

10 September 2021

The Employment Branch

National Indigenous Australians Agency

By email: ISEP@niaa.gov.au

**Response to NIAA Discussion Paper on
Indigenous Skills, Engagement and Employment Program (ISEP)**

Introduction

The Aboriginal Art Association of Australia Ltd (“AAAA”) serves and represents artists, individuals and organisations that produce, promote, protect and support Indigenous Art, and the cultures that create and nurture that art. Our membership includes over 200 Indigenous artist members (independent and art centre affiliated), over 50 trade members drawn from commercial galleries, dealers, art centres, licensors and mixed retail outlets marketing fine art and souvenirs and over 400 supporter members. Our Board of 9 is comprised of Indigenous members and non-Indigenous members. The Association has an Aboriginal Cultural Council on which it relies for advice on matters of Indigenous culture.

Together with the promotion of ethical practice, for all of its 22 years, the AAAA has grappled with growing the Indigenous visual art industry’s economic, social and employment benefits and opportunities.

Although Indigenous Visual Arts (IVA) is not directly connected to the Government’s mainstream employment services, nor to the Indigenous-specific employment programs funded through the Indigenous Advancement Strategy (“IAS”), the AAAA anticipates that it will be able to contribute to your thinking about IAS involvement in Indigenous-specific employment programs. To adopt the language of your Discussion Paper, the AAAA thinks it can help NIAA “increase economic opportunity for Indigenous Australians and drive actions that connect Australians to jobs, target skills acquisition and career advancement opportunity”.

We are interested in the whole scope, but our particular experience is in identifying barriers to employment, opportunities, skills acquisition and career advancement in IVA - in cities, regions, and remote communities.

Good Evaluation – Good Policy

The Association is encouraged to see that your decision-making is based partly on the interim evaluation findings listed at p. 7 of your Discussion Paper. To help you ‘test’ your interim evaluation findings, we offer the following responses:

1. *A flexible approach: local approaches are required for effective delivery of Indigenous programs that can adapt to region-specific needs.*

This finding is highly consistent with our experience with the IVA sector across Australia.

2. *High quality mentoring and wrap around services: mentoring is crucial to overcoming participant’s barriers to employment in a supportive manner.*

Agreed. We include ideas on how to overcome barriers to employment and opportunity, including the use of using wrap around services.

3. *Devolution of decision-making and governance structures: the delivery of services in partnership with the local Indigenous community.*

Agreed. We offer ideas for how to do so.

4. *Upfront investment in job readiness: the importance of connections with local services, as well as the need to be responsive to requirements at various stages of the participant’s journey and local labor conditions.*

Agreed, especially the need to be able to respond to the needs of individual participants and their individual circumstances.

5. *Culturally appropriate work places.* Agreed.

Our comments are set out below and address 3 aspects of your Discussion Paper:

1. They encompass and expand on your interim evaluation findings;
2. They address your Discussion Questions at p. 9; and
3. They address the four “Priority Reforms” in the *National Agreement on Closing the Gap* as described at p. 6 of the Discussion Paper.

Basic principle of Inclusiveness and Equity in Policy Design

The AAAA exists to help all stakeholders work together to build a sustainable IVA. The IVA includes Indigenous Artists across the whole country – cities, regional towns and in remote areas.

With this in mind, before we drill down into specific observations and recommendations, experience tells us that a key principle must be put on the table and, in our opinion, respected and observed as the ISEP is designed and navigates its way forward.

Wherever located and whether inside the government funded art centre system, or independently trying to earn a living outside that system, *all* Indigenous artists need to be

properly included in the policy design and relevant decision making and be properly supported. Employment and skill building opportunities are equally relevant and important for everyone.

AAAA Comments and Thoughts

The AAAA has spent a lot of time over its 22 years dealing with and thinking about barriers to improved Aboriginal skill development and employment opportunity in urban, regional and remote locations. We share the following ideas:

1. Leveraging Rather than Duplicating

Your Discussion Paper acknowledges the good sense of future IAS investment leveraging rather than duplicating mainstream employment services to make a sustainable contribution to closing the gap in employment outcomes.

An example we would like to explore further with you is leveraging IAS investment with existing Commonwealth Indigenous Visual Arts Industry Support (IVAIS) funding administered through the Office for the Arts. This IVAIS funding of art centres is an outstanding Aboriginal employment and social success story. One to be applauded and celebrated. Even so, there is plenty of scope for improved Aboriginal employment opportunities and associated outcomes.

Art centres rightly attract 10's of millions of dollars of funding annually, but 50 or so years down that track, art centres are overwhelmingly managed by non-indigenous people.

There are plenty of Indigenous people working in art centres, but generally not at senior levels.

Art centres are governed by Indigenous Boards, but art centre agendas and programs are typically set by non-Indigenous coordinators with Indigenous owners often left feeling powerless.

It is a shame that, after 50 years, there is no structure or policy to address this deficiency.

ISEP may be the opportunity to create that policy and structure.

AAAA believes that addressing this improved skill and employment-building opportunity would be a chance to:

1. Leverage off a successful Government employment program (IVAIS)
2. "...*co-design a locally informed approach to supporting Indigenous engagement and employment, designed to respond to the distinct needs, strengths and interests of local Indigenous communities*", - see Discussion Paper (p. 4)
3. Advance the "Priority Reforms" on "*Partnership and shared decision making*", and "*Building the Aboriginal community-controlled service sector in agreed outcome areas*".

Changes and improvements start with the desire and willingness to make them; they need a clear road map (how are we going to make them?); and can only happen successfully if based

on the correct decision-making process, especially the need to have ‘conversation’ as a pre-condition to proper ‘consultation’.

An important aside is that good policy design for this particular opportunity will recognize, appropriately consult on, and address the challenge of how the fairly standard human behavior of looking after family and kin can result in ‘outsiders’ being denied access and opportunity and also of avoiding Indigenous people being placed in impossible positions in their own communities due to the expectation to “help” family.

2. Use human capital well

A pathway to improved employment opportunity is to ensure existing skills are being used as effectively and as efficiently as possible. People should be concentrating on what they are skilled at and trained for.

Currently, the skills required in art centres are so broad that only the largest can hope to have enough staff to cover the requisite disciplines required to run a successful business. This is a known and longstanding problem for any art centre, and will remain so, whether headed by an Indigenous or non-Indigenous co-ordinator.

The simple step of centralising routine business matters such as marketing, finance and administration into area hubs set up for that purpose would immediately free up the art centre co-ordinator to focus on creative matters. Taking this approach would dramatically simplify the skill set required for a co-ordinator, lowering the barrier for Indigenous (and non-Indigenous) participation and dramatically reducing the challenge of getting Indigenous co-ordinators job ready.

The AAAA contends that an important added benefit would be improved quality of artistic output which, when more efficiently and effectively marketed through hubs by specialists in that area, would lead to increased revenue and associated social benefits for artists and their communities.

3. Incubator program – job readiness and addressing churn

IAS investment that was serious about leveraging existing employment related funding would address the matter of the high level of art centre worker turnover or churn.

One way to do that would be to invest in an incubator scheme where prospective art centre workers spend a period in established art centres to “learn the ropes”. This would make them more job ready and lessen the chance that they struggle or fail when confronted with the complexities of running an art centre. At the same time employment, revenue, economic development, and thus social and cultural benefits in local remote communities would be *productively* expanded. Such training would extend work skills beyond the art centre. The training would underpin more autonomy and empowerment, helping people to make decisions in future business dealings and practices.

The incubator scheme should start with Indigenous people who are interested in developing the skills needed to govern and manage a successful art centre, not just prime the linen for the artists, or attend to menial tasks as is currently too often the case.

The problems with employment, skills development and staff retention in art centres are not new. In his 2003 Report to the NT Government, ‘*An Indigenous Arts Strategy for the Northern Territory: Recommended Framework*’ – Professor Altman says;

Many art centres have a track record of low staff retention sometimes caused by staff burnout, with attendant organisational loss of corporate memory. This in turn can have a direct impact on the long-term stability and performance of centres, which are needed to develop economic and social benefits.

A re-evaluation of most staffing in most art centres is necessary, ensuring that each has at least one full-time person to work directly with the artists as an art coordinator, and a second person to run the business as a manager. It still seems to be assumed by funding bodies that one person can run the business, promote and market the product made there, work with the artists on production matters all day, attend interstate gallery openings, write grant submissions and acquittals, and deal on a person by person basis with 15-150 artists.

ISEP may be the chance to address this longstanding opportunity to expand Aboriginal employment while responding to the distinct needs strengths and interests of local Indigenous communities – as set out in ISEP’s “case for change” at p. 4 of the Discussion Paper. The incubator scheme looks like an ideal opportunity for the “high quality mentoring and wrap around services” identified in your interim evaluation finding number 2. This sort of mentoring embedded in the incubation idea would amount to skills transfer via job shadowing, and, in the words of your evaluation finding, *demonstrates* how to overcome participant’s barriers to employment in a supportive manner.

4. Identify and share best practice

An outstanding opportunity is for IAS investment to create and deploy a suitably qualified team to travel from art centre to art centre gathering and communicating best practice.

That approach could also be used to improve skill development and employment opportunities and outcomes for independent artists working in cities, towns or remotely.

5. Road Maps and Milestones

The Association is not aware of any system of “road maps” that grant recipients can, and are expected to, follow as regards the development of their businesses.

IAS Investment could lead to a system of clear road maps and milestones that lead to better employment, skill creation, economic and social outcomes for recipients of funding.

Development and monitoring of such road maps would be part of the remit of the best practice team.

Existing bodies funded to support art centres could also be tasked to get more involved in this sort of target setting. One idea may be to write such tasks into funding agreements as required deliverables, thus delivering improved impact measurement and an improved basis for evaluation.

6. Using better training to grow Indigenous employment

The AAAA recognises the effort the Government is making to understand what training should be provided to grow Indigenous employment.

In the IVA sector, our view is that training should address what matters most in the wider IVA ecosystem and be aimed particularly at creating a growing, prospering, sustainable IVA industry, based on a well-informed Australian population, confident about and proud to share its Aboriginal heritage and cultures.

That training would cover:

- The basics of financial sustainability, including basic financial literacy skills development,
- Basic business doctrine and discipline,
- An understanding of why government funding should promote sustainability by focusing on consumption, not production,
- An understanding of marketing principles and practice,
- An understanding of how to use information and communications technologies,
- What it means to be a customer-centred service, and how to do it,
- Digital transformation,
- Entrepreneurship,
- Creating cultural safety frameworks within employers' systems and operations,
- Community development and employment opportunities based on cultural activities, including agricultural and aquacultural knowledge and practice,
- Self-determination and economic participation through the arts and art practice,
- Creating career pathways, not just low-lying jobs'
- Business structures and setting up an ABN
- Negotiation skills, including a general understanding of contracts.

Independent Indigenous artists and urban Indigenous artists must also be able to readily access such support and training.

7. Independent Indigenous Visual Artists (“IIVA”)

The IVAIS scheme essentially deals with art centre/art centre style funding and support. It is a dedicated fund, or, to all intents and purposes, run as one.

On the other hand, IIVA are forced to compete for funding with non-Indigenous visual artists for Australia Council funding. There is no discrete funding pot for IIVA. Why? Why are IIVA treated differently?

The Federal Government's Covid-19 response demonstrated the stark difference in treatment:

- Art centres were allocated \$7 million in much needed funding, something the AAAA lobbied for. That funding was automatically allocated. No application was required.
- IIVA were required to compete via a competitive application process with other non-Indigenous visual artists for an Australia Council funding pot which totalled \$4.5 million.

It cannot be said that IIVA are any less worthy of support than artists working through art centres or that support of IIVA will not lead to better financial, community employment outcomes. IIVA need support and deserve express consideration as part of your consideration of Indigenous-specific employment and skill building and training programs. This cohort of Indigenous Australians fall squarely within *each* of the four Priority Reform areas identified in the Closing the Gap Agreement.

The AAAA notes that one of the tests required to be applied to funding administration is whether it is ethical. The AAAA maintains that discriminating between these two groups of artists in this manner is unethical and biased and should be righted.

8. Understand the job creation significance of the commercial sector

As the Government recognised in its Consultation paper on *Growing the Indigenous visual Arts Industry* in September 2020, “...*the industry is made up of a strong framework of art centres, commercial galleries, auction houses, wholesalers, dealers and independent artists working in a range of ways, including being represented by agents or commercial galleries, contracted as designers, or operating as sole traders*”.

The role of, and the importance of the gallery and other commercial functions is fundamental to employment, and to employment growth.

That commercial sector is the enabler of all other parts.

Broadening thinking and treating galleries as a possible avenue for increased Indigenous participation is a far healthier and more productive approach than the current mindset which seems hell bent on dismantling or bypassing the existing gallery sector and establishing parallel avenues to market. This is even more so in the world we ever increasingly move to, one of finite and scarce funding. The AAAA recommends leveraging off what is already in place rather than spending millions of replicating a model that has served artists worldwide for centuries.

9. Existing initiatives - how we view success

ISEP designers will be grappling with the cultural complexities of Indigenous employment issues, and will not be surprised that the concept of “employment” in the Indigenous visual art context has several dimensions.

One such complexity is the role of art centres in building skills and opportunity. If an art centre artist chooses to become a sole trader, and does so successfully, should industry participants and government see that as a success for the art centre system, or a failure?

AAAA’s view is that a successful Indigenous artist running their own business, whether inside or outside the art centre system, is a successful employment outcome, and a successful policy outcome whether under the existing IVAIS policy and program or via the broader artist support that we propose.

We believe that most people would agree that it won’t be a failure if good policy and astute and targeted funding leads to increased Indigenous participation in art centre management. Why then do many regard an artist developing their skills and being made “job ready” to take their practice independent as being problematic, a failure and a betrayal? If one pauses and

examines such thinking in the same manner we judge self-determination in other areas, it can only be concluded that this commonly held mindset is deeply offensive.

Controls over peoples' livelihoods and decision making should be released, not enlarged. Instead of the perceived loss, the reality is what is gained; that is a successful story of developing pathways and employment with autonomy on participation, economic freedom, decision making and self-determination. That is, choice.

Good policy will enable Indigenous IVA participants, whether artist, co-ordinator, gallery employee or gallery owner, to determine their future the way they want, not the way well-meaning people who seek to control outcomes to suit their IVA ideology want. Good policy will enable self-determination, not perpetuate the current flawed and patronising mindset.

AAAA says that every Australian should be able to make such choices for themselves and their family and community. Indigenous self-determination surely has to include that capacity.

10. A New Lens - Employment in the IVA industry – cost or opportunity?

IVA is rightly a focal point for employment and social development, though currently and incorrectly overwhelmingly art centre only focussed. IVA is also far more than this. It is a national treasure. Something utterly unique to this country. Something of enduring cultural worth to be shared and celebrated. Aside from the Opera House and Harbour Bridge, what else that is manmade in this country truly has the capacity to move the dial for residents and visitors to Australia? Within the arts, is there a single other sector that is on visitors to this country's radar more than IVA? Yet, IVA support is still viewed through the lens of cost, possibly because we have continued to view it the same way as the arts in general.

IVA is one of the most successful and proven mechanisms for exiting welfare funding and disadvantage that this country has seen. Our challenge, and enormous opportunity, is to support that further, broadening our thinking, leveraging off the good job that has been done and learning from previous initiatives and mistakes. Part of the challenge is to stop viewing it as a cost and see it as a long-term investment that will not only increase income in the arts but that also has the potential to benefit all Australians, particularly Indigenous Australians, through the flow on benefits of promoting something so unique.

The IVA sector is arguably already one of the largest direct and indirect employers of Indigenous peoples. But there is enormous opportunity to increase that employment through exploiting IVA's "natural advantage", intelligently supporting it with astutely funded, imaginative and well targeted employment policy and programs.

We hope the ISEP can tap into that potential.

To put the above in perspective, the AAAA understands that tens of billions are spent on fighting Indigenous disadvantage each year and several billions on Indigenous business-related initiatives. How much of that is in IVA? A minuscule proportion. Viewed against the massive spend on passive welfare, one must ask why and challenge ourselves to invest in something with the power to create new outcomes, not just support the unfortunate trapped in existing ones.

Concluding comments

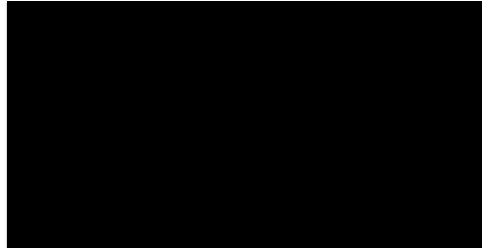
AAAA would welcome the chance to sit down to take you deeper into the opportunities to grow employment opportunities and skills in the Indigenous visual arts sector.

With that in mind we enclose our submission to the Government's recent and ongoing *Action Plan Consultation Paper on Growing the Indigenous Visual Arts Industry*, and our submission to the recent and ongoing House of Representatives Standing Committee on Communication and the Arts *Inquiry and report into Australia's creative and cultural industries and institutions – The Indigenous Visual Arts Industry*

Yours sincerely



President



Director & Aboriginal Cultural Council Member