



Models Joshua Morris and Shadeene Evans wear the BOONKAJ collection by Waringarri Aboriginal Arts, Country to Couture, Head Stylist – Rhys Ripper, 2021. Image credit: James Giles courtesy of Indigenous Fashion Projects.

Background artwork credit: Jilji and Bila by Mr. T May, paint pen on tin, 2018, ©Mr T May/Mangkaja Arts.

First Nations First

Targeted investment to grow a dynamic and sustainable First Nations fashion sector.

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The First Nations fashion sector has seen exponential growth in recent years, employing First Nations people from urban centres to the most remote communities of Australia. It is a multifaceted industry with the potential for extensive and sustained cultural, social, and economic outcomes. To continue to grow sustainably it requires a coordinated approach that effectively resources and meets the needs of First Nations fashion creators and businesses at each stage of the fashion and textile supply chain.

The First Nations fashion movement continues to grow, elevating First Nations voices on the national stage. Top First Nations models and fashion exhibitions are making the First Nations fashion sector a global phenomenon. Major commercial collaborations between remote based

First Nations artists and leading Australian brands have set new benchmarks for artists' participation and management of Indigenous Cultural and Intellectual Property (ICIP).¹ First Nations leaders and organisations are carving new pathways for First Nations fashion, and creating a significant investment opportunity for the Australian Government.

The Australian fashion industry contributes \$27.2 billion to Australia's economy each year, employing 489,000 people and generating \$7.2 billion in exports. The fashion sector is a strong contributor to the nation, worth 1.5% of GDP (2% for telecommunications) and 1.7% of Australian exports – more than double that of wine and beer combined (0.7%).²

The First Nations fashion and textile sector's contribution to the economy, and its growing international profile cannot be ignored.



Even comprising a small percentage of the overall fashion industry (3% of \$27.2 billion at a value of \$816 million)⁵ the First Nations fashion sector has the potential to become a multimillion-dollar industry. It is multi-dimensional, and its growth and activity reflect the diversity of First Nations culture, art, expertise, and experience.

The industry includes multiple forms of community-controlled business development, employment, creative engagement, and expression, as well as connecting a range of sectors and creative industries (Figure 1). There are increasing numbers of First Nations owned fashion brands and related businesses engaging in the broader fashion industry, with a growing and active audience.

This sector has a significant role to play in addressing the Closing the Gap targets for younger generations. There is a body of evidence showing that participation in arts and culture supports outcomes across the Closing the Gap framework.⁴ Participation in fashion is specifically relevant to socio-economic targets for First Nations people including:

- youth are engaged in employment or education (target 7)
- strong economic participation and development of people and communities (target 8)
- maintain a distinctive cultural, spiritual, physical, and economic relationship with their land and waters (target 15)
- cultures and languages are strong, supported and flourishing (target 16).⁵

Opportunities to connect with First Nations arts and culture in contemporary ways engage First Nations youth and help to build a bridge between cultures.⁶ Fashion is a highly visible platform for young First Nations people to see First Nations

role models and the celebration of culture. Investment in fashion programs is an investment in the social and emotional wellbeing of First Nations young people.

Mainstream investment fails to reach the First Nations sector

There is increased recognition and funding for the broader Australian fashion industry, particularly in the eastern states. The NSW Government has announced plans to deliver a new Centre for Fashion and Textiles Sustainability⁷ and \$500 million for the Powerhouse Museum to become a world class fashion and design hub.⁸ The Australian Government provided the Australian Fashion Council (AFC) with \$1 million to develop a national fashion trademark in 2021.⁹ However, broader industry funding is not reaching or targeting the First Nations fashion sector.

In 2022, the AFC presented four policy pillars for government to invest in to accelerate the economic impact of the Australian fashion industry. What is missing from those recommendations is any acknowledgement of the First Nations sector, including its diverse needs and the value it adds to the industry.

This is a growth sector lacking any recognition on a policy level, needing government investment directed specifically to First Nations programs.

Mainstream fashion programs are not reaching First Nations fashion designers and businesses, nor are they equipped with the cultural knowledge or capacity to address the First Nation fashion sector's needs. The 'top-down' approach favours funding engagement by non-First Nations providers and limits opportunities for self-determined localised engagement mechanisms.¹⁰



Figure 1. The diverse people, businesses, and organisations that connect to create and foster the First Nations fashion sector.



Mainstream fashion organisations need to partner, invest, and advocate for First Nations led fashion programs.

First Nations fashion, like its First Nations creative industry sector counterparts – visual arts, performance, and music sectors – needs coordinated state and federal investment in First Nations led organisations to continue to grow and to be sustainable and resilient.

First Nations First – a sector led by First Nations people

'First Nations First' is one of the five pillars of the Australian Government's new National Cultural Policy development.¹¹ It is critical that this is central to the development of the First Nations fashion sector.

The proliferation of imagery of First Nations fashion and the amplified attention from the commercial sector gives the appearance of a thriving and well supported First Nations fashion sector. The reality is very different – critical First Nations fashion programs and organisations, presenting one of the most marketable exports for Australia in recent years, largely exist on short-term and sporadic government support and high-risk commercial partnerships.

Successful independent First Nations designers and fashion businesses located in urban centres have leveraged commercial partnerships and capitalised on urban spaces to grow, with little government support. These are high risk partnerships with limited opportunity for experimentation and an imbalance in power and sustained benefit. In collaborations, First Nations businesses carry the load to educate commercial business lacking cultural competency, while commercial businesses benefit from alignment with

First Nations artists by gaining social licence and ethical endorsement.

Remote-based First Nations art centres have stretched their Indigenous Visual Arts Industry Support (IVAIS) program funding to develop successful and sustained remote based textile practices over decades. In recent years they have sourced commercial fashion industry partners to create collaborative collections, which government has not funded and yet promote as successful arts pathways.

Funding First Nations institutions to address sector needs

'First Nations organisations offer leadership and play an integral role as incubators and are the safe cultural spaces to mentor talent. Supporting them – as well as individual creatives – has a huge impact on the resilience and sustainability of a sector.'
– Australian Council for the Arts.¹²

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

State and national First Nations fashion organisations identify and respond to stakeholder issues, providing support to the sector in urban, regional, and remote locations with minimal resources. These organisations doing the work on the ground with First Nations fashion sector members are in urgent need of sustained and substantial resourcing from the Australian Government.

Australia Council has recognised the funding gap, creating the Flourish Fund, an inaugural First Nations fashion specific funding program in 2022. A sum of \$500,000 was distributed to 21 successful applicants.¹³ It has promised more funding to target this sector in the coming year. This national funding approach should be permanently established, with the funding pool increased and replicated in state government approaches.

Key areas for policy focus as identified by the sector

A consultation undertaken by Indigenous Fashion Projects and AFC in 2019 highlighted key sector issues raised by members of the eastern and northern states of Australia:

- protection and development of First Nations culture and community
- lack of business development support and best practice understanding
- difficulties connecting with industry networks and resources, including supply chain distribution and promotion opportunities
- limited access to industry education and training, particularly for young people.¹⁴

In 2022, the issues remain the same with some identified gaps and opportunities for federal and state governments to capitalise on.

Recognition and investment in sustainable practice. First Nations fashion industry members are unacknowledged leaders in environmentally sustainable textile practices. There is great opportunity for the fashion industry to learn and benefit from the First Nations sector's environmentally conscious practices.

Scaled funding to target fashion business growth. Scaled funding options for projects and larger business development are critical to business growth and sustainability. Successful First Nations fashion brands are seeking short-term and larger funding options that enable investment in infrastructure, and business development pathways.

Data collection and sector research. There has been no data collected to quantify the value of the sector. Investment in First Nations led research supporting culturally appropriate processes would give a rich sector evaluation considering cultural, social, and economic measures.

ICIP protection. Limited legal protection for ICIP is a significant problem for the sector. Government backing of policy priorities outlined in a submission by Arts Law, Copyright Agency and The Indigenous Art Code would positively impact all First Nations creative Industries.

Manufacturing access – quality and quantity of production. The manufacturing crisis in Australia disproportionately affects the First Nations fashion sector, with predominantly smaller business models looking to local production. Improving manufacturing access and garment quality is critical to be competitive in the international market.

Access to education/training pathways and appropriate resources. Investment in new and existing education models, mentorships, and pathways programs tailored to the needs of regional and remote Indigenous creators is needed to build capacity for the future.

Proven models to foster success

Coordinated sector investment has seen successful and sustained Australian fashion industry growth in the past. In the early 2000s, the WA Government invested in a Designer Fashion Grant Program, which resulted in more than a decade of fashion business and manufacturing growth. A shift in policy in 2016 that merged the creative sectors into one funding program removed the support that had stabilised the sector, leaving the Perth fashion scene a shadow of its former self. There are now no structures equipped to support WA creatives on fashion pathways.

In the NT, the ceasing of fashion and textile courses at Charles Darwin University and Bachelor College has halted progress and pathways for fashion development. Whereas in Victoria, Kinaway Chamber of Commerce's establishment of the Kin Fashion program is seeing an increasing number of Victorian First Nations designers and brands capitalising on opportunities, including a recent runway presentation in Milan by Victorian First Nations brand Ngali.

Nationally, First Nations fashion organisations are creating new First Nations led platforms and facilitating effective pathway programs for designers to grow their business with industry support.¹⁵ First Nations Fashion Design (FNFD) and Indigenous Fashion Projects (IFP) have presented multiple First Nations designers at Australian Fashion Week over consecutive years. Sustained investment in these programs is critical for continued success.¹⁶

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



Left: 'Old Laddie' Yarrenyty Arltere on Country to Couture catwalk, 2022. Image credit: Michael Jalaru Torres, courtesy of Indigenous of Fashion Projects. Middle left: Models Georgia King and Hayley Mulardy wearing Nagula Jarndu, Kakaji (Goanna) by Gabrielle Baxter and Magabala (bush banana) by Martha Lee. Image credit: Michael Jalaru Torres, Broome 2022, courtesy Nagula Jarndu. Middle right: Roman wears Linda Puna from Mimili Maku Arts x Unreal Fur, Country to Couture, 2022. Image credit: Michael Jalaru Torres, courtesy of Indigenous Fashion Projects. Right: Model Shaneiva Chatfield wears Gumnut Gown by Paul McCann, National Indigenous Fashion Awards Photoshoot with Marie Claire Australia, 2021. Image credit: Tristan Stefan Edouard, courtesy of Indigenous Fashion Projects.

Independent fashion creatives are disadvantaged when it comes to competing for funding programs that pit them against better resourced and established businesses and art centre supported artists. Resourcing First Nations fashion organisations that support independent designers and resourcing of programs tailored to their specific needs is especially critical for this sector to grow.

As seen on my Churchill Fellowship, internationally, fashion programs that are seeing First Nations fashion businesses rise have coordinated sectors that are multifaceted and provide collaborative funding models that support collective learning and international networking opportunities with a business-to-business training focus. Models in South Africa and Indonesia provide business training with a focus on quality and extending market reach. They mentor designers and get them to the standard needed for national promotional platforms, retail partnership developments, and international markets.

South Africa responded to their failing community industry by shifting their model from institutional training to incubation hubs, taking training to communities, using a strength-based approach.¹⁷ The national organisation, SA Fashion Agent, facilitates local industry growth in the manufacture of specialised products, building designer capacity and encouraging development of niche textile markets for South Africa.¹⁸

Indonesia has established the Indonesia Fashion Forward (IFF) program in partnership with the British Council to mentor designers through all elements of fashion and business and present at Jakarta Fashion Week. The program has fostered a significant rise in uptake of Indonesian designers into international retailers and nurtured an innovative and economically sustainable Indonesian fashion industry.¹⁹

State, national, and international models present proven solutions to the First Nations fashion sector's policy issues. With targeted investment and strategic collaborations Australia has the opportunity to lead in the growing global First Nations fashion industry.

Stakeholder consultation

Stakeholder consultation for this paper includes national, state and regional organisations with the core business of fashion and textiles; art-based organisations that support remote community organisations; independent First Nations designers and fashion businesses; First Nations fashion and art curators; First Nations sector leaders and mentors; independent fashion and art specialists; collaborative non-First Nations fashion business partners; and fashion journalists.

Policy recommendations

1. **Recognise the First Nations fashion sector's value and strategically invest in its future**
 - Fund First Nations led research and resource development to document the sector's value, prioritise First Nations sector identified outcomes, and measure impacts of Closing the Gap targets.
 - Recognise, resource and engage with leading national and state First Nations fashion programs.
 - Develop a coordinated and co-designed national strategy with First Nations fashion sector leaders and organisations.
2. **Invest in a federally funded First Nations fashion sector grant scheme**
 - Provide funding for all members of the supply chain, including manufacturing.
 - Scale and establish flexible funding options that are relevant to the needs of the varied sector business models.
3. **Invest in state funded First Nations fashion programs**
 - Recognise and fund the First Nations fashion sector within state based creative industry programs, and appropriately resource by engaging cultural and fashion expertise.
 - Fund urban, regional, and remote programs to build capacity through local strength-based initiatives.
4. **Commit to First Nations culture and leadership**
 - Action recommendations to recognise ICIP in law. Continue to engage and fund First Nations specialists in ICIP, fashion, and arts law.
 - Incentivise and subsidise First Nations led cultural competency training for fashion businesses and organisations, and educate government departments.
5. **Increase First Nations Australians' access to education and training, manufacturing, and fashion business development**
 - Resource and incentivise decentralised regional and remote textile and fashion training and business mentoring programs.
 - Fund fashion related infrastructure for manufacturing in remote and regional areas to provide training, increase employment, and grow remote and regional industry.
 - Invest in urban First Nations led programs and spaces to increase accessibility.

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