

**School of Fashion
and Textiles**

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Dear Minister for the Arts, Tony Burke MP,

We are writing on behalf of the School of Fashion and Textiles at RMIT University. Our School is a global leader in fashion and textiles education, training and research. We work with industry to ensure that our students will graduate with the skills and capabilities necessary to not only succeed within the fashion and textiles industry but to generate the transformative change urgently needed in this sector. Our researchers are leading international scholars in the fields of ethical, sustainable and culturally responsive fashion.

The Australian fashion and textiles sector is currently at a crossroads. We are witnessing an unprecedented deluge of fast and ultra-fast fashion imports, with little regulation to stem the tide. Local production capabilities are continuing to decline and the micro-, small- and medium-sized businesses (SMEs) who make up 88% of the industry are finding it increasingly challenging to stay afloat in response to the ongoing retail crisis. At the same time, knowledge of and commitment to ethical and sustainable imperatives, innovation in textile technologies and regenerative approaches to design and manufacture are advancing more rapidly than ever.

In 2021, the Australian Fashion Council reported that the domestic fashion and textiles industry contributes more than \$27.2 billion to the national economy annually. However, the fashion and textiles sector is not simply a commercial industry. It is built on the creativity and craftsmanship of designers, artisans and makers—the majority (77%) of whom are women—who are regularly overlooked in conversations about the nation's cultural landscape. In *Revive: A place for every story, a story for every place*, fashion is mentioned only twice in the 114-page document. One page is dedicated to a case study that profiles the Flourish First Nations Textile Design & Fashion Innovation Fund (p.32) and one reference to fashion is included in a statistic suggesting that 'ninety-eight per cent of Australia's engage in arts and culture in some way' (p.80). If fashion is recognised as a form of arts and culture, and as a primary way through which Australians engage in arts and culture, why is it so perennially overlooked in arts and cultural policy?

We suggest that fashion is a form of culture *par excellence*, providing a form through which individuals and social groups express themselves and foster a sense of belonging. And yet, fashion has largely been absent from cultural policy, both in Australia and elsewhere. As preeminent scholars of fashion as a creative economy, Angela McRobbie, Daniel Strutt and Carolina Bandinelli, write: What cultural policies 'name as a cultural practice is subsequently given legitimacy' (2023, p.5). Including fashion in the new national cultural policy will fundamentally support the legitimacy of this cultural practice, providing the recognition necessary to strength the

reputation of fashion as core to the arts and culture of this country. At the very least, this requires engagement with the needs of a fashion sector currently under enormous pressure.

To date, *Revive* has established Creative Australia, with dedicated councils to support the music sector, arts workers, the literature sector, and First Nations art and practitioners. What if Creative Australia also included a council dedicated to the fashion sector? There is support in the policy for digital games, for streaming services and design, broadly speaking. Enshrined support for fashion as a cultural sector will ensure recognition for the impact of fashion on the national economy and cultural imagination, allowing the sector to flourish in a time of increasing precarity.

We thank you for the opportunity to provide feedback on the development of Australia's new National Cultural Policy and we welcome the future inclusion of fashion within the strategy.

Sincerely,

Dr Harriette Richards, Senior Lecturer

Professor Alice Payne, Dean of the School of Fashion and Textiles

A/Prof Taylor Bridges, Director, Weft Research Centre