscience perspective is that there's a lot of work being undertaken around the role of the arts in terms of what they call mirroring neurons.

And that's where you're actually you develop empathy. For example, if you see something in an artwork, or you experience something in a play, or a piece of music, or a dance, or whatever, it can actually trigger in you an empathetic response, a deeper level of human understanding. And these mirroring neurons seem to be a very key part of that process.

And we know that's very heavily triggered through meaningful arts and cultural experiences.

Tim Stackpool: You're back home now, are you trying to bring the results of this research that you've done over 20 years back into Australia, are you hoping to make change while you're here? I know you're travelling back and forth between Australia and Europe, what are you trying to achieve right now, right here in Australia?

Prof Anne Bamford OBE: What I would really like to see is almost a recognition of what Australia has. In terms of creative thinking and in terms of arts and culture and a valuing and a respect for that and an acknowledgement of the importance of that in Australia. Because I, in other countries they're not third in the world for creative thinking and yet they're saying, we're so pleased, we're so excited.

I heard virtually nothing. That when those results came out in Australia, and that really surprised me. I was like, why aren't they really flying the flag about this? Why aren't they so proud of this? This can help boost their currency because currency trade is bet on innovation as being a marker of likely future success of a country.

Why aren't they making a big thing of this? Why isn't this being picked up politically? Why isn't this being picked up at the federal and state level and at the local level? And there's an energy and we're good at this stuff if we actually value it and do it well. And distance shouldn't be an issue because we are, we, in other ways, we don't see distance as being an inhibitor to our work.

And Australians perform very well on the global stage in this. I know that at one stage they joked in London because pretty much the heads of all the cultural institutions were Australians. There was a whole group of us. So there is a, it's something we do very well. At an international level and we do well in Australia, but it's not appreciated.

And unfortunately, when I look at the results of the innovation rankings over time, not the PISA test has only just started. It's only been had one full implementation, but other things like the innovation

scoreboard made up of 60 individual measures. Australia's declining in that. It's actually got worse over the years.

I think we also have to remember there's a sort of who's responsible for this. We all are, in a sense. Our government certainly is. Business needs to look at this too though, because business needs to be saying, how can we recruit really creative people? How do we make sure that once we've recruited them, we provide jobs that enable them to really, flourish in their creativity, that there's opportunities to use it. in those jobs.

So it's just as important for industry and business. And it's important for our social services. It's important for our families. It's important that, people, parents and carers of children are saying, actually, how can I help my child for the future? I can give my child a rich opportunity to experience arts and culture, and so it's everybody, it's a teacher in a classroom saying, I need to make sure that they get at least two hours a week of high quality arts and culture, because we know that's the minimum, that's the baseline.

And yet so many of our children are in schools where they're not getting that. So it's everybody. Yes, you need legislation to support it. Yes, if you look at examples like Canada, Singapore and South Korea, all of them have very clear national policies and legislation and good implementation and regional and local delivery systems. And those sorts of methods are crucial to understand. I mean, my work at the moment is focusing very much on what will be my next book. And this isn't a plug, but it's called The How Factor because I'm focusing on how. How do you bring about this change? We know that the arts have a lot of value.

There's plenty of research on this now. It's not a case of being a lack of research. How do we make sure that it's then implemented? In a way that's equitable for everybody because we also know, for example, kids in rural locations are less likely than kids in city locations to get a good provision. How do we give equity?

How do we make sure that everybody gets these opportunities? And from that base, you're going to then get the success. And it has to be something that can't just be a given political party because if it comes and goes every time there's an election cycle. That also actually hinders innovation because people don't trust it.

They don't feel that it's going to be something they can rely on because then they say we might have it now, but it'll be gone tomorrow. So giving that sort of long term view, making sure that it's core embedded part using systems of legislation can be really important to make it actually cemented within the system.

That's how countries like Denmark looked at actually changing the rules. So there was no one else could come in and change it back. Korea did it by setting up a specific body to do nothing but make sure it happened because they also have a quite volatile political system.

Tim Stackpool: Over the past few months, I know you've brought together creative thinkers from different sectors of the Australian community.

What are you hoping to achieve out of having those discussions?

Prof Anne Bamford OBE: Well,

The first thing was a quite simple thing, which was those people from very different sectors all have one thing in common. Was that they have to use an enormous amount of creative thinking in their day-to-day work. They also were all in sort of leadership positions.

They're all experts. They all had the ability to influence others. And they were, apart from that, they were very many different disciplines. They came from different industries. They were different ages. They were a very diverse group, but that's the common elements that they had. And the issue is that often they've been speaking in silos.

For example, the design companies talk to the other design companies, or the people working in the health industry talk to other health people, people in education talk to education people. In bringing that event together, what we're trying to do is say, actually there's a huge common link, but also the other issue going forward is that society keeps being faced with increasingly complex challenges.

They talk about the wicked problems in the future and rapidly changing scenarios. And to be able to address those, you need people that come from diverse perspectives. So you actually, if you wanted to take a central issue in Australia. It would be best to put together a team who come from very different perspectives, but who are strong, creative thinkers.

People who are able to come up with many solutions, who are then able to test those solutions, prototype them, pilot them, and then offer something that will really work. And not only work, but be captivating, fun, and enjoyable. Because some things can work, but people don't like it. And so won't accept it.

So if you put creative talent from different fields together, you can solve some of those very complex areas, whether it's housing or health or whether it's, attendance at school or results in exams, whatever it is, if you bring together the right group. You will have the, you'll have a much better chance of getting quickly to the sorts of solutions that will actually work.

Tim Stackpool: So where's your next step now with this collection of people that you've brought together quite loosely, but with a focus,

Prof Anne Bamford OBE: We posed a very simple question to them all, which is what if we get it right? What if we get it right? first of all, it's what does right look like?

What do we as Australians want to have? Do we want to have a place where there's great music you can hear, where you can go to see really interesting things, where our places we live are varied, interesting, social, there's things to do, what do we want to get? Do we want to have, do we want to address issues around the climate?

Do we want to address issues around inequality? Do we want to address issues around traditional knowledges and skills? and what does right look like? What would we be like if we talked again in 10 years' time? What things should have happened that, we really want to see?

And one of the key things that came out of that was people from all different disciplines said we need to have a greater acknowledgement and recognition in all its forms. So recognition can be financial recognition, it can be publicity recognition, it can be acknowledgement in a broader community sense, but a recognition of the value of arts and culture as core to the success of this country, and the people in this country.

And that came out strongly as the message. There were things on the side of that, that people wanted to learn more about or wanted to get more ideas, but that was the thing that drove them. But interestingly, they also said. Because the question was, what if we, and I said, who are we?

Who needs to be around the table? And they said it's got to be a whole range of people. We've got to have the politicians, but we also have to have media. We have to have big business. We have to have small business. We have to have local authorities or local or, local areas. We had many of those people around the table, but there's still more people we could get around the table.

So it's an open dialogue. And its point is that it doesn't have to wait for me to give the action or for someone else to give the action. We can start doing this stuff today. There's things that we can get going with today, and many of them are not requiring a budget. They just require the will.

They just require you to start to do it. So even what we're doing right now is part of that process.

Tim Stackpool: and I only hope you can shake up the cultural perspective in Australia in ways that you have done in Europe. I really appreciate your time on the podcast and all your knowledge as well. You've given us a lot of time today, and I wish you all the very best in the future.

Prof Anne Bamford OBE: Thank you so much. It's been a pleasure.