



# AIATSIS

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## AIATSIS Submission

### Inquiry into Northern Australia Workforce Development

#### Introduction

The Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS) is Australia's only national institute dedicated to telling the story of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' knowledge, societies, and cultures. We are the custodian of Australia's national collection of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander heritage materials and a publicly funded research agency. AIATSIS is also tasked with providing advice to government on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and heritage.

AIATSIS welcomes this opportunity to provide a submission into the inquiry and report on Northern Australia's workforce development.

#### Submission

Through our work, AIATSIS collaborates with and supports Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people's from across Australia, a significant number of whom are from Northern Australia. We are well placed to provide an informed view of impediments to building the economic and social infrastructure, and workforce needed to support economic development with a particular reference to empowering and upskilling the local Indigenous population.

Indigenous peoples, particularly in Northern Australia, regularly experience issues which impede their economic development. These include but are not limited to:

- High rates of social disadvantage, poverty, and low levels of health literacy
- Lacking medical, dental, disability and community care services
- Disproportional level of incarceration for population
- High unemployment
- Little education and poor school attendance
- Ineffective government programs
- Decaying infrastructure

AIATSIS supports a multi-faceted and **comprehensive review of these issues** which present as impediments to workforce development and **to support recommendations for improvements** in outcomes for Indigenous peoples. The review should consider each of these issues, and through collaboration with Indigenous peoples, should design strategies to realise improvements across the board.



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AIATSIS believes that **greater engagement and collaboration with Indigenous peoples by policy makers**, government, and industry is essential to ensuring strategies are effective and present the highest chance of success.

AIATSIS supports a **review and improvements of current Northern Australia Indigenous Australian education standards and approaches**. Greater emphasis of Indigenous cultures, languages, and practices should be incorporated into current educational curriculums which will benefit education outcomes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people's and foster greater understanding between non-Indigenous and Indigenous peoples. The flow on benefits of increasing higher education participation rates, increasing capability and agency of Indigenous peoples will contribute to Indigenous economic participation and empowerment.

AIATSIS recommends greater **support in creating local Indigenous run cultural centres and/or keeping places** as an opportunity that directly responds to the wishes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and improves workforce development opportunities and economic participation.

AIATSIS works with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and communities to return cultural material (objects, photographs, audio-visual records, artwork, and archival items) from overseas governments, collecting institutions, and private collectors. Where possible, AIATSIS strives to return this material direct to Country and into the custodianship of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to be cared for at their designated cultural centre and/or keeping places.

In the course of completing this critical work, AIATSIS has found that cultural heritage material from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities in Northern Australia is represented in significant numbers overseas. Consequently, returning material to Northern Australian communities constitutes a high portion of AIATSIS's work both now and into the future.

At present, for communities access to culturally appropriate and Indigenous managed or controlled cultural centres and/or keeping places is inadequate. Further compounding this issue is the absence of dedicated federal government funding or program/s that specifically creates and/or supports the maintenance of community controlled cultural centres and keeping places.

Supporting **cultural centres and keeping places requires initial infrastructure development** as well as support from government, industry, and business to create the regional jobs which maintain and run these cultural centres and keeping places. However, once established they create economic and employment opportunities for local Aboriginal and Torres Strait regional communities. Once established, **cultural centres become must see tourist and cultural hubs** in the community, for example Nyinkka Nyunyu Art & Culture Centre at Tennant Creek.

AIATSIS recommends **regional job creation through expansion and support in the arts and cultural sector** across Northern Australia. Investment in traditional ecological knowledge such as cultural burns and Indigenous ranger programs; and creating opportunities for Aboriginal ownership of businesses and services, particularly where those operate to benefit Aboriginal peoples.

Over the past two decades, AIATSIS has observed a steady decline in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples working in the Gallery, Library, Archive and Museum (GLAM) sector. It is vital that an **Indigenous workforce be trained and supported in developing skills** and knowledge in how to



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**manage cultural collections on Country.** The process of digitally returning cultural material from Australian institutions in large cities back on Country is empowering for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. Indigenous communities need to be empowered and upskilled in all aspects of working with cultural collections. This important work supports Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural maintenance, restoration, and revitalisation.

Building appropriate keeping places or cultural centres and upskilling local Indigenous peoples to manage cultural collections will build skills, knowledge, expertise, create jobs, and attract economic development through tourism and development in regional towns throughout Northern Australia.

## Conclusion

AIATSIS welcomes the opportunity to submit a response to this inquiry. As the only national institution focused exclusively on the diverse history, cultures, and heritage of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australia, AIATSIS is well placed to provide a considered response that reflects Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ways of knowing, being and doing.