

THE CREATIVE METROPOLIS: A RELATIONAL STRATEGY

Submitted by AFTEC for the First Five-Year Plan for Economic and Social Development of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (2026 -2030) & the Policy Address 2026



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Executive Summary



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1. Strategic Context

The Northern Metropolis (NM) represents a defining opportunity for Hong Kong to align its economic, social, and cultural development with the nation's 15th Five-Year Plan. With Hong Kong designated as the East-Meets-West Centre for International Cultural Exchange (EWCICE), the NM is uniquely positioned to become more than a physical infrastructure hub, it can become a **Creative Metropolis where imagination drives innovation**. This submission responds directly to that mission to enrich the NM in relational development on top of the transactional.

2. Challenges

Hong Kong is world class and excels in innovation, particularly in patents and technological output. To be even more illustrious for its own sake and the nation, **a policy and plan for the *creative dimension of innovation*** is immediately required as it is in this aspect that we are lagging behind.

This is firstly evident in the *OECD's PISA Creative Thinking Assessment* (2022) which placed Hong Kong's 15-year-olds at 22nd globally when we know that our young people are capable of much higher achievements. Of PISA's assessment criteria, while our students performed adequately at improving existing ideas, they struggled to generate original ideas or evaluate them critically. These are the leaders of tomorrow and we should take heed of their creative growth from an even earlier age.

From a recent research, equally noteworthy is that practiced creativity in Hong Kong remains generally passive, fragmented and isolated, visible in grassroots and cultural sectors but disconnected from institutional frameworks. The disconnect between policy, education, and industry is undermining Hong Kong's potential to become a truly creative economy.

The Northern Metropolis' planning and execution is a perfect opportunity to address gaps with powerful creative thinking involving adult professionals linking to young people to the wider community in one geographical area.

3. Core Insight: The Arts as the Missing Key



Photo credit: AFTEC

Performances and exhibitions are the windows to the world. The arts are, however, not confined to the overtly tangible. **The deeper powers of the arts lie in their capacity to cultivate creative mindsets.** While they may at first seem to be invisible and intangible, these are precisely the capabilities that fuel innovation across every sector: education, finance, logistics, construction, healthcare, and technology. **Creativity is human-centred irrespective of background or profession.**

4. Proposal: The Relational Strategy

We propose this strategy as the critical soft-power connector, an intentional and adaptive framework designed to cultivate and harness innovation across the NM's ecosystem. Woven across the NM's economic and social fabric, **building relationships alongside transactional ideals** will elevate the NM into a formidable and far-sighted **Creative Metropolis.**

As part of Hong Kong's First Five-year Plan, over the next five years, the strategy will be translated into a phased roadmap connecting partners at their strategic cores and powering them towards enduring, self-sustaining innovation.

Our key recommendations are:

- **The Northern Metropolis Creativity Index (NMCI):** A multi-layered diagnostic tool measuring creative development at three levels: **Individual (personal growth)**, **Institutional (organisational culture)**, and **Common Good (community participation)**. This ensures creativity is not left to chance but tracked, incentivised and systematically cultivated
- **Transcending Disciplinary Silos:** We propose planning parameters (2026–2030) that forge a **new language of collaborative imagination** across three integrated axes: **Vertical (generational continuity)**, **Horizontal (cross-sector creative agility)** and **Diagonal (cross-border synergy with Shenzhen and the Greater Bay Area (GBA))**
- **Artificial Intelligence and Artistic Intelligence as Partners.** The relationship between AI and human creative capacity is not a zero-sum game. Artistic Intelligence, which we interpret as the human capacity for intuition, empathy, metaphor, and meaning-making, substantially informs and enhances AI. By embedding creative thinking into the NM workforce and residents, Hong Kong will strengthen as a **global leader in human-AI co-creation, not merely a consumer of AI technologies.**

5. Greatest Natural Asset

In a city of restricted physical space is our people. We believe that by rekindling the collective imagination, we can fire up **immense constructive possibilities beyond stock answers and familiar solutions.**

The time is ripe. Hong Kong's designation as the East-Meets-West Centre provides the perfect platform, powered by the First Five-Year Plan. The argument is **not whether creative development takes time**; it is **whether that time is well spent.** With short, medium, and long-term soft-power planning, the NM will become **a model of creative urban development, locally nurtured, nationally aligned, and globally influential.**



INTRODUCTION:

The Northern Metropolis, the Arts and Creativity

This submission from AFTEC focuses on the Northern Metropolis (NM), a **visionary and logical step** in the right direction to drive Hong Kong forward, economically, socially and culturally as part of the nation's 15th Five Year Plan. As Hong Kong is tasked as the **East-Meets-West Centre for International Cultural Exchange**, this document aligns to this important mission as well.

In terms of physical infrastructure, the Northern Metropolis has clear, well-articulated goals and resolute plans to forge ahead. We propose the **relational strategy as the critical soft power connector**, an intentional and generic arts and creativity framework designed to cultivate and harness innovation across NM's ecosystem.

With this strategy woven across its economic and social fabric, the NM will emerge as a formidable and far-sighted **Creative Metropolis**. Over the next five years, the strategy will be translated into a phased roadmap, connecting partners at their strategic cores and powering them towards enduring, self-sustaining innovation.

As the newest and most ambitious development in Hong Kong, the NM will represent the truest mark of international-calibre performance. It is the **ideal testing ground to establish how through the arts, creativity and creative thinking can be systematically cultivated**

to drive a larger volume of innovation and new thinking. In time, this catalytic effect will generate a cascading motion, spilling over into the rest of Hong Kong, raising the overall sustainability of creative capacity.

The arts entertain; the public appreciates the finer points of the arts whether performing or visual. Yet their **value extends far behind aesthetic development**. The arts make connections, invite possibilities, promote social interaction, fire the imagination, offer diverse ways of seeing and understanding. The arts communicate meaning and test new ideas. They are reflective vehicles that provide safe spaces for collective creations; they foster divergent-convergent thinking as foundational; they bring people together and more.

The arts are extraordinarily good vehicles for teaching us how to live in and with VUCA (vulnerability, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity) (Bennis and Nanus, 1985). In such fluctuating global circumstances, we need **imaginative resilience**.

The arts are not just platforms for events; their innate properties remind us that behind everything we develop lie **human-centred capabilities that drive social and economic progress (creative industries)**. Korea, UK and the US are such examples. The arts are core



constructs that deserve much more attention. By releasing their as yet untapped energy, they can inspire social and economic change.

The proposal is divided into three parts. First, upfront recommendations and then the rationale. It concludes with a brief description of AFTEC, the submitting organisation and its work in arts and creativity.

PART I

RECOMMENDATIONS: From Hardware to Soft Power

1. Northern Metropolis Creativity Index (NMCI)

The relational strategy aims to cultivate a new generation of Hong Kong talent via the creative powers inherent in the arts to become self-sustaining, globally competitive, originating from and deeply rooted in the NM. The goal is to **transform the NM into a foundry for homegrown imaginative innovators** (see Figure 1).

The NMCI will measure, track and incentivise creative development in the whole NM ecosystem. It will become a **multi-layered diagnostic tool** that captures creative growth on three levels. The arts are the engine as illustrated in the Introduction. The following are brief examples of how the arts can be integrated into the NMCI. There are three criteria to each level with three dimensions.

(a) Individual Creative Index

- This **micro segment** allows for the charting of **personal development in creative thinking** via deep thinking through strategies, tools and skills in the arts. This tracks how individuals progress from routine fact-finding and problem solving to generative, multi-perspective imaginative innovation. The focus is on **shifting from routine to creative mindsets**

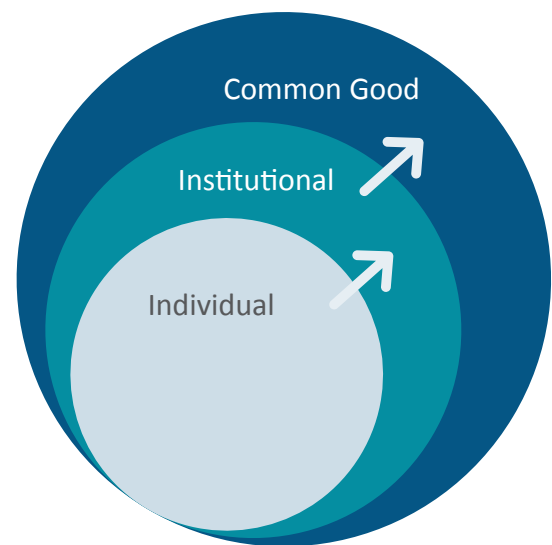


Figure 1. The Northern Metropolis Creativity Index

- The arts are not merely decorative; they are the **foundational springboard for cultivating the capabilities** measured in this index
- Innovation can be further developed with **creative mindsets that are re-wired towards growth**. Innovation is not left to chance or mirroring international examples; it is homegrown. Individuals will grow a roadmap for continuous and sustainable creative growth

- At the individual level, there is the **added value of cultivating a sense of wellbeing** as the mind is displaced to unfamiliar terrain
- Assessment instruments: self-assessment surveys, peer feedback, reflection portfolios/ journals, pre- and post-test surveys, ethnographic workshop observations.

Criterion 1: Creative Self Efficacy

Finding the creative self

Subset	Description	Arts-based Development Examples
Ideas Generation Confidence	Belief in one's capacity to produce original ideas	Improvisation Exercises: reduce the fear of failure with a positive change in exploration
Solution-seeking Resilience	Willingness to persevere when initial ideas do not work	Process Drama Exercises: living in uncertainty with changing scenarios and more than a single correct answer
Creative Identity	Acknowledging that the self is creative beyond one's professional/individual background and training	Working with Artists: open workshops to shadow creative mindsets

Criterion 2: Divergent Thinking

Opening up fixed mindsets and single solutions

Subset	Description	Arts-based Development Examples
Idea Fluency	Ability to generate new ideas without fear within a given time frame	Working with Artistic Prompts: what else can this chair be? How can the component in this painting change? How did that change your perception?
Flexibility of Mind	Cultivating diverse ideas and approaches	Materials Exploration: participants work on different materials based on one artistic brief
Originality	Developing unique as opposed to common solutions	Finding Connections: from arts to sector comparisons locating similarities

Criterion 3: Risk-Taking and Tolerance for Ambiguity

Willingness to trial disparate ideas and iterate in the face of change

Subset	Description	Arts-based Development Examples
Willingness to Try Again	Ability to dwell within grey areas or without guaranteed success	Rich Workshops: through diverse arts media, participants enter into a trial and error zone where chance and accidents are seen as opportunities
"Teflon" Strength	Capacity to iterate learning each time	Process-inspired Workshops: through numerous fun-filled building activities, participants focus on the creative process
Ambiguity as New Comfort	Ability to live with uncertainty and no clear answer at every turn	Open-ended Performance Tasks: participants develop short performances with minimal direction, learning to create meaning and structure in the absence of clear guidelines

(b) Institutional Creative Index

- Specifically for companies situated within the NM. This **meso segment** is embedded in **Human Resource and talent development functions**
- Creativity is part of core competency** (not leisure activities) and is considered part of overall annual inhouse training. This index serves to support the building of an imaginative workforce with curiosity and ideas
- The arts teach us that **creativity flourishes in environments** that value multiple answers, experimentation, diverse perspectives, and collective meaning-making
- Measured through strategies, tools and skills** acquired as individuals, this index delves into organisational culture, team creative dynamics and company creative output, pushing institutions to go further than hiring on paper qualification and hard skills only, to cultivate local talent that is proactive, imaginative and much more than problem-solvers
- Assessment instruments:** self-assessment surveys, peer feedback, reflection portfolios/journals, pre- and post-test surveys, ethnographic workshop observations

Criterion 1: Organisational Culture

The extent to which institutions reward curiosity, experimentation and creative thinking

Subset	Description	Arts-based Development Examples
Psychological Safety	Employees feel safe to take creative risks without fear	Forum Theatre: participants engage in exercises where they enact and then reshape challenging hypothetical scenarios, building collective norms of constructive feedback and safe spaces
Curiosity Encouragement	Institutions actively encourage constructive questioning, exploration, and inquiry	Questions Lab: inspired by artistic inquiry practices, these workshops support creative questions based on diverse scenarios
Valuing Diversity of Thought	Different perspectives, disciplines, and approaches are actively sought and valued	Cross-disciplinary Salons: regular gatherings where employees from different functions, backgrounds, and perspectives come together for arts-based exploration and dialogue, opening up possibility thinking

Criterion 2: Team Creative Dynamics

The effectiveness of team collaboration to generate, refine and implement novel ideas

Subset	Description	Arts-based Development Examples
Collaborative Idea Generation	Teams generate more and better ideas together than individually	Feedback Practice: adapting the studio art critique model, teams present ideas to each other for structured, supportive feedback that identifies strengths, opportunities, and areas for development without personal criticism
Constructive Critique	Teams provide and receive feedback in ways that strengthen rather than undermine creativity	Questions Lab: inspired by artistic inquiry practices, these workshops support creative questions based on diverse scenarios
Collective Ownership	Ideas are seen as “ours” not “mine,” reducing self-centred assumptions	Co-creation Projects: teams work together on arts-based projects where all contributions are acknowledged as part of a collective whole, reinforcing that the best ideas emerge from shared effort

Criterion 3: Creative Output

Output of institution's tangible innovations

Subset	Description	Arts-based Development Examples
Innovation Volume Creativity Techniques	Quantity of creative outputs (patents, new products, process improvements)	Competitions: teams pitch creative ideas for new products, services, or process improvements, inspired by arts-based ideas
Innovation Quality	Quality and impact of creative outputs	Exhibition and Curation: teams present their creative outputs in an exhibition format, with peer and expert curator evaluating not just the idea but its originality, feasibility, and potential impact
Process Innovation	Improvements to how work is done, not just what is produced	Sensing the Workflow: using artistic observation and sensory mapping, teams re-imagine their work processes. Eg What would a beautiful workflow look like? What would feel like music to our customers?

(c) Common Good Creative Index

- To advocate for **quality creative health** (physical, mental and affective), **creativity needs to expand** beyond the individual, the employee, the employer and even the boardroom
- Just as the arts cultivate individual creative capabilities and transform institutional cultures, they also **build cohesive, resilient and imaginative communities**. The arts create shared experiences, foster social cohesion, and give communities a language to express their collective.
- This macro segment equates with volunteer work and geographical, area-

wide involvement. A signature initiative is the creation of a **NM Creativity Festival** with broad participation from institutions, families, schools, artists, ecologists, environmentalists, and NGOs. This is not filling venues with attractions or programming in the routine sense, it is the **strategic cultivation of quality mindsets**. The focus is on wider community participation using arts strategies, tools and skills led by NM professionals and artists previously learned and now honed and applied

- **Public spaces, parks, open door company facilities and other public spaces** will provide the physical landmarks for collective imagination, inculcating the important notion that creativity is innate, developmental, very

much a mark of the **quality of life** and **the quality of being**. These are two goals that the current HKSAR Government is looking to enhance

- **Assessment instruments:** self-assessment surveys, peer feedback, reflection portfolios/journals, pre- and post-test surveys, ethnographic workshop observations



Photo credit: AFTEC

Criterion 1: Community Participation and Engagement

Participation percentage in creative activities and community initiatives

Subset	Description	Arts-based Development Examples
Participation Rate	Percentage of NM residents engaged in at least one community creative activity annually	NM Creativity Festival: annual, week-long community celebration featuring performances, workshops, exhibitions, and co-creation projects. Open to all residents, with targeted outreach to underserved communities
Frequency and Intensity of Participation	Percentage of NM residents engaged in one-off and/or ongoing activities	Community Residencies: artists and creative practitioners embed in NM neighbourhoods for extended periods, co-creating projects with residents/professionals and building sustained engagement
Diversity of Participation Neighbourhood Hub	Representation across age, background, profession, and geography	Programming: creative activities are distributed across all NM districts, ensuring accessibility and reflecting the community's diversity

Criterion 2: Civic Creative Health and Community Wellbeing

Extent to which participants report on community creativity

Subset	Description	Arts-based Development Examples
Perceived Creative Vitality	Residents believe their community is creative, dynamic, and innovative	Creative Pulse Survey: annual community survey measuring residents' perception of their community's creative vitality, inclusiveness, and quality of creative life
Sense of Belonging	Residents feel connected to their community and its creative life	Community Storytelling Projects: residents/professionals share and document their personal stories through diverse arts media, building a collective sense of identity and belonging
Social Cohesion	Creative activities bring together diverse community members	Arts Exchanges: projects that intentionally bring together residents/professionals from different cultural, linguistic, and socio-economic backgrounds through shared creative practice

Criterion 3: Flagship Initiatives and Collective Creative Identity

Events that build community

Subset	Description	Arts-based Development Examples
Signature Events	Annual events that become landmarks of the NM's creative calendar	NM Creativity Festival: week-long celebration of community creativity, featuring open studios, performances, participatory workshops, and public arts installations that illustrate the creative mindset
Creative Community Recognition	Celebrating community creative thinking achievements	NM Creative Awards: annual awards recognising outstanding community creative thinking contributions, from individual residents/professionals to institutions and community groups
Creative Identity Ripple Effect	NM's creative identity inspires and influences the wider Hong Kong community	Regional Creative Exchange: NM shares its creative practices, initiatives, and lessons with other Hong Kong districts and GBA cities, building a broader creative ecosystem

Integration of the Three Indices

The success of the three indices depends on in-tandem articulation and needs to be **implemented conceptually as one integrated whole**. This is intentional to avoid silos and disconnections

- Progress in the **Individual Index feeds into the Institutional Index**, with more creative mindsets building more creative organisations
- Progress in the **Institutional Index fuels the Common Good Index**. Companies that understand and practise creativity are more likely to create and sponsor Creative Festivals
- In return, a **vibrant Common Good foundation attracts talent and investment**, thereby reinforcing the meso and micro segments
- The NMCI is not static; it is a **dynamic feedback loop** that accelerates creative growth at every level of the NM ecosystem.

Considerations for Developing the NMCI

In order to develop an appropriate NMCI,

- A **skills audit** is required, one in which current and future creative skills¹ are studied, looking for inherent yet unexploited strengths and gaps in all participating sectors
- That both **quantitative and qualitative indicators** are mandatory
- Establish a **long-standing Creative Ecosystem Core Group** with inter-bureaux and civil society professionals and practitioners. Bureaux include, but are not limited to, Culture, Sports and Tourism, Education, Health, Labour and Welfare, and Home Affairs and Youth.

¹ If an external international party is to be considered, we recommend the London/New York-based AEA Consulting: <https://aeaconsulting.com/about>



Photo credit: AFTEC

2. Transcending Disciplinary Silos

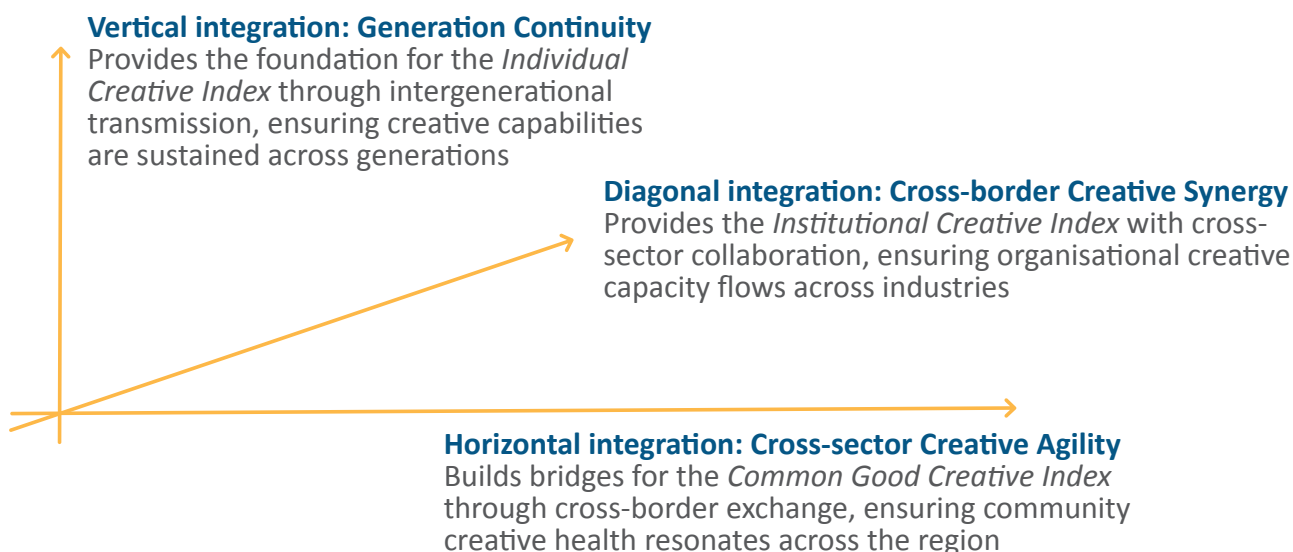


Figure 2. Relational Strategy Integration on Three Planes

We propose to set out planning parameters for 2026-30 that expand out from routine disciplinary silos and jargon to proactively **create a new language for collaborative imagination** (see Figure 2). The new operational grammar will be built across three interconnected axes in the NM shifting regular transactional mindsets to relational ones. An important note here is that though some of the programme examples may seem routine in the city, it is **the creative thinking concept that underpins the entire Northern Metropolis**, not patchwork programmes under one theme. **Creativity is fundamental; the programmes are vehicles.**

(a) Vertical integration: Generational Continuity

- To bridge the gap between generations by designing arts-based creative thinking programmes that bring together **inter-generational** professionals (those who build and operate the NM), schools in the vicinity, NGOs and the families who live there

- Through shared creative workshops, mentorship circles, and community activities, the relational strategy will nurture a **common understanding of a collaborative imagination** that transcends age, rank, and routine, ensuring that the NM's unique cultural and professional heritage is passed down and reimagined by each new generation
- Vertical integration focuses on the **temporal dimension of creative transmission** ensuring that **creative capacity is not the preserve of any single generation but a continuous dialogue across age groups, ranks, and life stages**. Through programmes designed to connect inter-generational professionals, neighbouring schools, NGOs, and families living in the area, we bridge generational divides
- The goal here is to ensure that innovation is not just a young person's game, but a **lifelong conversation with other**

- Examples can include inter-generational creative mentorship, NM creative heritage workshops, NM creative thinking artworks, etc

(b) Horizontal integration: Cross-sector Creative Agility

- To break down sectoral walls through regular, structured **creative thinking development** exercises that unite professionals across NM industries in education, finance, logistics, construction, healthcare, I&T and more
- These are not mere networking events; they are **intensive, facilitator-led sessions** designed to push participants beyond hard factual knowledge and routine workflow and habitual mindsets. By introducing out-of-the-box catalysts through the deeper powers inherent in the arts, the relational strategy will open up **new understandings of what innovation truly means and grow globally conversant innovators**
- Horizontal integration focuses on the spatial dimension of creative flow, ensuring that creative capacity is not confined to any single industry or profession but flows freely across sectors, inspiring and enriching one another. Through regular, structured creative thinking development exercises, we break down sectoral walls and unite professionals from education, finance, logistics, construction, healthcare, I&T and beyond
- The goal here is to transform “innovation” from a buzzword into a **tangible, practised, and collective muscle**

- Examples include cross-sector creative catalyst series, NM innovation salons, “Flip classroom” shadowing

(c) Diagonal integration: Cross-border Creative Synergy

- To **unlock the full potential of Shenzhen/Greater Bay Area** by forging diagonal linkages that cut across both sectors and invisible boundaries connected by creative thinking embedded in artistic practices
- The relational initiative will inspire with, for example, joint innovation vouchers, cross-border residency exchanges, and a shared Northern Metropolis-Shenzhen-Greater Bay Area Creative Council. By doing so, the NM will gain organic power and shall expand from a standalone development into the **creative nerve centre of the entire region**
- Diagonal integration focuses on the **spatial and cultural dimension of creative expansion**, ensuring that the **NM’s creative capacity extends beyond Hong Kong’s borders** to form organic synergies with Shenzhen and the wider Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macau Greater Bay Area. By forging diagonal linkages that cut across both sectors and invisible boundaries, we unlock the immense potential of Shenzhen and the GBA
- The goal here is to turn geographic adjacency into a **dynamic, frictionless ecosystem** of collaborative imagination
- Examples are a cross-border creative residency exchange, cross-border talent mobility platform for youth.

3. Artificial Intelligence and Artistic Intelligence: Two Forceful Partners²

In discussions about the future of innovation, a false binary has sometimes emerged: that **Artificial Intelligence (AI)** will either render human creativity obsolete, or that human creativity must compete with machines for relevance. This framing is not only unhelpful, it is fundamentally mistaken.

The relationship between AI and Artistic Intelligence, which is the distinctly human capacity for intuition, empathy, metaphor-making, and meaning-seeking, is **not a zero-sum game**. They are not opponents in a race; they are **partners in a new frontier of possibility**.

AI excels at pattern recognition, data processing, and generating variations on existing knowledge. It can analyse millions of designs, compose in the style of past masters, and optimise solutions within given parameters. What AI cannot do, and what it may never do, is:

- a) Ask original questions that redefine the problems themselves
- b) Infuse outcomes with moral and cultural meanings that resonate with human experience
- c) Make leaps of analogical reasoning that connect seemingly unrelated domains
- d) Bring emotional intelligence to complex, value-laden decisions, and
- e) Take creative risks grounded in lived experience, failure, and resilience.

Artistic Intelligence substantially informs and enhances Artificial Intelligence. When **AI is guided by human creativity**, its outputs are not merely efficient; they are wise, humane, and culturally resonant. **The most powerful AI applications are those that augment human imagination, not those that replace it.** In fields as diverse as healthcare, urban planning, education and sustainable design, the synergy between AI's computational power and **Artistic Intelligence's human-centred perspective yields outcomes that neither could achieve alone.**

For the Northern Metropolis, this partnership is **not optional; it is foundational**. As the NM develops its four zones, AI will undoubtedly play a central role. **The question is how to use it and, crucially, who wields it.**

The **relational strategy** ensures that **AI is wielded by minds trained in Artistic Intelligence: minds that can question, imagine, empathise, and create with purpose.** By embedding creative thinking development across the NM's workforce and community, we ensure that **AI serves human flourishing, not the other way around.**

In doing so, Hong Kong will not merely be a consumer of AI technologies, it will be a global leader in human-AI co-creation, exporting not just algorithms, but a **distinctive philosophy of innovation that places the creative human at the centre. Hong Kong will be an oasis that many will emulate in the years to come.**

² *Wen Wei Po* article (Lynn Yau, published November 26, 2026).



PART II

RATIONALE

1. Creative Mindsets, Creative Economy

Performances and exhibitions of the highest quality are very important windows to the world for Hong Kong. That said, there is an intrinsic **first misunderstanding** about the arts in general. To sprint ahead regionally and internationally, the **more profound yet seldom articulated powers of the arts** need to be advocated, extracted and implemented for social, economic and cultural development in the city.

Our single, greatest, natural asset in a city of restricted physical space is **our People**. **A creative mindset is the powerhouse to innovation.**

Kindle the imagination and we will fire up immense possibilities to provide more than stock answers and familiar solutions.

Think of the NM's University Town, in the Innovation and Technology Zone (Ngau Tam Mei), alongside sites in the High-end Professional Services and Logistics Hub (Hung Shui Kiu) and the Boundary Commerce and Industry Zone (New Territories North). If Hong Kong is to leap high and propel forward, **the arts and cultural hardware needs to be imbued with creativity, more than training performing and visual arts techniques**. We already have excellent technique training currently.



Imagine if all its professionals and residents are **linked more than by its hardware** (transportation, housing and work environment), with **relational creativity, the soft power of unfettered growth**, north to Shenzhen and the GBA, and south encompassing the entire Hong Kong.

There is a **second misunderstanding**: that when the word **“creativity” is documented on paper**, in policy documents, creativity actually happens on the ground, that people are able to immediately be creative with ideas that can benefit our society.

While research shows that we are all born creative (Magsamen and Ross, 2024), unfortunately many of us lose it along the way as we are ingrained with routine habits of mind. The arts, when done properly, have the powers to re-ignite innate creativity. When this happens, the mind becomes much more flexible opening up more innovative thinking and solutions. This is what is being proposed in the submission.



2. Current Gaps

We have a huge potential force of young homegrown talent who can contribute at high standards to the city's economic and social development. AFTEC works with many and can testify to that. Yet we are **lagging behind in OECD's PISA Creative Thinking Assessment (2022)** for 15-year-olds. We **scored suitably on improving on ideas**, one of the three criteria for creative thinking, but **did not do as well in terms of developing original ideas or evaluating them**.

Although we were at international level (32 points with 33 points as the OECD average), we were placed 22nd. Singapore was first, then Korea³, Canada, Australia and New Zealand in fifth place.

³ Korea's arts and cultural development has been backed by policy and education reform. See <https://arte.or.kr/index.do>

In other words, those 15-year-olds who took the test are currently in higher education. In a few years they will be contributing to the economy. The relational strategy is foresight planning to cultivate creative mindsets much earlier than in 15-year-olds.

As international literature shows, the **arts can be socially prescribed as primary healthcare preventative measures**⁴, reducing the need for regular medication and hospitalisation thereby lowering the usage and need for healthcare which is always very stretched. It might be the case that when minds are incentivised by purpose and goal, the **NEET situation**⁵ in Hong Kong will change for the better as well.

Hong Kong is a leader in innovation, especially in patents, but **less so in the creative dimension of innovating**. Currently, practised creativity is fragmented and isolated, often more visible in grassroots, entrepreneurial and cultural sectors, highlighting a disconnect between institutional frameworks and the dynamic creativity present in the wider community. Participants are passive consumers rather than active co-creators.

This is garnered from a research project initiated jointly by AFTEC and Professor Anne Bamford, the international expert on arts, creative, teaching and learning. The discussion in 2025 led to AFTEC commissioning her to undertake a focus group and online surveys. The resultant *Asian Conceptions of Creative Thinking: Hong Kong City Report* will be made available online on AFTEC's website in September.

⁴ See Chapter 6, *Those COVID Days: The Arts and Wellbeing* in Lynn F. C. Yau, *Evolving Creative Mindsets: Thinking through the Arts* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2025).

⁵ Young people not in education, employment or training

The findings point to significant opportunities for Hong Kong to strengthen its creative thinking ecosystem. Key recommendations include:

- a) **System-wide integration:** Embed creative thinking as a core capability across education, policy, and industry, moving beyond isolated initiatives for an integrative approach
- b) **Education reform:** Beyond restricting the definition of education to schools and institutions, “education reform” here refers to training in the broadest sense in the arts sector and further in other industries, to produce unique ways of thinking and processes. A shift needs to be made towards more flexible, learner-centred learning models that prioritise inquiry, exploration, and interdisciplinary practices
- c) **Trainer development:** Deploying the arts as the springboard and tapping into their inherent *processes* of thinking, trainers in diverse industries should invest in training to support creative pedagogies as a generic approach and build confidence in facilitating open-ended exploration, learning and implementation
- d) **Cultural shift:** Promote greater acceptance of risk-taking, experimentation and diverse forms of creativity across society
- e) **Cross-sector collaboration:** Strengthen partnerships between education, business and the creative and cultural industries to align learning and creativity with real-world applications, and

- f) **Policy and funding support:** Increase sustained investment and strategic co-ordination to support long-term development.

Hong Kong demonstrates excellence in innovation, and both strong potential and clear constraints in creative thinking. By aligning policy, practice, and cultural attitudes, the city is well positioned to develop a model of creative thinking that is both locally grounded and globally influential.

By nurturing a **concrete plan to intentionally cultivate high quality, flexible and adaptive mindsets**, we will be establishing a precedent in cross-sector local talent development.

Many will say that we **need immediate results to compete globally**, that a plan which may not produce results tomorrow will simply take too long. The argument should not be this, efficiency at the risk of effectiveness. The argument is not that it takes time but **whether it is time well spent**⁶ and whether there is **short/medium and long-term integration**.

The time is ripe now to develop arts and culture as entertainment, and much more than is recognised. The foresight of the **Northern Metropolis and the East-meets-West Centre for International Cultural Exchange** is a perfect platform powered by Hong Kong’s First Five-Year Plan.

⁶ In an analysis of the PISA Creative Thinking Assessment and the city’s performance, it was seen that more extra-curricular hours across arts or computer learning etc did not equate with better results. Singapore students did fewer hours. See Chapter 7 Creative Mindsets, Creative City: OeCD PISA Creative Thinking Test in Lynn F. C. Yau, *Evolving Creative Mindsets: Thinking through the Arts* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2025).





PART III

About AFTEC: Arts For Transforming Education and Communities

Creativity allows us to recognise potential within ourselves and the world around us. It promotes new ideas, nurtures relationships, cultivates resilience, and can transform lives in countless ways. At AFTEC (The Absolutely Fabulous Theatre Connection), we work with the public, young people, professionals and creative practitioners to plant the seeds of creativity in our community, seeds we have seen yield results season after season.

As a proudly homegrown, bilingual and **multiple award-winning Hong Kong NGO**, we nurture the city's greatest natural resource, its people. Through co-designed, collaborative, and inclusive bilingual educational programmes, we create supportive environments where young and professional minds are free to explore, express, and flourish. We spark imagination, build confidence, and foster a sense of growth and belonging together.

We are/have been supported by the **HKSAR Government** through the Culture, Sports and Tourism Bureau, the Leisure and Cultural Services Department, the Hong Kong Arts Development Council, the **Hong Kong Jockey Club Charities Trust** and other private foundations.

AFTEC was a 17-year partner at the Leisure and Cultural Services Department's (LCSD) Venue Partnership Scheme during which its ***Bravo! The Hong Kong Youth Theatre Awards*** project won an award. Other accolades include awards for a long-running **Medical Humanities (Performing Arts)** module in partnership with the University of Hong Kong, and an **outdoor cross-disciplinary arts festival** in a Lantau village.

We are currently in Yuen Long as part of an **LCSD northwest New Territories initiative *Cultural Playground@Yuen Long***, a unique platform that blends arts, history and culture into travel. The project features a wide range of arts and cultural experiences, from promenade theatre along the Ping Shan Heritage Trail, to visual-auditory explorations in the wetlands, to performing and visual arts happenings across Yuen Long, as well as a collection of community stories that celebrates the district's rich human tapestry. (https://www.aftec.hk/?page_id=16089)



Photo credit: AFTEC

1. Our People, Our Potential

In AFTEC's almost 18 years' contribution to the city, through research data, we have witnessed an infinite amount of potential in our people, in children and young people. We see a **great need for trainers, educators and artists to be nurtured together, to be upskilled in creative teaching and teaching for creativity.** Only when the trainers are fully equipped with the essential skills can young people truly benefit.

The more creative mindsets are cultivated from a **young age**, the higher the quality of **post-secondary candidates** and the **better the results for the NM and Hong Kong** as these young people begin their careers. This can only result in a **larger volume of innovation** in Hong Kong, one **sustained by minds that have been developed for long-term growth and not by chance or by socioeconomic status.**



Photo credit: AFTEC

2. Training the Trainers

Since 2017, AFTEC began to develop training courses for social workers and school teachers in conjunction with artists (2021-2028) to **broaden the impact that adult professionals have on school-aged young people**. Since 2021, AFTEC has partnered with the **Hong Kong Academy for Performing Arts** to cultivate undergraduates, post-graduates and faculty in creative teaching and learning. From 2026, **another University's research centre** will become the second Partner for the visual arts, creative industries and public value.

The signature projects since 2017 have been funded by the Hong Kong Jockey Club Charities Trust, with solid impact studies for two projects, the pilot *Jockey Club Arts-based Cross Curriculum Creative Learning Project* (2021-24) and the ongoing *AFTEC Jockey Club Creative Futures Project*. (https://www.aftec.hk/?page_id=12788). The former was the recipient of the **Hong Kong Arts Development Council's Arts Promotion and Education and Arts Promotion Award in 2025**.

3. Research and Publications

AFTEC firmly believes in **the value of action research to inform our practice**, and we actively review international research trends and documents to sharpen our thinking and elevate the quality of our work. Where funding is available, projects are substantiated by impact studies and evaluation. We now have a **Creative Learning Model** that can be adapted to serve generic disciplines and cross-disciplines in educational establishments from primary to tertiary education.

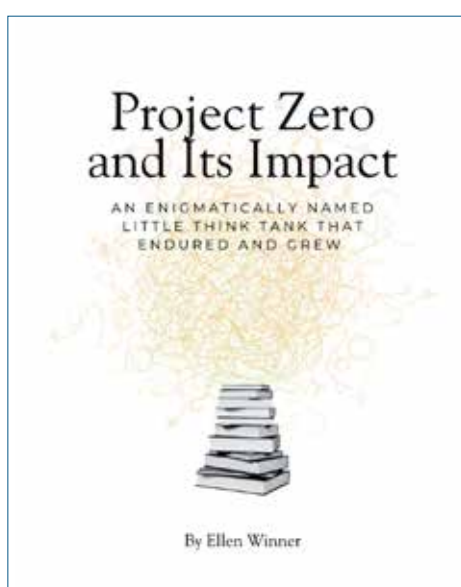
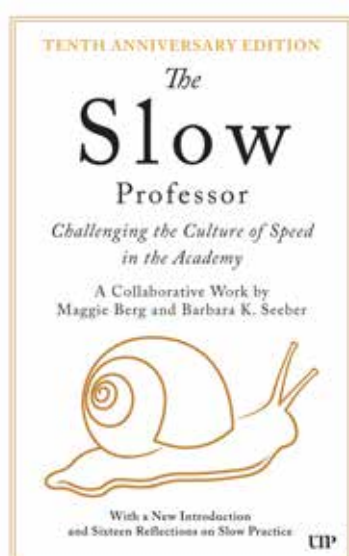


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In 2025, the following was published:

- Book: *Evolving Creative Mindsets: Thinking Through the Arts* (HKU Press). Written by Lynn Yau, AFTEC's CEO, the publication was hailed by Eric Booth as "hitting the bull's eye exactly" and Prof Anne Bamford as "a practical handbook and visionary manifesto"
- Lynn Yau's essay, *Slow is More: Teaching & Learning Collaboratively*, a commissioned piece in *The Slow Professor 10th Anniversary Edition* (University of Toronto Press)
- Her interview with Professor Ellen Winner was published online in *Project Zero and Its Impact*, Harvard Graduate School of Education in late 2025.



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