

# NIAA Indigenous Skills, Engagement and Employment Program (ISEP)

## Submission in response to Discussion Paper July 2021

### Submitted by

  
Department of Economics, Macquarie University, Sydney.

**Note:** Data in this submission are taken from the *National Survey of Remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Artists* (hereafter the survey), which is being undertaken in the Department of Economics at Macquarie University progressively across six regions in remote Australia. The regions are: (1) Kimberley, WA; (2) East and West Arnhem Land, NT; (3) North-West NT and Tiwi Islands; (4) Central Desert, NT and APY Lands, SA; (5) Pilbara and Ngaanyatjarra Lands, WA; and (6) Far North Queensland. The first four regions have been completed; the last two regions are planned to be completed in 2022.<sup>1</sup>

### 1. Cultural production as a source of Indigenous employment

Art and cultural production can provide a viable pathway towards economic empowerment for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people living in remote towns, settlements, homelands and outstations across remote Australia. It can provide viable, sustainable and culturally appropriate employment for members of remote communities. Cultural production is taken to include: (1) creative activities such as the visual and performing arts as well as artistic production in newer formats such as film and audio-visual media; (2) cultural maintenance such as caring for country; and (3) applied cultural activities such as providing tourism services.

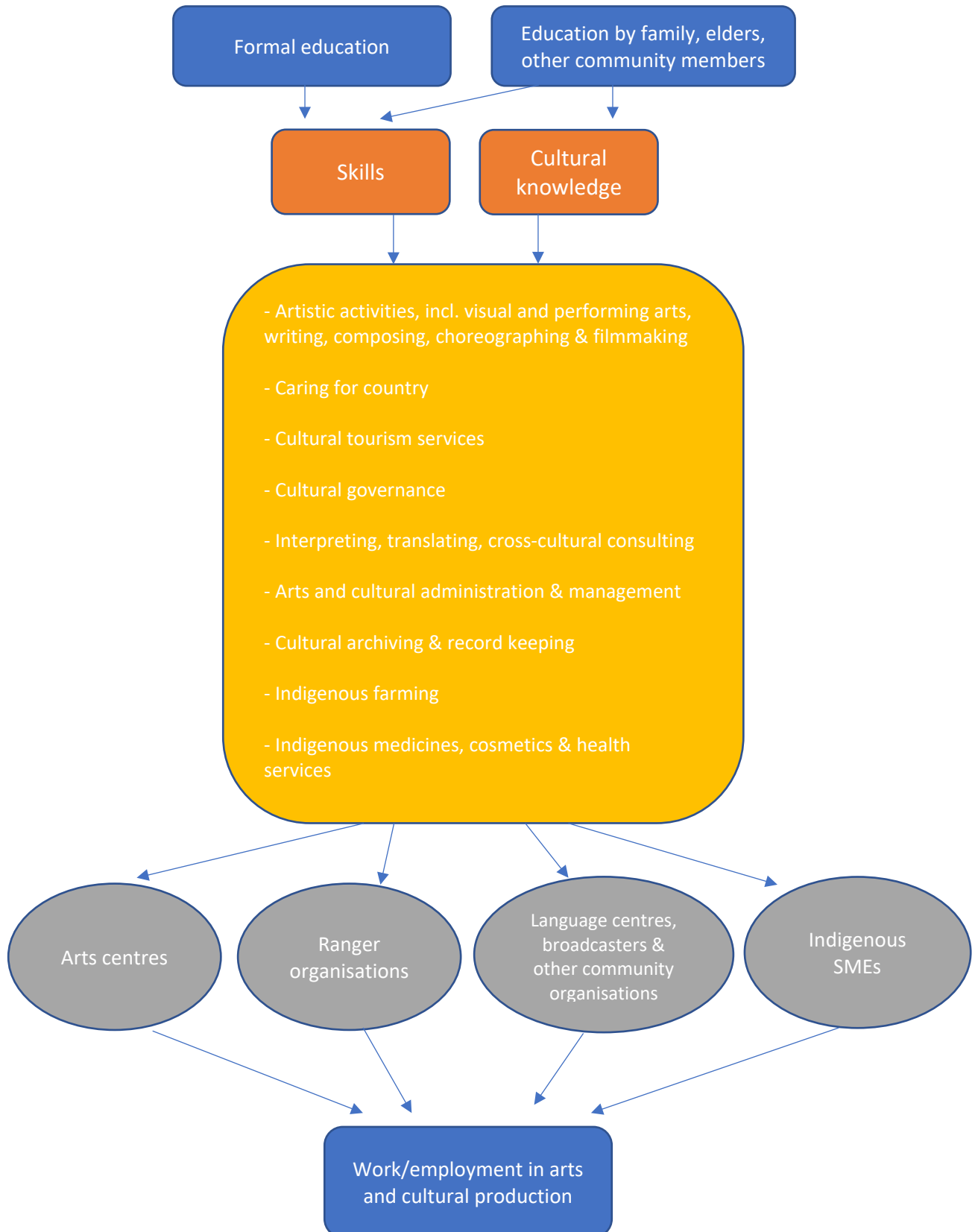
The way in which employment is generated in this sector is shown in the diagram in Figure 1 overleaf. In summary, the diagram depicts the pathways by which work/employment in art and cultural production is produced by inputs of human and cultural capital, and it illustrates the various goods and services that the work/employment produces. These outputs may yield revenue, such as through the sale of art works, or may be supplied on an unpaid basis, such as through cultural maintenance via caring for country. We elaborate on all these relationships and outcomes in the following sections of this submission.

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<sup>1</sup> Reports for the completed regions can be found here:

1. Throsby D., Petetskaya K. (2019) *Integrating art production and economic development in Arnhem Land, Northern Territory*. Research paper: 3/2019. Macquarie University. <https://apo.org.au/node/257301>
2. Throsby D., Petetskaya K. (2019) *Integrating art production and economic development in the Central Desert (NT) and the APY Lands (SA)*. Research paper: 1/2019. Macquarie University. <https://apo.org.au/node/252706>
3. Throsby D., Petetskaya K. (2019) *Integrating art production and economic development in North-West NT and the Tiwi Islands*. Research paper: 2/2019. Macquarie University. <https://apo.org.au/node/253221>
4. Throsby D., Petetskaya K. (2016) *Integrating art production and economic development in the Kimberley*. Research paper. Macquarie University. <https://apo.org.au/node/252696>

**Figure 1:**  
**Work/employment in the cultural sector**  
**in remote Indigenous communities**



## **2. There are significant levels of human and cultural capital in remote regions that are underutilised and underpaid**

Arts and cultural producers in remote areas undertake a wide range of cultural work, some of which is paid, some is undertaken unpaid or on a voluntary basis. Considerable amounts of time are spent working -- for example, on average artists and cultural practitioners in Arnhem Land work 60 hours per week doing diverse cultural work, in Central Desert and APY Lands they work 47 hours per week, and 50 hours per week in North-West NT and Tiwi Islands. The pattern of paid/unpaid work for different work activities varies greatly between work activities and regions. But it is apparent that there is a significant accumulation of human capital in remote regions which is a major resource to generate economic benefit for the Indigenous communities, but which is not currently gainfully employed. The knowledge and skills are there for meaningful art and cultural production, but they are not being adequately utilised.

The many skilled and experienced artists and cultural producers who do not earn income through working at their cultural activities represent a workforce that does not need to be trained or skilled to get into employment – they just need more targeted employment programs to support the provision of their work. The types of currently unpaid cultural work involved include:

- translation and interpretation services when dealing with service providers for community members;
- cross-cultural consulting or language translation in a job that does not include such services as part of its job description;
- providing cultural learning and cultural tourism services for visitors;
- undertaking caring for country activities;
- organising and performing welcoming ceremonies;
- being engaged in cultural governance with organisations as a board or committee member; and
- providing cultural archiving and museology services.

While some artists and cultural producers receive some form of payment for at least some of these services, our survey findings indicate that the share of unpaid work can be substantial, varying between 25 to 75 percent on average across different activities.

As noted, the skills for this work are already there, so little or no additional training is required for them to be brought into paid employment. ***It would be possible for ISEP to formalise employment arrangements in these areas so that this significant resource of human and cultural capital is more effectively utilised.*** We return to these issues further below.

## **3. Teaching and training by artists are important means for cultural transmission and skill development in Indigenous communities**

Teaching and training others involve significant amounts of time for arts and cultural producers; yet the great majority of this work in remote regions is currently unpaid. For example, 77 percent of artists in Arnhem Land are currently engaged in teaching others and spend between 1.5 full days a month and 1 full day a week of their working time in this activity. Yet only 30 percent of artists in Arnhem Land receive some form of payment for at least some of their teaching work. This type of work is carried out by the most experienced trainers and educators in the communities. For example, about two-thirds of the artists in the Arnhem Land region and in the Central Desert/APY

Lands region (66 percent and 68 percent respectively) who are currently engaged in teaching others have had more than 20 years' experience practising their art form.

Very few funding streams acknowledge artists engaged in teaching others in their communities as educators and reimburse their work accordingly. This unpaid and unrecognised labour has created an unsustainable situation, where the most knowledgeable and skilled cultural producers are required to take time off from their paid artistic and cultural production when they are engaged in educating and training others. In these circumstances, the transfer of knowledge is largely done on a volunteer basis, underpinned by cultural obligations and these individuals' personal beliefs and good will. ***It would be appropriate for ISEP to investigate ways to provide greater recognition and remuneration for this important educational work.***

#### **4. More generally, intergenerational and intragenerational cultural transfer of knowledge and skills that occurs within family and through elders in remote communities needs to be more effectively facilitated**

Our survey findings highlight the fact that in remote Indigenous communities, the most effective way of learning new skills and knowledge comes from learning from each other. For most Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artists in remote regions, by far the most important pathway for acquiring new industry skills and knowledge is through learning directly from family members, elders or other community members. Mostly these processes occur within communities and the costs involved have been borne by artists and cultural producers themselves. There are opportunities to provide specialised programs to recognise this hugely important transfer of knowledge and to support its continuity.

For example, the Australia Council's *Chosen* program provides a successful demonstration of how such intergenerational cultural transfer can be supported. This culturally-based program provides community-led cultural apprenticeships and residencies. It engages artists and communities to determine program design, delivery and evaluation to ensure the successful intergenerational transfer of arts and cultural knowledge from older to younger generations. *Chosen* ensures that artistic and cultural knowledge will be passed on to the next generation in the most culturally appropriate manner. ***The program could provide a model for ISEP to consider in the search for further opportunities to enhance the training and skill development for younger Indigenous people.***

#### **5. There are a number of Indigenous-owned and controlled organisations that can become education and training providers within communities**

Many arts centres, Indigenous ranger organisations, media organisations, culture and language centres, local government agencies and other such organisations recognise the importance of intergenerational and intragenerational knowledge transfer and already provide some training that involves local community members as trainers. However, these organisations rarely have an appropriate budget or funding source to support these activities, and workers are most often unpaid. Our survey findings point to the need to acknowledge the long-term educational benefit that these organisations can provide, and their positive impact on arts and cultural production in remote Australia. ***But they can only continue to do so if they are properly supported via reliable and ongoing funding specifically earmarked for this purpose.***

In any case, it would be highly desirable to engage these organisations in any future planning for the deployment of training and educational resources in remote communities. They have much experience that would be crucial in informing the development of any of these programs.

#### **6. In all employment initiatives in remote communities, the role of language is critical**

The importance of language as an integral element in the maintenance of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture is well understood. The use of language in schools in a bilingual educational context is a significant prerequisite to culturally-appropriate employment opportunities in a post-school environment. In this respect, programs such as the Indigenous Languages and Cultures (ILC) program in the Northern Territory has much to offer as an example of how this objective can be achieved. Amongst other strategies, the ILC program allows for the employment of elders and community members to develop and implement teaching and learning programs for Indigenous languages and cultures in schools. For example, the program can provide for cooperation between local arts and cultural organisations and schools, such as where children visit an art centre on a regular basis, or where senior artists visit a school to teach arts and cultural skills to children. Our survey results indicate very strong support for bilingual education among artists and cultural producers in remote communities.

Language also offers employment opportunities for Indigenous artists and cultural producers who have the skills and knowledge to act as translators. Some are accredited, as in the Northern Territory's Aboriginal Interpreter Service. But, as already noted, many cultural producers provide translation services on a voluntary or unpaid basis. Such services may be required for businesses, government agencies and other entities in their interactions with Indigenous people in remote communities. In some countries of the world where such relationships with Indigenous people are involved, the use of native language is a requirement. ***If a similar requirement were introduced in Australia, it would create a significant employment opportunity for Indigenous cultural practitioners in remote communities***, and would have the potential to provide long-term jobs in culturally appropriate workplaces.

#### **7. Engagement and employment strategies in remote regions require strong infrastructure support**

The art economy in remote regions depends on a wide variety of infrastructure that supports and facilitates its operation. Some of this infrastructure is general, and serves everyone in the region, such as transport and communication services. Other categories of infrastructure are specific to the arts and cultural sector, providing the necessary support to enable artists and cultural producers to pursue their work. The latter include: art centres; language centres; recording studios and other facilities for musicians, performing artists, film-makers and multimedia artists; and cultural organisations of various sorts.

In this context, art centres play a particularly important role. They can be primary employers of artists, cultural workers, administrative staff, cataloguers, packers and so on. If they operate a shop and/or a gallery on site, they may provide jobs for staff. However, these aspects of an art centre's functions place a demand on management for commercial expertise. If resources permit, additional staff can be put on to provide accounting or legal help and advice, or in some cases some of these services may be provided pro-bono by local firms, but in general the responsibility rests with the manager. Skill development programs such as workshops and similar activities for existing and potential art centre managers are needed to maintain and enhance the wide range of capabilities that the job demands.

In addition, an important function of an arts centre manager is to oversee the skills training of arts workers and other staff who assist in the artistic and commercial operations of the centre. This training function needs support, especially in centres with only a single manager.

Given this range of obligations, it is hardly surprising that art centres are frequently faced with budgetary problems, especially when they are called upon to provide services in health, community welfare and in other activities that serve the community but are not part of their functions of supporting art production. ***We recommend that ISEP pay particular attention to understanding and facilitating the important role that art centres play in training provision and employment generation in remote Indigenous communities, and take steps to improve their financial resilience and sustainability so that they can continue their vital work.***

#### **8. There is potential for small business initiatives to provide employment opportunities in the cultural sector in remote Indigenous communities.**

A number of artists and cultural producers in remote Australia who work as independent individuals or as members of small informal groups -- for example, musicians, filmmakers, textile workers producing fashion goods, multimedia artists, artists working with digital technologies -- may take up opportunities to establish small creative enterprises, perhaps on a collaborative or cooperative basis, and perhaps engaged in experimental art or developing new creative products or modes of distribution. These opportunities may be particularly appealing to young people, offering them gainful and stimulating creative employment which might help to retain them in the community. In policy terms, such initiatives can link into a broader innovation agenda associated with the development of cultural and creative industries<sup>2</sup>. But such start-ups do not grow on their own, they need smart policy measures that recognise talent in this field and can provide seed funding or small business incubators to encourage creative enterprise development.

There is particular scope for small start-ups and local initiatives in the Indigenous cultural tourism space. In some locations, opportunities exist for the establishment of small family-based tourism enterprises involving Indigenous individuals and focussing on providing small-group art/culture/nature experiences for discriminating visitors. There are many ways to increase the involvement of Indigenous individuals, families and communities in these initiatives. For example, in some communities there are likely to be experienced cultural producers who are good storytellers and who feel comfortable talking to visitors, enabling them to act as tour guides, interpreters and translators for tourists individually or in groups<sup>3</sup>. Sometimes these activities can occur in association with the work of Indigenous rangers.

But it must be stressed that prospective enterprises in this field will require basic business skills, indicating the need for skill development programs such as workshops, short-course training sessions, and/or small business incubators tailored to the needs of family-based tourism initiatives, as foreshadowed in the ISEP Discussion Paper. ***For these developments to become a reality, a well-***

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<sup>2</sup> See, for example, the *Creative Industries Strategy NT 2020-2024*.

<sup>3</sup> Examples of initiatives that have been successful in this area include the Indigenous Tourism Champions program instigated by Tourism Australia and Indigenous Business Australia. The program identifies and promotes Aboriginal-owned tourism businesses offering authentic cultural experiences delivered by Indigenous tour guides and operators. Another potentially successful initiative is the Commonwealth Government's Indigenous Tourism Fund that aims to support Indigenous tourism businesses to become established or to expand.

***planned and adequately funded training strategy is needed, focussing on small Indigenous family- and community-run tourism businesses. If successful, these enterprises could become a prime example of a participatory economy in a given region, engaging individuals, families and communities.***

#### **9. The need for evidence-based planning and decision-making.**

As one of the principles for a new model to provide tailored investment strategies to enhance skills, engagement and employment for Indigenous Australians, the Discussion Paper points particularly to the need to target specific cohorts based on data and evidence, supplemented with local knowledge and needs. The *National Survey of Remote Indigenous Artists* that underlies the issues discussed in this submission is the only comprehensive, objective, and statistically reliable source of data on the economics of Indigenous art and cultural production by individual artists and cultural producers in remote communities across the whole of northern Australia. We have argued that the arts and cultural sector in remote communities has the potential to provide employment for Indigenous cultural producers that will be both economically and culturally sustainable into the future. ***The data and analysis in the survey reports provide the evidence to support this proposition. We recommend them to the ISEP process.***

  
8 September 2021