

National Cultural Policy Submission

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Submitted: As a worker/professional in an industry who uses arts; On behalf of an organisation with arts-components.

First Nations First - Targeted Investment to grow a dynamic and sustainable First Nations Fashion Sector.

A Growing Sector with Great Cultural, Social and Economic Impact

The First Nations fashion movement continues to grow, as First Nations fashion programs elevate First Nations voices on the national stage. Top First Nations models and fashion exhibitions are making the First Nations fashion sector a global phenomenon. Major commercial collaborations between remote based First Nations artists and leading Australian brands have set new benchmarks for artists participation and management of ICIP.¹ First Nations leaders and organisations are carving new pathways for First Nations fashion, and this creates a significant investment opportunity for the Australian government.

The Australian Fashion Industry contributes \$27.2 Billion to Australia's economy each year, employing 489,000 people and generating \$7.2 billion in exports. The fashion sector is a strong contributor to the nation, worth 1.5% of GDP (2.0% for telecommunications) and 1.7% of Australian Exports – more than double that of wine and beer combined (0.7%).² The First Nations fashion and textile sector's contribution to the economy, and the profile it garners from the Australian and international fashion world, should not be ignored. Even comprising a small percentage of the overall fashion industry (3% of \$27.2 billion at a value of \$816M)³ the First Nations fashion sector has the potential to become a multimillion-dollar industry.

The First Nations fashion sector is multidimensional, and its growth and activity reflect the diversity of First Nations culture, art, expertise, and experience. The industry provides a platform for self-determination and offers multiple forms of community-controlled business development, employment, creative engagement, and expression, as well as connecting a range of sectors and creative industries (Figure 1). There are increasing numbers of First Nations owned fashion brands and related businesses engaging in the broader fashion industry, with a growing and active audience.

This sector has a significant role to play in addressing the Closing the Gap targets for younger generations. There is a body of evidence showing that participation in arts and culture supports outcomes across the Closing the Gap framework.⁴ The First Nations fashion sector supports First Nations employment, engagement in education, economic development, and

¹ ILSC, Discussion Paper: First Nations Cultural and Intellectual Property, NILSC Strategy 2022.

² Australia Fashion Council, From High Fashion to Hi Vis; The economic contribution of Australia's fashion and textile industry, 31 May 2021

³ N.B 3% is based on population percentage statistics provided by the Australian Bureau of Statistics - <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/people/aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander-peoples>

⁴ Australia Council for the Arts, Towards a National Cultural Policy 2022, <https://australiacouncil.gov.au/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/National-Cultural-Plan-Framing-Submission-1.pdf>

critical intergenerational engagement with culture and the celebration of First Nations identity.

Opportunities to connect with First Nations arts and culture in contemporary ways engage First Nations youth and help to build a bridge between cultures.⁵ Fashion is a highly visible platform for young First Nations people to see First Nations role models and the celebration of culture. Investment in fashion programs is an investment in the social and emotional wellbeing of First Nations young people, and the related Closing the Gap targets for youth justice, employment, and education.

First Nations First – The need for targeted investment in First Nations led programs and organisations

First Nations fashion like its First Nations creative industry sector counterparts – visual arts, performance, and music sectors, need co-ordinated State and Federal investment in First Nations led business and organisations to continue to grow to be sustainable and resilient. There is increased recognition and funding for the broader Australian fashion industry, particularly in the Eastern states. However, broader industry funding is not reaching or targeting the First Nations fashion sector.

The Australian First Nations fashion sector needs co-ordinated and targeted investment and support for First Nations led organisations, research, and programs, across urban, regional, and remote spaces. The proliferation and celebration of imagery of First Nations fashion and the amplified attention from the commercial sector gives the appearance of a thriving and well supported First Nations fashion sector. The reality is very different, critical First Nations fashion programs and organisations, presenting one of the most marketable exports for Australia in recent years, largely exist on short-term and sporadic government support and high-risk commercial partnerships.

Successful independent First Nations designers and fashion businesses located in urban centres have leveraged commercial partnerships and capitalised on urban spaces to grow, with little government support. These are high risk partnerships with limited opportunity for experimentation and an imbalance in power and sustained benefit. In collaborations, young First Nations businesses are carrying the load, having to educate major commercial entities repeatedly lacking in cultural competency and with much to gain in light of current social issues; social license and ethical endorsement through alignment with First Nations artists and designers.

Remote-based First Nations Art Centres have stretched their First Nations Visual Arts Industry Support Program (IVAIS) funding to develop successful and sustained remote based textile practises over decades. They have sourced commercial fashion industry partners to create collaborative collections, which government have not funded and yet promote as successful arts pathways.

Funding Strong First Nations Led Institutions to address the sectors needs

⁵ Australia Council 2018, Submission to the Closing the Gap Refresh p13

State and national First Nations fashion organisations are identifying and responding to stakeholder issues and developing programs to educate the broader fashion sector, whilst providing support to the First Nations sector in urban, regional, and remote locations. First Nations designers and creators speak with their feet, the spaces where we see First Nations fashion presented are on First Nations led platforms across the country. There are obvious platforms and organisations that are doing the work on the ground with First Nations fashion sector members, and this is where Australian governments need to invest their resources.

A constant setback for the sector is the competition for minimal short term project funding and commercial partnerships. There is no ongoing funding program for fashion specifically, nor for operational activities and staffing. First Nations fashion organisations are not appropriately resourced to build capacity and grow sustainably to develop their organisational expertise and reach.

The First Nations fashion sector needs to be funded in a targeted and strategic way that sees First Nations-led approaches that support artists, communities, organisations, and sustainable practise.⁶ Australia Council have taken the lead in the funding space, creating the Flourish fund, an inaugural fashion specific funding program in 2022. \$500,000 was distributed to 21 successful applicants of over 40 who applied. Australia Council is stepping into this space with more funding promised to target this sector in the coming year. This national approach needs to be built on and echoed in State government approaches.⁷

A national model for policy makers to consider for broader development is the First Nations Arts sector that has seen a steady reduction of reliance on government funding.⁸ IVAIS helps fund the operations of around 80 First Nations-owned art centres and many art fairs, regional hubs, and industry service organisations. Each year the government invests \$21 million to support this program; in 2018/2019, supported organisations generated \$31 million in sales and contributed \$70 million to the Australian economy.⁹ The First Nations fashion sector has the potential to generate far more financially and reach greater international export markets.

The IVAIS model is a base that would need significant adaption to address the needs of the First Nations fashion ecosystem, informed by First Nations fashion sector leaders. Funding programs would require a scaled approach, including opportunities for established businesses to access more significant funding amounts for short-term business scaling and infrastructure, seed and project funding for younger businesses and sustained funding for the organisations supporting the sector.

There is a critical need for programs that support independent designers and fashion labels. Independent fashion creatives are disadvantaged when it comes to competing for funding programs that pit them against better resourced and established businesses and art centre supported artists. Resourcing First Nations fashion organisations that support independent

⁶ ibid

⁷ <https://www.artshub.com.au/news/news/first-nations-fashion-receives-over-half-a-million-in-funding-2566991/>

⁸ Office for the Arts, Consultation Paper on Growing the First Nations Visual Arts Industry, September 2020

⁹ ibid

designers and developing programs tailored to their specific needs is especially critical for this sector to grow.

A strategic policy approach needs to be developed that recognises the significance of the First Nations fashion movement and its contribution to the broader Australian fashion sector and Australian Creative Industries.

Policy recommendations

Investment in First Nations-led research and the development of a National First Nations Fashion Sector Strategy.

- Fund First Nations-led research and resource development to recognise the sector's value, prioritise First Nations sector identified outcomes and measure impacts on Closing the Gap targets.
- Provision for state and national platforms and events for sector wide connection and strategy development.
- Co Designed strategic policy approach with a collective group of First Nations Fashion Sector leaders to create a co-ordinated national strategy and funding plan to be launched in 2023/2024.
- Regional Collective leadership approach – funding regional collectives to capacity build and feed into the broader national strategy and action plan.

Federally Funded First Nations Fashion Sector Grant Scheme.

- Funding provision for all members of the industry supply chain; including manufacturing.
- Scaled funding that is tiered and relevant to the needs of the varied sector business models. e.g. infrastructure and business scaling funds for business growth.
- Flexible funding options – including recurrent, project and start-up funding options

State funded First Nations Fashion Programs

- Recognition and funding of First Nations fashion sector within state based creative industry programs, as per fellow First Nations creative sectors – visual arts, theatre, dance, and music.
- Connection with First Nations sector leaders/experts to support the development of culturally appropriate programs and culturally safe engagement.
- Engagement of fashion industry experts to support successful engagement and pathway development.

State and Federal Government Commitment to First Nations Culture and Leadership

- Resource and engage with First Nations specialists in ICIP and fashion/art business legalities to continue research, resource development and support to the First Nations sector, and education of the broader fashion industry.
- Incentivise and subsidise First Nations led cultural competency and cultural awareness for fashion businesses, organisations, and government departments.

Improve Regional and Remote Access to Education & Training, Manufacturing, and Business development –

- Resource, Subsidise and incentivise decentralised regional and remote reaching textile and fashion training and business mentoring programs.
- Fund fashion related infrastructure for manufacturing in remote and regional areas that can support on the job training, employment and improve access for remote based businesses.