

Submission - Strengthening Australia's Craft, Design and Maker Economy

Introduction

Australia's craft, design and maker sector is an essential part of the nation's cultural identity, creative economy, local manufacturing ecosystem and community wellbeing. Yet despite its enormous social, cultural and economic contribution, the sector remains under-recognised, under-measured and structurally under-supported when compared with international peers.

Makers are not only artists and craftspeople. They are micro-manufacturers, innovators, educators, recyclers, storytellers, cultural custodians and small business operators. They contribute to tourism, education, sustainability, regional economies, urban activation and Australia's broader innovation pipeline.

This submission strongly supports the work being undertaken by [Nation of Makers Australia](#) and calls for a coordinated national strategy that recognises craft and design makers as critical contributors to Australia's future economy and cultural resilience.

The Current Challenge

Over recent decades, Australia's craft and design sector has experienced significant erosion in national visibility, infrastructure and policy support.

The closure or defunding of key sector organisations and ongoing instability in arts funding has weakened pathways for emerging and mid-career makers, reduced access to professional development and diminished opportunities for public engagement. Industry advocates have noted that the removal of national craft advocacy structures substantially reduced the sector's visibility in national policy discussions.

At the same time, makers face increasing pressures from:

- Rising studio and retail rents
- Escalating material and energy costs
- Competition from mass-produced imports
- Limited access to affordable fabrication infrastructure
- Lack of business and export support
- Insecure income streams
- Reduced exhibition and retail opportunities
- Limited pathways into procurement and manufacturing ecosystems

These pressures are particularly acute for independent makers and sole traders, who form the backbone of the sector.

The recent loss and instability of several significant craft and design support organisations has further exposed the fragility of the ecosystem.

Why Craft and Design Matter

Craft and design practice sits at the intersection of culture, innovation and sustainable production.

Makers contribute far beyond the creation of objects. They:

- Preserve and evolve cultural knowledge and technical skills
- Support local manufacturing capability
- Foster circular economy practices through repair, reuse and material innovation
- Create highly skilled small businesses and self-employment opportunities
- Activate high streets, galleries and local economies
- Build social connection through workshops and participatory programs
- Contribute to tourism and destination identity
- Support mental wellbeing and lifelong learning

Research into Australia's craft sector has highlighted the importance of maintaining a national culture of "making" rather than relying solely on extraction-based economic models.

Importantly, the sector aligns strongly with multiple national priorities, including:

- Circular economy transition
- Advanced manufacturing
- Skills development
- Regional economic diversification
- Community wellbeing
- Cultural diplomacy
- Creative industries growth

International Examples of Strong Maker Support

Australia lags behind many comparable nations in the way it supports makers, craftspeople and small-scale design production.

South Korea

South Korea has invested heavily in cultural industries and creative production as a core economic strategy. Government-supported creative hubs, maker spaces, craft villages and export programs have helped position Korean craft and design internationally alongside broader cultural exports.

Importantly, South Korea treats cultural production as nation-building infrastructure, not simply discretionary arts funding. Government investment models support skills pipelines, innovation precincts, international market development and manufacturing capability.

The success of Korean cultural exports demonstrates the long-term economic return that can result from sustained investment in creative industries and design-led production.

United Kingdom

The UK has long recognised craft as both a cultural and economic asset through organisations such as the Crafts Council, which receives public investment to support exhibitions, education, research, commissioning and sector development.

The UK also integrates craft and design into tourism, placemaking and heritage strategies, while supporting makers through public programming, apprenticeships and business support initiatives.

Japan

Japan's approach provides one of the strongest examples globally of cultural recognition of craft practice. Through systems including "Living National Treasures," regional craft preservation programs and support for traditional industries, Japan actively protects specialist making knowledge while also positioning craft as a contemporary economic and cultural asset.

Craft regions in Japan are deeply integrated into tourism, education and export identity, demonstrating how maker culture can support regional resilience and international cultural recognition.

Scandinavian Countries

Countries such as Finland and Denmark embed design and making into national identity and innovation systems. Makers and designers are supported through education, public procurement, cooperative workshop infrastructure and export development.

Design is treated as a strategic economic and social capability rather than a niche cultural activity.

Opportunities for Australia

Australia has enormous unrealised potential in the craft and design sector.

The country possesses:

- Highly skilled practitioners
- Strong tertiary and vocational education pathways
- Growing public interest in sustainability and handmade production

- Expanding interest in repair and circular economy models
- Internationally respected contemporary makers
- Rich First Nations making traditions and knowledge systems
- Strong local maker communities and grassroots organisations

However, the sector requires coordinated structural support to thrive.

Recommendations

1. Develop a National Craft and Design Strategy

The Federal Government should develop a dedicated national strategy for craft and design that:

- Recognises makers as part of Australia's creative and manufacturing economy
- Establishes long-term sector development priorities
- Integrates craft and design into innovation, tourism and sustainability policy
- Strengthens pathways between education, industry and enterprise

2. Restore and Expand National Sector Infrastructure

Australia requires sustained investment in:

- Craft and design peak bodies
- Exhibition and retail infrastructure
- Regional maker hubs
- Shared workshop and fabrication facilities
- Professional development and mentoring programs

Multi-year operational funding is essential for sector stability.

3. Support Makers as Small Businesses and Micro-Manufacturers

Many makers operate as sole traders and micro-enterprises but fall between arts funding and traditional small business support structures.

Government should provide:

- Business capability training
- Export and trade support
- Affordable insurance access
- Tax incentives for local production
- Low-interest equipment and studio loans
- Support for digital capability and e-commerce

4. Invest in Shared Making Infrastructure

Shared workshop infrastructure dramatically reduces barriers to entry for emerging makers and supports collaborative innovation.

This includes:

- Community maker spaces
- Shared studios
- Tool libraries
- Fabrication labs
- Repair hubs
- Regional production facilities

These spaces also provide substantial community and educational benefits.

5. Strengthen Public Procurement Pathways

Government procurement policies should include stronger pathways for commissioning Australian makers and designers in:

- Public buildings
- Civic infrastructure
- Furniture and fit-outs
- Public art and interpretation
- Cultural tourism initiatives

6. Support Sustainable and Circular Making

Australia has an opportunity to become a global leader in sustainable craft and circular design.

Support should be directed toward:

- Reuse and repair initiatives
- Material innovation
- Low-waste production models
- Local manufacturing capability
- Circular economy education and training

7. Improve Data Collection and Sector Measurement

The sector remains poorly measured despite its broad impact.

Government should invest in:

- National mapping of the maker economy
- Economic contribution analysis
- Skills and employment data

- Social impact measurement
- Regional impact studies

Better evidence will support more effective long-term policy development.

Conclusion

Australia's makers are already contributing enormously to cultural life, sustainability, innovation and community resilience, often with minimal structural support.

What is needed now is not simply short-term project funding, but recognition that craft and design makers are essential contributors to Australia's future economy and identity.

Countries that invest strategically in creative production, cultural infrastructure and design capability consistently see returns across tourism, manufacturing, exports, education and innovation.

Australia has the talent, knowledge and community appetite to become a global leader in contemporary craft and design. What is currently missing is coordinated national commitment.

This submission strongly supports the development of a robust national framework that values makers not as peripheral contributors, but as essential participants in Australia's cultural and economic future.