



Queensland University of Technology

Response to the Productivity Commission Consultation on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Visual Arts and Crafts

Queensland University of Technology (QUT) welcomes the opportunity to comment on the Productivity Commission's Consultation on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Visual Arts and Crafts.

This submission details a number of actions that will help protect and grow the Australian Indigenous arts industry: the promotion of business and digital capabilities among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artists and creative enterprises; methods of consumer education; and legislative, social, technological and economic measures to protect authentic Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander art.

While recognising that there are numerous legitimate approaches to the question at hand – all of which have complementary roles to play in protecting, supporting and promoting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander visual art and craft practice, commerce and cultural significance – our perspective centres primarily on the critical importance of authenticity, and the tremendous opportunity presented by new technology to authenticate Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artworks for the benefit of artists, art buyers and the economy. QUT's expertise in this arena is manifold, including our contribution to the world-leading development of the [IndigiLedger](#)¹ blockchain authentication methodology.

Growth

A number of practical and relatively straightforward actions will support sustainable growth in the Australian Indigenous arts industry.

On an immediate level, providing and promoting access to the *National Blockchain Roadmap* report, especially sections on the supply chain pertaining to the agricultural sector from which relevant lessons can be drawn for the arts industry, will empower those within the sector to rebuild the market in a sustainable way. The *Roadmap* report holds relevance to Australian markets broadly, with particular importance for areas of trade high in cultural value.

There is also a need to support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artists and creative enterprises, educating and promoting awareness of the economic value of their work, including the provision of sound, informed advice on pricing strategies and approaches to expand their product catalogues to meet the needs of diverse consumer segments.

The tourism market, in particular, would benefit from increased support for domestic fabrication hubs and industries to expand supply of competitive and sustainable Aboriginal

¹ A world-first First Peoples' start-up, IndigiLedger uses blockchain technology to verify the authenticity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural work, developing a culturally-appropriate business rules engine based on collective Indigenous Knowledge that uniquely defines and captures what is authentic, provable and traceable Australian Indigenous art. <https://indigiledger.com.au/>

and Torres Strait Islander designed souvenir art (including products made from timber, cotton, glass, metal and ceramic).

Incentives should also be introduced to encourage domestic manufacturers to pivot production toward Australian Indigenous-designed products, as a means of enhancing domestic and international competitiveness and promoting Australia's unique Indigenous identities.

The market

As the industry takes stock of its underlying position and businesses pivot in the new COVID19-normal marketplace, the opportunity to rebrand and refresh cultural expression with a mark of authenticity, provenance and traceability backed by blockchain technology is yet to be realised. The rise of 'certified organic' labelling and brand personality serves as an important pathfinder that offers relevant lessons for the art and design market.

Technology and digital connectedness are moving at a rapid pace, and Australia risks leaving behind Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artists and art centres if they are not supported during the sector pivot to a 'digital-led' model. The business need is clear and the technology already exists: the missing elements are artist and consumer education, infrastructure provision and regulatory adoption.

Fake art has a serious, ongoing and damaging effect not only on the economy but more importantly on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures: as remarkably diverse as those distinct cultures are, they are united in their susceptibility to the profound economic, cultural and spiritual harm that can be caused by callous profiteering through fake art. While legislative protection is vital, its success relies on economic and social strategies. One such movement, ethical consumerism, has demonstrated itself as a powerful force of change throughout product supply chains. The efficacy of social and economic strategies in protecting the value of authentic Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander arts and design products is dependent on strong investment in consumer education at the point of purchase and support for the development of smart retail technology to give consumers the tools to distinguish between fake and authentic cultural goods. As mentioned, efforts must be made to empower Australian Indigenous artists and creative enterprises through business education, capacity building and support to adopt emerging technology and digital approaches.

Authenticity

Indigenous knowledges are expressed by ontologies, axiologies and epistemologies (ways of knowing, being and doing), enshrined in a ribbon of relatedness to each other and to connection with Country. This underlying Indigenous standpoint is the essential precursor to understanding the meaning of Authentic Australian Indigenous Art. The process of understanding and obtaining information must be conducted through consultation and collaboration in order to achieve a closed loop of consensus as an immutable source of truth.

Expressions of artwork should be at the consultation and discretion of those wishing to create it. Australian Indigenous cultural expression is circular in motion and adapts over time. Innovation, adoption, entrepreneurship and connection to culture is the underlying reason why Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people continue to be the oldest living culture.

Skills

Strong and engaged effort must be made to invest in the digital capability of individual artists, communities and small-to-medium creative enterprises with training and infrastructure, with a particular focus on digital marketing and smart retail technology.

Existing skill-building incubators like [IndigiLedger](#), [First Nations Fashion and Design](#),² [Dot Com Mob](#)³ and [Bamaga Productions](#)⁴ that teach skills of smart retail technology, product development, cultural heritage, design expression and computer literacy in rural and remote communities are exemplars of the authentic and effective capability building that must be undertaken on a wider scale.

Digital inclusion

Digital inclusion is a key pillar in the competitiveness of businesses owned and operated by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people themselves, with all the benefits those arrangements can bring to the economic sustainability of Australian Indigenous communities. Investment in the NBN and other internet service provider infrastructure is key to overcoming isolation and lack of connectivity in regional and remote communities. Ubiquitous connectivity, particularly in an advanced sophisticated economy such as Australia, is no longer a novel, exotic luxury – it is well-established, normalised, and fundamental to social and economic participation.

Access to stable, reliable and well-supported digital technologies is a vital condition for dramatically changing the social and economic development of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities across Australia, its modern impact every bit as profound as the lifeline previously represented by the post office and the overland telegraph. Digital connectedness has the metaphorical effect of collapsing time and space, making it possible to do business across deserts and oceans as easily as across town or even next door.

However, connectivity is just the first step to digital inclusion, as many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artists living in highly connected urban locations still experience digital exclusion. Therefore, capacity building, support for the proliferation of business-building digital tools and government policies which encourage market growth (such as recognition and protection of Australian Indigenous Cultural Intellectual Property) are vital supports. Technologically-enabled activation of social and economic opportunities in the digital economy centred on Australian Indigenous art and destination tourism are vital to building thriving Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

Properly implemented, fully realised digital inclusion enables growth of regional economies on a par with their urban counterparts – but only for those who have the access, capability and knowledge to operate within its confines.

Certification of authenticity

One long-overdue and profoundly effective measure to help protect and grow Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander visual arts and crafts would be a technologically-enabled means of

² <https://firstnationsfashiondesign.com/>

³ <https://www.dotcommob.org/>

⁴ <https://bamagaproductions.com.au/about-us/>

certifying authentic Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural expression for sole practitioners, small-to-medium enterprises and art centres.

In partnership with IndigiLedger, QUT has undertaken comprehensive and robust research and analysis of primary data from interviewing art centres, regional city councils, peak bodies, sole traders and resellers of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander art and souvenirs to understand exactly how they interpret authenticity, provenance and traceability. A world-first Indigenous start-up, IndigiLedger uses blockchain technology to verify the authenticity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural work, developing a culturally-appropriate business rules engine based on collective Indigenous Knowledge that uniquely defines and captures what is authentic, provable and traceable Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander art.

A pilot undertaken by QUT and IndigiLedger demonstrated a strong demand for the technology to be deployed across Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander sole traders and businesses in Australia. This impact was achieved without State or Federal Government support. With public support at Commonwealth and State levels, IndigiLedger could become the trusted mark of Australian Indigenous cultural expression, assuring Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artists of the revenue streams to which they are entitled; assuring buyers of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander art of the future value of their treasured acquisitions through authenticated provenance; assuring ethical consumers of the destination of their purchasing dollars; and assuring the Australian economy of its rightful benefit from Australian Indigenous art production, instead of losing value to offshore fake art rip-off factories or inauthentic black-market operators.

Indigenous Cultural Intellectual Property protections

The IndigiLedger platform captures Australian Indigenous ways of knowing, being and doing in relation to all forms of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural expression, using trusted authentication technology. IndigiLedger's business rules engine, combined with publicly-facing data and enshrined by secure blockchain delivered through smart retail technology, provides an unprecedented level of authenticity, provenance and traceability. IndigiLedger is the retail and education consumer level of industry standard required to protect Indigenous Cultural Intellectual Property.

In addition to its value domestically, IndigiLedger has strong export potential given the ubiquity of these patterns of neo-colonial exploitation at the expense of First Nations artists all around the world. The success of IndigiLedger has implications for other nations grappling with the authentication of First Nations cultural intellectual property, placing Australia as a world-leader in this space. Any adoption in other countries could only succeed in close collaboration with their own First Nations peoples, to ensure

In practice, applying blockchain technology through a trusted cultural interface such as IndigiLedger provides producers, resellers and consumers an immutable source of truth – the missing ingredient in the current global “authentic vs imitation” contest in every Indigenous art marketplace in the world.