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Professor Margaret Sheil AO  
Vice-Chancellor and President

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Visual Arts and Design Section  
Office for the Arts  
GPO Box 2154  
CANBERRA ACT 2601

Via email: [IVA@arts.gov.au](mailto:IVA@arts.gov.au)

Dear Sir / Madam

**QUT response to the Department of Infrastructure, Regional Development, Transport and Communications *Consultation Paper on Growing the Indigenous Visual Arts Industry***

Thank you for the opportunity to contribute to the development of the National Indigenous Visual Arts Action Plan as discussed in the *Consultation Paper on Growing the Indigenous Visual Arts Industry*.

The University's contact officer for this submission is:

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I trust QUT's comments will be of assistance to the Department in its deliberations.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Margaret Sheil', written in a cursive style.

Professor Margaret Sheil AO  
Vice-Chancellor and President



## Queensland University of Technology

### **Response to the Department of Infrastructure, Regional Development, Transport and Communications *Consultation Paper on Growing the Indigenous Visual Arts Industry***

Queensland University of Technology (QUT) welcomes the opportunity to comment on the *Consultation Paper on Growing the Indigenous Visual Arts Industry*.

In addressing relevant consultation questions, this submission details a number of actions that promote sustainable growth in the Indigenous arts industry: the promotion of business and digital capabilities among Indigenous artists and creative enterprises; methods of consumer education; and legislative, social, technological and economic measures to protect authentic Indigenous art.

While recognising that there are numerous legitimate approaches to the question at hand – all of which have complementary roles to play in protecting, supporting and promoting Indigenous visual art practice, commerce and cultural significance – our perspective centres primarily on the critical importance of authenticity, and the tremendous opportunity presented by new technology to authenticate Indigenous artworks for the benefit of artists, art buyers and the economy. QUT's expertise in this arena is manifold, including our contribution to the world-leading development of the [IndigiLedger](#)<sup>1</sup> blockchain authentication methodology. Please find attached an informative slide deck about IndigiLedger to illustrate the case.

#### **Theme 1: Sustainable growth**

##### **1. What practical actions do you think will assist to rebuild the market in a sustainable way?**

A number of practice actions will support sustainable growth in the Indigenous arts industry.

On an immediate level, providing and promoting access to the *National Blockchain Roadmap* report, especially sections on the supply chain pertaining to the agricultural sector from which relevant lessons can be drawn for the arts industry, will empower those within the sector to rebuild the market in a sustainable way. The *Roadmap* report holds relevance to Australian markets broadly, with particular importance for areas of trade high in cultural value.

There is also a need to support Indigenous artists and creative enterprises, educating and promoting awareness of the economic value of their work, pricing strategies and strategies to expand their product catalogues to meet the needs of diverse consumer segments.

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<sup>1</sup> A world-first Indigenous start-up, IndigiLedger uses blockchain technology to verify the authenticity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural work, developing a culturally-appropriate business rules engine based on collective Indigenous Knowledge that uniquely defines and captures what is authentic, provable and traceable Indigenous art. <https://indigiledger.com.au/>

The tourism market would benefit from increased support for domestic fabrication hubs and industries to expand supply of competitive and sustainable Indigenous-designed souvenir art (including products made from timber, cotton, glass, metal and ceramic).

Incentives should also be introduced to encourage domestic manufacturers to pivot production toward Indigenous-designed products, as a means of enhancing domestic and international competitiveness and promoting Australia's unique Indigenous identities.

## **2. What do you like or dislike about how the market currently works?**

As the industry takes stock of its underlying position and businesses pivot in the post-COVID19 marketplace, the opportunity to rebrand and refresh cultural expression with a mark of authenticity, provenance and traceability backed by blockchain technology is yet to be realised. The rise of 'certified organic' labelling and brand personality serves as an important pathfinder that offers relevant lessons for the art and design market.

Technology and digital connectedness are moving at a rapid pace, and Australia risks leaving behind Indigenous artists and art centres if they are not supported during the sector pivot to a 'digital-led' model. The business need is clear and the technology already exists: the missing elements are artist and consumer education, infrastructure provision and regulatory adoption.

Fake art has a serious, ongoing and damaging effect not only on the economy but more importantly on Indigenous culture. While legislative protection is vital, its success relies on economic and social strategies. One such movement, ethical consumerism, has demonstrated itself as a powerful force of change throughout product supply chains. The efficacy of social and economic strategies in protecting the value of authentic Australian Indigenous arts and design products is dependent on strong investment in consumer education at the point of purchase and support for the development of smart retail technology to give consumers the tools to distinguish between fake and authentic cultural goods. As mentioned, efforts must be made to empower Indigenous artists and creative enterprises through business education, capacity building and support to adopt emerging technology and digital approaches.

## **5. What do you understand 'authentic Indigenous art' to mean? What type of artwork should be included in this definition?**

Indigenous knowledges are expressed by ontologies, axiologies and epistemologies (ways of knowing, being and doing), enshrined in a ribbon of relatedness to each other and to connection with country. This underlying Indigenous standpoint is the preamble to understanding the meaning of Authentic Indigenous Art. The process of understanding and obtaining information must be conducted through consultation and collaboration in order to achieve a closed loop of consensus as an immutable source of truth.

Expressions of artwork should be at the consultation and discretion of those wishing to create it. Indigenous cultural expression is circular in motion and adapts over time. Innovation, adoption, entrepreneurship and connection to culture is the underlying reason why Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people continue to be the oldest living culture.

## Theme 2: Capacity Building

### **6. What skills do you think are important to the industry? What ways do you build those skills? What would help you to build those skills?**

Strong and engaged effort must be made to invest in the digital capability of individual artists, communities and small-to-medium creative enterprises with training and infrastructure, with a particular focus on digital marketing and smart retail technology.

Existing skill-building incubators like [IndigiLedger](#), [First Nations Fashion and Design](#),<sup>2</sup> [Dot Com Mob](#)<sup>3</sup> and [Bamaga Productions](#)<sup>4</sup> that teach skills of smart retail technology, product development, cultural heritage, design expression and computer literacy in rural and remote communities are exemplars of the authentic and effective capability building that must be undertaken on a wider scale.

### **8. Is there more that can be done to encourage the development of Indigenous-owned and operated businesses in the industry?**

Digital inclusion is a key pillar in the competitiveness of Indigenous-owned and -operated businesses and the economic sustainability of Indigenous communities. Investment in NBN and other internet service provider infrastructure is key to overcoming isolation and lack of connectivity in regional and remote communities. Ubiquitous connectivity, particularly in an advanced sophisticated economy such as Australia, is no longer a novel, exotic luxury – it is well-established, normalised, and fundamental to social and economic participation. However, connectivity is just the first step to digital inclusion, as many Indigenous artists living in highly connected urban locations still experience digital exclusion. Therefore, capacity building, support for the proliferation of business-building digital tools and government policies which encourage market growth (such as recognition and protection of Indigenous Cultural Intellectual Property) are vital supports. Technologically-enabled activation of social and economic opportunities in the digital economy centred on Indigenous art and destination tourism are vital to building thriving Indigenous communities.

## Theme 3: Access to Market

### **10. How can digital technologies overcome the challenges of remote locations?**

Access to stable, reliable and well-supported digital technologies is a vital condition for dramatically changing the social and economic development of Indigenous communities across Australia, its modern impact every bit as profound as the lifeline previously represented by the post office and the overland telegraph. Digital connectedness has the metaphorical effect of collapsing time and space, making it possible to do business across deserts and oceans as easily as across town or even next door. Properly implemented, it enables growth of regional economies on a par with their urban counterparts – but only for those who have the access, capability and knowledge to operate within its confines.

<sup>2</sup> <https://firstnationsfashiondesign.com/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.dotcommob.org/>

<sup>4</sup> <https://bamagaproductions.com.au/about-us/>

**16. Do you like the idea of certification trademark scheme for authentic products?  
How do you think it should work?**

Yes, emphatically – a successful model to certifying authentic Indigenous cultural expression for small-to-medium enterprises and art centres is long overdue.

QUT & IndigiLedger have undertaken comprehensive and robust research and analysis of primary data from interviewing art centres, regional city councils, peak bodies, sole traders and resellers of Indigenous art and souvenirs to understand exactly how they interpret authenticity, provenance and traceability. A world-first Indigenous start-up, IndigiLedger uses blockchain technology to verify the authenticity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural work, developing a culturally-appropriate business rules engine based on collective Indigenous Knowledge that uniquely defines and captures what is authentic, provable and traceable Indigenous art.

A pilot undertaken by QUT and IndigiLedger demonstrated a strong demand for the technology to be deployed across Indigenous sole traders and businesses in Australia. This impact was achieved without State or Federal Government support. If IndigiLedger is able to harness public support at Commonwealth and state levels, it is perfectly positioned to become the trusted mark of Indigenous cultural expression, assuring Indigenous artist of the revenue streams to which they are entitled; assuring buyers of Indigenous art of the future value of their treasured acquisitions through authenticated provenance; assuring ethical consumers of the destination of their purchasing dollars; and assuring the Australian economy of its rightful benefit from Australian Indigenous art production, instead of losing value to offshore fake art rip-off factories or inauthentic black-market operators. QUT and IndigiLedger continue to explore opportunities for public-sector collaboration to secure this suite of benefits for all legitimate players.

**19. How do you think that Indigenous Cultural Intellectual Property protections could work in practical terms?**

The IndigiLedger platform captures Indigenous ways of knowing, being and doing in relation to all forms of Indigenous cultural expression, using trusted authentication technology. IndigiLedger's business rules engine, combined with publicly-facing data and enshrined by secure blockchain delivered through smart retail technology, provides an unprecedented level of authenticity, provenance and traceability. IndigiLedger is the retail and education consumer level of industry standard required to protect Indigenous Cultural Intellectual Property.

The success of IndigiLedger has implications for other nations grappling with the authentication of First Nations cultural intellectual property, placing Australia as a world-leader in this space. In practice, applying blockchain technology through the IndigiLedger trusted cultural interface provides producers, resellers and consumers an immutable source of truth – the missing ingredient in the current Indigenous vs imitation art marketplace.