

IMPACTS OF COVID-19 ON FIRST NATIONS ARTS AND CULTURE

KEY POINTS

- This paper outlines the immediate and longer term needs, concerns and potentially catastrophic impacts for First Nations arts and culture in light of COVID-19. This includes potential for the most significant loss of culture since the arrival of the First Fleet, through loss of vulnerable Elders.
- There is an urgent need to ensure impacts of the virus on First Nations Elders are minimised to ensure ongoing cultural leadership, to maintain the arts as a key source of economic empowerment for First Nations people, and to ensure survival of the world's longest continuously living culture.
- Many First Nations languages are in a perilous state, with only a small number of elderly speakers remaining. While it is too early to determine what effects COVID-19 will have on the state of First Nations languages in Australia, the Office for the Arts is closely monitoring the situation.
- Strategies to ensure cultural wellbeing and mental health during isolation are a priority. This includes safe ways to access arts and culture, including access to technology and the digital space. With an urgent need to preserve First Nations cultural knowledge, the Kimberley Aboriginal Law and Cultural Centre (KALACC) has proposed that the lockdown be used to capture Elders' knowledge and language by recording stories on devices at home and that families are incentivised to do so.
- Sector representatives have raised concerns about mental health and increased risk of suicide and self-harm. Support Act and like organisations should be encouraged to specifically reach out to First Nations artists and art workers.
- As well as being more susceptible to COVID-19 than non-Indigenous communities, First Nations communities have a much greater reliance on income from arts and cultural activity, particularly in remote areas with art centres. That income is rapidly drying up. Many art centres have closed their doors, effectively shutting off key revenue streams as well as vital health and community infrastructure.
- The Australia Council welcomes the announcement of targeted support for art centres through Indigenous Visual Arts Industry Support (IVAIS), however ongoing engagement and advocacy is still needed as well as support for First Nations artists across art forms. A ten year plan will be needed for the art centre sector which is still recovering from the global financial crisis. Art centre sales have been growing for eight years, but average sales are still 12% lower than their peak in 2007–08. While art centres are showing flexibility by developing online selling and social media platforms, these are unlikely to replicate market or gallery sales.

- There is also an opportunity for cross-portfolio engagement and advocacy to ensure that support for culture is a priority in the \$123m the Australian Government has announced for targeted measures to support First Nations communities in COVID-19.
- It is vital that support for First Nations culture remains central across portfolios in the policy response. Culture is the foundation of First Nations health and wellbeing and is now more important than ever.
- Across art forms, the cancellation of festivals, literary events, live performances and art fairs is already having a devastating effect on First Nations artists' livelihoods, and on these artists' ability to support their families. As in the arts sector more broadly, there is confusion among First Nations artists regarding eligibility for JobKeeper and JobSeeker payments and a sense that artists have been left behind.
- Many First Nations' artists and organisations are exploring online opportunities. However, digital adaptation poses unique challenges for First Nations arts, including the need to uphold Indigenous rights and sovereignty in the digital environment and to protect against unethical dealing and digital disadvantage.
- Stakeholders have expressed concern that First Nations arts will lose hard won visibility as a result of COVID-19. It is important that First Nations arts continue to develop, challenge and contribute to the ongoing maturation of Australian culture.
- For First Nations musicians, the importance of community radio, NITV, SBS and the promotional opportunities the ABC provides for First Nations music cannot be overstated.
- There is an opportunity for the development of an online network to enable First Nations artists to connect with their peers and international colleagues outside of forums such as the Australian Performing Arts Market (APAM).
- The First Nations dance and theatre sectors are bracing for long term impacts and will need long term financial support. Financial constraints could mean programming is more conservative in future. A concern was also raised that the financial desperation during recovery from COVID-19 will mean that cultural protocols will be disregarded.
- The First Nations Australia Writers Network (FNAWN) is anticipating a drying up of funds from leading Australian online journals that did not receive Four Year Funding. Encouragement and motivation for First Nations writers to write through the crisis is needed.
- Across art forms, the greatest future concerns relate to potential loss of life and cultural knowledge if communities lose their Elders, negative impacts on young people, and the loss of income and art economies. It is clear that the impacts of COVID-19 will be felt for a long time to come. Immediate support, cross-portfolio advocacy and long term planning are needed.

INTRODUCTION

This paper draws on research and sector intelligence to outline immediate and longer term needs, concerns and impacts for the First Nations arts and culture sector in light of the COVID-19 pandemic. It highlights opportunities for First Nations arts specific support and cross-portfolio engagement.

First Nations arts are important to Australia and Australians. They sustain and strengthen First Nations communities, are a vital part of Australia's identity, and provide opportunities for employment, skills development, and income. First Nations art also makes a large contribution to the economy. Australia's First Nations tourism has an estimated value of \$5.8 billion annually, catering to 910,000 international visitors and 688,000 overnight domestic trips in 2016.¹

Australia's First Nations arts and culture sector faces particularly devastating impacts from the COVID-19 pandemic including potential for the most significant loss of arts, culture and language since the arrival of the First Fleet. As well as facing real risks to lives, Elders and cultural knowledge, First Nations communities already face high levels of disadvantage and suicide. They have a much greater reliance on income from arts and cultural activity than their non-Indigenous counterparts, particularly in remote communities with art centres, and that income is rapidly drying up. Digital adaptation poses unique challenges, including the need to uphold rights in the digital environment and unequal access to it. It is clear that the impacts of COVID-19 will be felt for a long time to come and that immediate support and long term planning is needed.

The paper draws on the first three virtual First Nations' Roundtables² the Australia Council has hosted for arts and creative independents and organisations to discuss the current situation. There were 380 unique attendees to the webinars, which were hosted by Wesley Enoch, Lydia Miller and Lee-Ann Buckskin. It also draws on information provided by the Office for the Arts. The Australia Council Research team also conducted interviews with representatives of 11 First Nations arts and culture peak bodies and organisations on 7–8 April 2020. This included visual arts, theatre, dance, music and literature organisations.³

PROTECTING HEALTH AND ELDERS

There are tremendous concerns for the health of Australia's First Nations communities during the COVID-19 pandemic. Many First Nations people experience poorer health than other Australians, making them more vulnerable to COVID-19. First Nations Australians are more likely than other Australians to have respiratory diseases, mental health problems, cardiovascular disease, diabetes and chronic kidney disease.⁴ First Nations people are also

¹ Tourism Research Australia, International Visitor Survey 2016 and National Visitor Survey 2016.

² See: <https://www.australiacouncil.gov.au/aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander-arts/First-nations-roundtables/>

³ See Appendix A for a list of organisations consulted for this paper.

⁴ Health Direct, *Indigenous Health*. Viewed 8 April 2020: <https://www.healthdirect.gov.au/indigenous-health>

more likely to live in overcrowded conditions,⁵ posing challenges for social distancing. These issues are not specific to remote parts of Australia but exist in First Nations communities in regional and suburban areas as well.

In particular, there is great concern for the health of First Nations Elders. Elders are ‘living libraries’ of First Nations knowledge.⁶ They are the safekeepers of cultural knowledge and provide access to living expressions of ancient traditions. Art and language play an important role in the transference of cultural knowledge to the younger generation, and there is concern about the impact that COVID-19 may have on this knowledge exchange. If the virus spreads among First Nations communities, infecting Elders, it would result in a profound loss of culture, language, knowledge and cultural leadership. According to the Kimberley Aboriginal Law and Cultural Centre (KALACC):

‘We stand at the precipice of a great cliff. There is a clear and present danger, and there is a moral obligation for this nation to protect the cultural base around traditional knowledge. ... What is at risk here is the loss of an entire culture and once it is lost it is irretrievably lost forever.’⁷

As well as being the bearers of knowledge, older First Nations people are often the breadwinners for their communities due to their engagement in artistic production. One quarter of all art works produced in First Nations visual art centres are by artists aged 60 years or older. Over one third of all First Nations visual art works are produced by female artists aged over 50.⁸ In remote locations, First Nations artists predominantly acquire cultural knowledge from family members, highlighting the importance of intergenerational kin-based transfer of skills.⁹ A loss of these older artists would have an incalculable impact upon First Nations arts – both production and related economies.

As leaders, Elders are also critical in the successful communication of public health messages regarding COVID-19. They possess the authority to recommend the ceasing of cultural activity, such as funerals. They provide intergenerational governance, connecting young people to tradition and community identity.

There is an urgent need to ensure that the impacts of the virus upon First Nations communities, particularly Elders, are minimised to ensure the possibility of ongoing cultural leadership and communication, to maintain the arts as a key source of economic

⁵ Towart R, Griew R, Murphy S, Pascoe F 2017, [*Remote housing review: a review of the National Partnership Agreement on Remote Indigenous Housing and the Remote Housing Strategy \(2008-2018\)*](#). Canberra: Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet.

⁶ Wayne Barker, Coordinator Festival and Events at Kimberley Aboriginal Law and Cultural Centre (KALACC), presentation at Australia Council First Nations’ Roundtable 3 April 2020.

⁷ Email correspondence received 7 April 2020.

⁸ Desert Inc, *Financial Snapshot of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art Centres, 2004/05 > 2018/19*, March 2020; Throsby D and Petetskaya K 2019, [*Submission to the Committee on Indigenous Affairs: Inquiry into the pathways and participation opportunities for Indigenous Australians in employment and business*](#). (Sub.5).

⁹ Throsby D and Petetskaya K, *Integrating Art Production and Economic Development in the Central Desert (NT) and the APY Lands (SA)*, April 2019; *Integrating Art Production and Economic Development in North West NT and Tiwi Islands*, May 2019; *Integrating Art Production and Economic Development in Arnhem Land Northern Territory*, July 2019.

empowerment for First Nations people, and to ensure survival of the world's longest continuously living culture.

CULTURE AND WELLBEING

As articulated by KALACC in the context of the trauma, anxiety and distress of COVID-19, 'now more than ever communities need culturally based wellbeing.'

Around 53% of the health gap between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and non-Indigenous Australians is attributable to a combination of a) the social determinants of health, including physical, social, emotional and cultural wellbeing and b) behavioural risk factors such as tobacco and alcohol use, dietary factors and physical inactivity. An antidote to this is 'the adoption of a whole-of-life view that encompasses regeneration and renewal, health and wellbeing, and an acknowledgment of the vitality that culture provides Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.'¹⁰

First Nations communities are vulnerable from a cultural perspective as well as a health perspective during the isolation of COVID-19, and in light of urgent concerns about the potential loss of Elders and cultural knowledge. Culture provides foundations, resilience and strength and is the glue that holds communities together. Communities will need strategies to address their social, emotional and cultural needs in the coming months.

Sector representatives across art forms and regions have raised concerns about mental health and increased risk of suicide and self-harm. Support Act and like organisations should be encouraged to specifically reach out to First Nations artists and art workers to provide information and support.

While isolation is vital to protect the health of Elders, there are increased risks for young people who will miss out on cultural connections. First Nations children and young people represent 28% of recorded suicide deaths of children and young people, despite comprising only 3% of Australia's population. This overrepresentation is even more alarming among children aged 13 years and under.¹¹ In the Kimberley, where suicide rates are distressingly high, particularly among children, KALACC reports that culture is fragile and already starting to slip in some places.

Roundtable discussions have further highlighted that strategies to ensure cultural and spiritual wellbeing and mental health during isolation are a priority. People are already feeling alone, exhausted and frustrated. There are concerns about the situation contributing to an increase in violence and the need for services that people can access from their homes. This includes safe ways to access arts and culture, including access to technology

¹⁰ Lowitja Institute forthcoming, '...Country Can't Hear English...' *A Guide supporting the implementation of cultural determinants of health and wellbeing with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples*, p.4. [Currently embargoed by Comm Dept of Health].

¹¹ Education and Health Standing Committee 2016, [*Learning from the Message Stick: The Report of the Inquiry into Aboriginal Youth Suicide in Remote Areas*](#), Legislative Assembly Parliament of WA, Report No.11, Nov 2016, p.1.

and the digital space. Many artists work collaboratively with communities, so sector concerns are not just for the artists but for the participants and communities they work with as well.

Sector advocates were feeling positive that, after many years at the periphery, culture was at the centre of government policy frameworks in Indigenous affairs, included in development of the next ten year Indigenous health plan and in work relating to Closing the Gap. However, culture was not mentioned in the Australian Government's recent announcement of \$123 million over two financial years for targeted measures to support Indigenous businesses and communities to increase their responses to COVID-19.¹² It is vital that the cross-portfolio importance of support for culture remains central at this time when First Nations culture is facing such dire risk.

The evidence is clear that First Nations arts and cultural participation can support the development of strong and resilient First Nations children; improved school attendance and engagement; higher levels of educational attainment; improved physical and mental health and wellbeing; greater social inclusion and cohesion; more employment, economic opportunities and meaningful work; safer communities with reductions in crime and improved rehabilitation; as well as the prevention of suicide.¹³ Fostering a secure sense of cultural identity is a powerful protective factor against self-harm for young First Nations people¹⁴ and helps First Nations children and young people to navigate racism and being a minority group in their own country.¹⁵ Practising culture, including through arts participation, is the key to improving wellbeing for Aboriginal people in remote Australia.¹⁶

For decades, First Nations peoples and numerous inquiries have advocated for the critical role of culture – as a necessary part of the solution to Indigenous disadvantage, and for the healing and strengthening of individuals and communities.¹⁷ The importance of First Nations arts, culture and languages, and the enormity and urgency of the current risks to them, must be considered in responses to COVID-19.

First Nations languages

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages play a fundamental role in First Nations culture and identity. Language speakers are more likely to create and earn income from the sale of arts and crafts,¹⁸ demonstrating the centrality of languages to the future growth of the Australian Indigenous art market which is instrumental in bringing unique Australian stories to the world. In Arnhem Land, where use of traditional languages by artists is very high (91%), the median annual income of artists is \$26,000 per annum, over twice the median

¹² The Hon Ken Wyatt AM MP, '[\\$123 million boost to Indigenous response to COVID-19](#),' media release 2 April 2020.

¹³ See pages 13–18 of the [Australia Council's submission to the Closing the Gap refresh](#).

¹⁴ Dudgeon P, Cox K, D'Anna D, Dunkley C, Hams K, Kelly K, Scrine C & Walker R 2012, *Hear Our Voices: Community consultations for the development of an empowerment, healing and leadership program for Aboriginal people living in the Kimberly*, WA, Telethon Institute of Child Health Research WA.

¹⁵ Department of Education and Early childhood Development 2010, *The State of Victoria's Children 2009: Aboriginal children and young people in Victoria*, State Government of Victoria, Melbourne

¹⁶ Australia Council 2017, [Living Culture: First Nations arts participation and wellbeing](#).

¹⁷ See pages 8–11 of the [Australia Council's submission to the Closing the Gap refresh](#) for a review of the evidence.

¹⁸ Australia Council 2017, [Living Culture: First Nations arts participation and wellbeing](#).

annual income for Aboriginal adults in remote areas of the Northern Territory (as at the 2016 Census).¹⁹

However, many First Nations languages are in a perilous state, with only a small number of elderly speakers remaining. While it is too early to determine what effects COVID-19 will have on the state of First Nations languages in Australia, the Office for the Arts is closely monitoring the situation.

IMPACTS ON INCOME

Art centres

Some of Australia's most dynamic and critically acclaimed visual art is produced in Indigenous-owned and governed art centres which provide opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to maintain and develop professional arts practice, develop skills, engage in the nation's economy and be part of the internationally-renowned Indigenous visual arts movement.

Many art centres throughout regional and remote Australia have closed their doors in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic (a total of 26 at 8 April 2020), including some that continue to operate but are closed to visitors, effectively shutting off key revenue streams. In addition, many art centre managers have left communities due to COVID-19.

Support for the whole community

As well as economic effects, the impacts of COVID-19 on art centres will have social, health and cultural effects. Art centres are highly valued by community members, are usually at the heart of community life, and are central to the cohesiveness and social and economic wellbeing of remote communities. Most art centres and artists subsidise other services for their communities such as food and nutrition programs, numeracy and literacy programs, training and employment support, leadership and youth services, after school and holiday programs, as well as facilitating access to government services.²⁰

Many provide welfare services – which are usually not part of their core arts-related operations and for which they rarely receive specialised funding – including: home and community care to the aged and people with disability; child protection and family support services; community-based youth justice supervision; providing training and education to community members; and documenting and archiving of material of cultural and social significance to the community.²¹

¹⁹ Throsby D and Petetskaya K 2019, *Integrating Art Production and Economic Development in Arnhem Land Northern Territory*, July 2019.

²⁰ Office for the Arts 2019, [Submission to the Committee on Indigenous Affairs: Inquiry into the pathways and participation opportunities for Indigenous Australians in employment and business](#). (Submission 1), p.3.

²¹ Throsby D and Petetskaya K 2019, [Submission to the Committee on Indigenous Affairs: Inquiry into the pathways and participation opportunities for Indigenous Australians in employment and business](#). (Sub.5), p.6.

At times, an arts and cultural organisation might be the only organisation in a community that has functional equipment and facilities such as an internet or phone connection. Located remotely, these organisations often facilitate government and other organisations' staff to make contacts and carry out discussions and negotiations with Indigenous clients. At the same time, most art and cultural organisations located remotely receive only small amounts of operational funding when compared to many other community-based health and welfare organisations funded by Closing the Gap programs.

Far more than retail or financial centres, art centres are centres of community activity. As one consultee put it, 'you lose the art centres, you lose of a lot of community function.'

Support for the Indigenous arts economy

Indigenous owned and controlled art centres also play a vital role in the functioning of the Indigenous arts economy. In 2018–19, organisations supported by the Indigenous Visual Arts Industry Support (IVAIS) program participated in over 900 exhibitions and events, achieving \$26.5 million in primary art sales. In addition in 2018–19, the four Indigenous art fairs supported through the IVAIS program hosted more than 96,400 visitors, achieved more than \$4.3 million in art sales, and featured work by more than 2,700 artists.²² Financial analysis by Desart found that in 2018–19, nearly 74,300 art works were produced through 83 art centres, an average of 895 works for each of the art centres included in the data.²³

Art centres represent a rare, long-term success in remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australia. They have been a feature of remote communities since the 1970s and have made a major contribution to Australia's cultural and creative landscape.²⁴ Cultural producers from these remote locations contribute significantly to their local economies. Many collaborate, travel or send their work Australia-wide and internationally. For example, almost two-thirds of artists in the Central Desert/APY Lands region have had their work shown or presented in capital cities, and nearly one in three have been seen overseas.²⁵

Art centres perform many functions to support artists. For visual artists, an art centre typically provides a place to work, a supply of materials such as canvas and paint, services such as mentorship and advice, and a marketing channel for the sale of work. For the majority of visual artists in the Central Desert/APY Lands region, the availability of access to an art centre is critical – for 84% this is their most important work location.²⁶ Many art centres also provide account management for their artists and negotiate with government services on behalf of the artists.²⁷

²² Data provided by the Office for the Arts, 8 April 2020.

²³ Desart Inc, *Financial Snapshot of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art Centres, 2004/05 > 2018/19*, March 2020.

²⁴ Acker T 2015. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art Economies Project. CRC-REP Policy briefing PB009. [pdf](#).

²⁵ Throsby D and Petetskaya K 2019, [Submission to the Committee on Indigenous Affairs: Inquiry into the pathways and participation opportunities for Indigenous Australians in employment and business](#). (Sub.5).

²⁶ Throsby D and Petetskaya K, *Integrating Art Production and Economic Development in the Central Desert (NT) and the APY Lands (SA)*, April 2019.

²⁷ Throsby D and Petetskaya K 2019, [Submission to the Committee on Indigenous Affairs: Inquiry into the pathways and participation opportunities for Indigenous Australians in employment and business](#). (Sub.5), p.6.

Art centres form partnerships and make connections with agents, galleries and art institutions in the capital cities in Australia and overseas. They link artists to the wider art market through their participation in art fairs such as the Darwin Aboriginal Art Fair, their relationships with dealers, galleries and museums in Australia and abroad, and their marketing presence on the internet. They also create employment opportunities, both in creative art production and for art workers engaged in packaging, archiving, art restoration, cataloguing, office work, cleaning, working with visitors and so on.²⁸

Art centres, along with fairs such as the Cairns Indigenous Art Fair (CIAF) and Darwin Aboriginal Art Fair (DAAF), increase access for domestic and international visitors to experience First Nations arts. Prior to the travel restrictions, First Nations arts were increasingly part of the itinerary for both international and domestic tourists in Australia and were driving tourism in regional and remote areas.²⁹

A significant majority of First Nations artists living in remote areas agree that art and cultural production has the potential to promote long-term sustainability of remote communities in their region. It is clear that in these settings, arts and cultural activities perform better than non-cultural activities in providing regional artists with relevant employment opportunities and associated incomes.³⁰

Impacts of COVID-19 on art centres

Art centres have been relatively stable enterprises, particularly when considering the challenges facing small businesses in remote communities. Of the 90 organisations funded through the IVAIS program in 2008–09, 67 (or 75%) were still funded in 2018–19. This means that, for a decade, these organisations have consistently delivered against program outcomes across arts development, engagement with the art market, Indigenous employment and participation, and managing financial, administrative and governance requirements.³¹

Following the devastating impact of the global financial crisis on Australia's First Nations art market, art centre sales have seen eight years of growth. From 2011–12 to 2018–19, average sales grew by 43% (still, however, 12% lower than at their peak in 2007–08). Art centres have also become more financially independent. Over the last two years the proportion of income from grants fell to its lowest level in more than a decade, at around

²⁸ As above, p.9.

²⁹ Australia Council 2018, [*International Arts Tourism: Connecting cultures*](#). Australia Council 2020, [*Domestic Arts Tourism: Connecting the Country*](#).

³⁰ Throsby D and Petetskaya K, *Integrating Art Production and Economic Development in the Central Desert (NT) and the APY Lands (SA)*, April 2019; *Integrating Art Production and Economic Development in North West NT and Tiwi Islands*, May 2019; *Integrating Art Production and Economic Development in Arnhem Land Northern Territory*, July 2019.

³¹ Office for the Arts 2019, [*Submission to the Committee on Indigenous Affairs: Inquiry into the pathways and participation opportunities for Indigenous Australians in employment and business*](#). (Submission 1), p.3.

40% of total average income.³² All of this success is at risk with the dramatic and immediate impact of COVID-19 on the Indigenous visual art sector.

The sector relies heavily on tourism, art fairs and events for sales of work. Restrictions on movement, along with the economic downturn, have dramatically reduced demand and income has dried up almost overnight. In addition to the closure of many art centres, most major Indigenous visual art markets and events in the 2020 Indigenous visual arts calendar have been cancelled.

While art centres are showing their flexibility by developing online selling and social media platforms (see digital adaptation section below), these are unlikely to replicate market or gallery sales. There is concern across the First Nations arts sector about business sustainability and solvency, with two peak organisations (ANKA and Desart) running workshops on measuring solvency. There are additional financial challenges for art centres that do not receive support through IVAIS.

Art centre managers leaving communities due to COVID-19 presents an additional challenge. The majority of art centres are reliant on the attraction, retention and quality of management staff recruited into the community. As it is, an average tenure of two-to-three years and limitations to the number and quality of applicants is already often disruptive.³³

While there is a clear message that the sector is in crisis, art centres are adapting to ensure the safety and wellbeing of their artists, staff and communities. Service organisations are also quickly adjusting their activities to respond to the needs of their members. For example, Desart has produced a series of plain English guides to respond to COVID-19, including a visual guide to handwashing and social distancing, and a guide for artists articulating the connections between the pandemic and a reduction of art money. Some of the other concerns that have been raised by the service organisations include:

- safety of art centre staff as communities come under stress and the impact of the shutdown is felt, including through a reduction in income
- need for specialised information on government support measures, targeting both the arts sector and Indigenous Australians
- particular issues arising from the remote location of many Indigenous art centres and communities, meaning that it can be difficult to access information and support.

The Indigenous Art Code has coordinated the development of a resource for the Indigenous art sector outlining the various nature of government support measures for art centres, artists and art market professionals.³⁴

With the central role of art centres to the health and the economic, cultural and social wellbeing of their communities, as well as the international success of contemporary

³² Desart Inc, *Financial Snapshot of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art Centres, 2004/05 > 2018/19*, March 2020.

³³ Acker T 2015. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art Economies Project. CRC-REP Policy briefing PB009. [pdf](#).

³⁴ The guide is available online at <https://indigenousartcode.org/covid-19-financial-support-options-paper/>

Indigenous art and support for regional tourism, peak First Nations arts organisations placed a high priority on a broad package of support for art centres in response to COVID-19. The Australia Council acknowledges the proposal put forward by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peak bodies – led by Arnhem, Northern and Kimberley Artists Aboriginal Corporation (ANKA) and Desart – and welcomes the support announced for the remote Indigenous art sector.

Artist incomes and lost opportunities across art forms

Looking across art forms and the cultural sector, the cancellation of festivals, literary events, live performances and art fairs is already having a devastating effect on First Nations artists' livelihoods, and on these artists' ability to support their families.

For performing artists and performing arts producers, the cancellation and/or postponement of events such as Welcome to Country ceremonies and NAIDOC Week has meant loss of critical earnings. Musicians have lost gigs up until June, if not later, and are in desperate need of income.³⁵ For First Nations authors and book publishers, sales have plummeted across March/April, and are expected to fall further across 2020. The cancellation of festivals and literary events has meant a loss of speaker fees for First Nations authors – an income on which many rely.

Many artists across Australia are feeling anxious and overwhelmed about the fact that they do not have a source of income. For First Nations artists, however, the closure of community hubs and gatherings will have particular effects on broader community health and wellbeing. The postponement of festivals such as Baiame's Ngunnhu Festival in Brewarrina (originally scheduled for 17–19 April), for example, will not only mean a financial loss for participating artists, but also an economic loss for the regional town, and lost opportunity for inter-regional First Nations cultural exchange.

Stakeholders have also expressed concern that First Nations arts will lose hard won visibility as a result of COVID-19. It is important that the cultural landscape does not return to one in which First Nations artists are underrepresented, and even more critically, that First Nations arts continue to develop, challenge and contribute to the ongoing maturation of Australian culture.

As in the arts sector more broadly, there is confusion among First Nations artists regarding eligibility for the JobKeeper and JobSeeker payments, and a strong perception that performing artists and others employed on short-term contracts are ineligible for this government support. The original 'gig' workers, the vast majority of artists work as freelance or self-employed in their art form (81%), relying most commonly on contracts for fixed amounts (43%) followed by royalties and advances (35%).³⁶ There is a sense that artists have been left behind and, in response, a clear call for arts specific and First Nations arts specific stimulus packages.

³⁵ APRA are currently reviewing live music streaming licensing with musicians' income needs in mind.

³⁶ Throsby D and Petetskaya K 2017, *Making Art Work: An Economic Study of Professional Artists in Australia*, Australia Council for the Arts.

COVID-19 has come at a time of particular vulnerability for small to medium arts organisations, with many feeling a sense of fatigue due to changes in the funding environment. For many, the convergence of COVID-19 with Australia Council announcements regarding Four Year Funding has raised significant questions regarding the long-term robustness or sustainability of the sector.

DIGITAL ADAPTATION

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, many First Nations' artists and organisations are exploring online opportunities. Digital platforms and the internet are important for artists to continue to create, collaborate, share and sell their work. However, there are access concerns, particularly for those in remote communities where internet connection is unreliable or unavailable. Australians are more likely to be digitally excluded when Indigenous, living in remote areas, or being over the age of 65.³⁷

First Nations art centres are also adapting by attempting to move their business online and Desart are working with their art centre members to assist in setting up strong online sales functions on their websites and social media. But many remote centres have poor access to web-capable devices and have low-quality internet connections.³⁸ A 2015 study of ebusiness in arts centres identified challenges of slow internet, lack of technical support, website design and a maximum of 10% of overall sales generated by (direct or indirect) online sales.³⁹

Looking across the sector, First Nations artists and organisations are developing online content including Mooghalin Arts regular Facebook performances, and the platform, *Awesome Black*.⁴⁰ This showcases work from a digital collective including podcasters, artists, video makers, musicians, gamers, performers, hosts and commentators.

Established First Nations cultural events, such as the Cairns Indigenous Art Fair and the Darwin Aboriginal Art Fair, are also exploring an online platform for art centres to sell artworks and performers to perform online. Commercial art galleries who work with art centres are creating virtual galleries – for example Aboriginal Contemporary who are exhibiting works from Warmun and Jirrawun art centres online.⁴¹

Roundtable participants and Desart highlighted concerns with the rapid development of shared online platforms, specifically the ways in which these can provide new opportunities for exploitation and unethical practices, and the need for protection of Indigenous sovereignty. With an urgent need to preserve First Nations' cultural knowledge, KALACC

³⁷ Thomas J, Barraket J, Wilson CK, Rennie E, Ewing S, MacDonald T 2019, *Measuring Australia's Digital Divide: The Australian Digital Inclusion Index 2019*, RMIT University and Swinburne University of Technology, Melbourne, for Telstra.

³⁸ Holcombe-James I 2020, 'Coronavirus: As culture moves online, regional organisations need help bridging the digital divide,' *The Conversation*, April 7 2020.

³⁹ Bendor I and Acker T. 2015. *Summary - The use and benefits of ebusiness for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander art centres*. Ninti One Limited. Alice Springs. pdf 0.7MB.

⁴⁰ See: <https://awesomeblack.org/travis-de-vries/>

⁴¹ See: <https://www.aboriginalcontemporary.com.au/pages/virtual-gallery>

have proposed that the lockdown be used to capture Elders' knowledge and language by recording stories on devices at home and that families are incentivised to do so. The digital environment will be critical for providing safe access to arts and culture during the lockdown. This need further highlights the importance of ensuring access to technology and internet to artists and communities in regional and remote Australia.

The Australia Council's *Creating Art* research⁴² identifies an opportunity for an online network to enable First Nations artists to connect with their peers and international colleagues outside of formal forums such as the Australian Performing Arts Market (APAM). This suggestion was echoed in a roundtable in the context of COVID-19. Many participants have been speaking positively about the opportunity to come together through the Roundtables, including the First Nations representative from MEAA who said, 'Last week's Roundtable was amazing. 175 people from maybe 300+ Nations across the country sharing the one yarn.'

LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

Across art forms, the greatest future concerns relate to potential loss of life and cultural knowledge if communities lose their Elders, negative impacts on young people, along with loss of income and art economies. It is clear that the impacts of COVID-19 will be felt for a long time to come and that long term planning is needed. One art sector representative stated that the current situation shows a National Indigenous Arts and Cultural Authority (NIACA) is needed now more than ever – to provide leadership across all art forms and a central authority with direct links to government.

The **First Nations visual arts** sector is still recovering from the global financial crisis. While art centre sales have been growing for eight years, average sales are still 12% lower than they were at their peak in 2007–08.⁴³ Desart believes a ten year plan will be needed to rebuild the ecology, which includes relationships with private galleries. The Aboriginal Art Centre Hub of Western Australia suggested that planning and recovery support could include arts alongside tourism, which will also be hard hit. Ananguku Arts mentioned that the current crisis has highlighted the need for succession plans for future generations of leaders and to rethink online delivery for artists who do not have a gallery.

Representatives from the **First Nations theatre and dance** sectors are also bracing for long term impacts and believe economic support should continue after the shutdown is lifted. Before COVID-19, the First Nations performance sector was experiencing unprecedented demand.

The **First Nations dance** sector is the oldest in the world but is still 'emerging' in regards to embedded multi-year funding for First Nations-led companies aside from Bangarra. Except for Marrugeku intercultural dance company and the peak body BlakDance, there are no multi-year funded small to medium First Nations dance companies. BlakDance is calling for

⁴² Forthcoming.

⁴³ Desart Inc, *Financial Snapshot of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art Centres, 2004/05 > 2018/19*, March 2020.

strategic support to develop First Nations-led dance companies and their practice during this time of COVID-19:

*‘We call on funders federally and at every level, to create pathways that recognise and develop Indigenous, culturally and linguistically diverse dance companies to transition from project-based funding to multi-year funding models. **Let’s use this time to re-design the future we want together.**’*

Since COVID-19 BlakDance have conducted over 100 consultations via phone, zoom, and teleconference to establish clear priorities and needs for the sector. BlakDance, Diversity Arts Australia and Performing Art Connections Australia are working together to map out the future and review existing structures.

First Nations theatre companies raised concerns that financial constraints could mean that programming could be safer and more conservative in future, or that with so many works stalled at the development stage there will be an oversupply of work and an undersupply of audiences when the shut-down lifts. A concern was also raised that the financial desperation during recovery from COVID-19 will mean that cultural protocols will be abandoned or watered down.

A representative from the **First Nations music** sector expressed concern about losing visibility of First Nations music in the wider industry as the focus is on the mainstream, commercial acts. The importance of community radio, NITV, SBS and the promotional opportunities the ABC provides for First Nations music cannot be overstated. The traditional album cycle of release then tour will need to be re-evaluated and there is a need to ensure musicians outside metropolitan areas have access to technology and the internet.

The First Nations Australia Writers Network (FNAWN) is anticipating a drying up of funds from leading Australian online journals that did not receive Four Year Funding. FNAWN also fear a stagnation of **First Nations Australian stories and literature** from 2020 on, and that First Nations authors won’t be so visible in the mainstream. This would mean a backsliding following years of effort to make First Nations issues more visible. Encouragement and motivation for First Nations writers to write through the crisis is needed followed by a recruitment process to bring First Nations writers back to the wider Australian literary landscape.

Magabala Books is terrified for the health of many First Nations storytellers, writers and illustrators and their families and communities across Australia, the majority of whom are in the vulnerable category. The potential for loss of cultural and historical knowledge from COVID-19 and the impacts of grief on communities in the long term are immense.

APPENDIX A – ORGANISATIONS CONSULTED

Visual arts

- Desart
- Ananguku Arts
- Aboriginal Art Centre Hub of Western Australia
- Arnhem, Northern and Kimberley Artists Aboriginal Corporation (ANKA)⁴⁴

Theatre

- Moogahlin (NSW)
- Yirra Yaakin (WA)

Dance

- BlakDance

Music

- APRA AMCOS

Literature

- Magabala Books
- First Nations Australia Writers Network

Cross-sector

- Kimberley Aboriginal Law and Cultural Centre (KALACC)
- Media, Entertainment & Arts Alliance (MEAA)

Roundtables

The briefing paper also draws on the first three Australia Council [First Nations' Roundtables](#) for arts and creative independents and organisations to discuss the impacts of COVID-19.

- 20 March: 204 attendees
- 27 March: 168 attendees
- 3 April: 159 attendees

Total across all three webinars with duplicates removed: 380.

⁴⁴ Arnhem, Northern and Kimberley Artists Aboriginal Corporation (ANKA) provided materials but were unable to be interviewed within the timeframe.