

## **Submission – Review of the Indigenous Visual Arts Industry Support Program**

Stephen Cassidy

The Consultation Paper on Growing the Indigenous Visual Arts Industry is very timely. It seems wide-ranging and I don't want to provide input related to many of the topics it raises. Those working directly in the sector and the communities it supports will have plenty to add. The proposed Action Plan is extremely important, especially as a national plan developed by the Australian Government because the Government already plays a crucial role in supporting the network of art centres and the parallel network of language centres. It also is responsible for areas that are inextricably linked to the future of the arts centres, such as intellectual property legislation and codes. The role the Government can play in threading together whole-of-Government approaches to supporting the arts centres and the Indigenous visual arts industry is critical.

An earlier action plan, the [Indigenous Contemporary Music Action Plan](#), jointly agreed between the Australian Government and States and Territories, played an important role in support for the Indigenous contemporary music sector. It showed how a strategic plan could pull together many years of experience, consultation and research into a focused approach that was more cost-effective for everyone involved.

### **Art, culture and creative industries**

The area I would like to comment on is the potential links between the Indigenous art centres and the creative economy, particularly design and fashion. These are areas where it seems there could be opportunities to broaden the income streams of the art centres and enhance their economic viability. There have already been positive developments in this area which point towards what could be achieved. The exhibition [Piinpi: Contemporary Indigenous Fashion](#), currently at the Bendigo Art Gallery, documents this potential.

As the Gallery website notes, the exhibition 'brings together a selection of garments and textiles by First Nations designers and artists from around Australia. The first major survey of contemporary Indigenous Australian fashion to be undertaken in this country, Piinpi sheds lights on a growing industry which is blossoming and set to become Australia's major fashion movement. 'Piinpi: Contemporary Indigenous Fashion' celebrates Indigenous art, history and culture through the lens of contemporary fashion.'

The exhibition [draws on a much broader contemporary Indigenous fashion phenomenon](#) nationwide. It hints at the potential of the creative economy and creative industries to build stronger communities and is of massive relevance to not only First Nations communities, but also to Australian culture and its creative economy more generally.

It is linked to the enormous long-term community effort to revive and maintain Australia's own languages, those spoken nowhere else in the world. This is another crucial area, which as the current discussion paper notes, is supported by the Australian Government through its funding programs. In many ways, happening as it does at community level, this can be almost invisible to the general public. Yet it is one of the most inspiring community movements I have encountered, offering inspiration to other Australian communities for their own challenges and ambitions.

### **Why I have provided a submission**

While I am no longer directly involved with the Indigenous Visual Arts Industry, I have a long-term interest and expertise in the creative economy and creative industries. This dates from when I worked on the long-running Creative Industries Cluster Study, undertaken by the Howard Government when Senator Alston was Minister for Arts. I subsequently found myself working for

over six years in the Indigenous cultural programs of the Australian Government during a number of Governments. Here I was responsible for programs that supported First Nations languages and culture. I became particularly interested in the potential of the creative economy and creative industries to build stronger communities.

At one stage I was also responsible for the Indigenous cultural programs in that ACT, NSW and Queensland. In this role I began to appreciate how major events such as the Cairns Indigenous Art Fair played a role in highlighting and promoting Indigenous fashion. This involved presenting designs that had evolved from collaborations between community-based Indigenous art centres, often in remote areas, and educational institutions, such as the School of Design at the Queensland University of Technology, with its focus on fashion. In 2013, the year I attended the Fair, an inaugural fashion parade of work was presented by young Indigenous models.

What interests me are the broader impacts of creativity and culture. Both the economic importance and the community and social importance of creativity and culture are tightly interlinked because of the way in which creativity and culture are integral to everyday life and the essential activities that make it up. This is the basis of Impact and Enterprise, the unit I teach at the University of Canberra, part of the Master of Arts in Creative and Cultural Futures.

This has been reinforced by my involvement with [DESIGN Canberra](#) since its inception in 2014, which has underlined the potential positive role of creative industries and design in strengthening local and regional communities.

### **Arts and cultural jobs – and income streams**

How do you make a positive and lasting difference to the chronic issue of Indigenous disadvantage – the fact that on almost every important measure Aboriginal Australians are worse off than every other Australian? For a long time the view has been that ultimately it's all about jobs – without ongoing jobs, so the argument goes, there will never be an improvement.

Like so many areas where government and communities intersect, the views about jobs can seem narrow and lacking imagination and flexibility. The latest thinking seems to be that when we talk about Indigenous jobs we mean jobs in the the private sector, in mining or real estate or primary production.

Yet many of these types of jobs also receive their own direct and indirect subsidies. Publically-funded infrastructure, such as roads and railways and ports, for example, benefits them immensely. The legal and financial framework provided by government that enables them to operate at all in order to generate wealth is critical.

Subsidised jobs in the area of arts and culture and land care are real jobs, with real career paths and they deliver genuine skills and employment capability. Case studies and anecdotal evidence show that involvement in arts and cultural activity – by both Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities – often has powerful flow on social and economic effects. By building self-esteem and generating a sense of achievement; developing a stronger sense of community; increasing skills and capabilities through involvement in engaging activities relevant to modern jobs and thereby increasing employability; and by helping to generate income streams however small, cultural activity can have profound long-term effects.

It may involve some paid jobs, it may be more likely to involve income going to artists even if it doesn't involve jobs as we traditionally think of them. What it does mean is income streams

generated by communities themselves, even if the underlying mini-infrastructure of a centre and a manager is subsidised.

As the current discussion paper notes, this can be seen in the network of Indigenous arts centres across Australia, particularly in remote areas. The income generated by art sales may be the only source of independent income in the community apart from government benefits and the centres are also likely to be the social and cultural hub for the whole community. It's also true of the complementary network of community-based Indigenous language centres and the cultural centres operating across the country.

### **Creative industries – mining a new seam of value**

An important aspect of many of these jobs is that they are in the crucial new and growing industry sector of the creative industries. For a long time this has been relatively under-recognised, with a continuing focus on the declining industries that were important in the 19th and 20th centuries but less so now. However this emphasis has been changing.

What is important here is that one of the most valuable assets possessed by Indigenous communities is their culture. This culture, and the intellectual property that translates it into a form that can generate income in a contemporary economy, is pivotal to these under-recognised jobs. They may not be in mining but they mine a far richer seam – authentic and rich content that has already been recognised internationally for its high value, just like our iron and coal.

Unfortunately if the jobs concerned are government-subsidised ones, some argue, then they are not sustainable and ultimately do not contribute to any long-term solution. Yet if we look beyond Indigenous communities, there are plenty of jobs in the cultural sector that are partially or even wholly government-subsidised. No-one has suggested that the many jobs in the non-Indigenous cultural sector, in libraries, museums, galleries and arts and cultural centres, should only exist if they are totally self-supporting. Jobs in these organisation have always been and will always have to be subsidised. If not the private sector would long ago have moved into the area.

Why are arts and cultural jobs in Indigenous communities any different? If a contribution by government leads to worthwhile jobs that have career paths and useful skills and make a genuine contribution to Australia, is that a better use of government funding than out and out welfare? The question is: are these roles valued enough by the Australian community that they are worth supporting by government?

As former Secretary of the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, Peter Shergold, has accurately pointed out, government support for community organisations is a way of delivering services that the government needs to provide far more cheaply than it could ever be delivered by government. Community organisations leverage the core government funding they receive to enable them to run on a daily basis to attract a wider pool of financial and other support. This is often extremely diverse, from private businesses, philanthropic bodies and individuals. The value of the unpaid volunteer contribution alone to these organisations can be substantial.

Given the Government has demonstrated its commitment to continue to support these community organisations, identifying and fostering opportunities to broaden their economic role seems a potential way to make existing support more effective. It could be one of many components which help take the Indigenous art centres and Indigenous visual arts industry into the post-COVID future.