



SCREEN AUSTRALIA

SUBMISSION TO THE INQUIRY INTO ECONOMIC SELF-DETERMINATION AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR FIRST NATIONS AUSTRALIANS

MAY 2024

Screen Australia and the First Nations Department

Screen Australia is the Commonwealth Government agency responsible for the Australian screen industry. The agency was established under the *Screen Australia Act 2008*,¹ and was created following the merging of predecessor agencies the Australian Film Commission, the Film Finance Corporate Australia and Film Australia Limited. The agency promotes a diverse and vibrant sector through supporting drama, documentary and children’s content across all screens, and the development of digital games. Screen Australia connects cultural, commercial and governmental stakeholders, ensuring the production of culturally significant, high quality and innovating Australian screen stories.²

Screen Australia is implementing the pillars of the Government’s National Cultural Policy, *Revive*, through our programs and initiatives. Screen Australia strongly recognises and respects the crucial place of First Nations stories at the centre of Australia’s arts and culture. We are committed to supporting authentic First Nations screen stories made for First Nations communities, for other Australians, and for global audiences. First Nations content makers may apply to any Screen Australia funding program in addition to the programs of the First Nations Department, which has been operational for over 30 years.

The First Nations Department is an essential part of Screen Australia. Since its creation in 1993 by the Australian Film Commission, the First Nations Department has led the way in promoting First Nations screen stories and storytellers. Entirely staffed by First Nations Australians, the Department drives change in the industry by providing significant development and production funding for imaginative, resonant and authentic First Nations screen stories. It supports quality First Nations drama series and features like *The New Boy*, *The Moogai*, *Mystery Road*, *True Colours*, *Total Control* and *Samson & Delilah*; documentaries such as *Our Law* and *First Australians*; children’s programs such as *Little J & Big Cuz*, and online projects including *KGB*.

In addition to funding screen content, the First Nations Department also identifies and champions emerging First Nations talent, advocates for representation, encourages cultural safety, and funds skills development and career escalation opportunities. This includes creating initiatives and establishing partnerships that connect First Nations screen creatives with international markets and practitioners.

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Screen Australia welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission to the Joint Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs’ Inquiry into economic self-determination and opportunities for First Nations Australians. Our submission addresses particular areas of focus outlined in the Terms of Reference.

¹ [Screen Australia Act 2008](#) (Cth).

² Further information on Screen Australia’s role can be found in Screen Australia’s [Corporate Plan](#).

Barriers to, and opportunities for training, employment and business development

First Nations screen practitioners continue to face barriers to training, employment and business development in the screen industry,³ including:

- **Fragmented funding, strategies and approaches across the whole screen industry:** contributing to confusion about the opportunities available for First Nations practitioners and businesses, and the process of accessing support.
- **Unclear and unsustainable talent pathways:** resulting in a disconnect between the number of First Nations practitioners that reach a mid-career phase and those that become established. Unclear pathways also contribute to skills shortages and gaps for First Nations practitioners in certain key creative roles, such as producers.
- **Cultural barriers:** including challenges related to cultural protocols and differences in storytelling traditions, which may impact the development, production and distribution of First Nations screen stories.
- **Access to funding and resources in an environment of rising costs:** impacts abilities to finance projects and access equipment, grow networks and knowledge base by attending screen conferences and education events, travel to First Nations content markets such as the imagineNATIVE Film & Media Arts Festival and attend prestige festivals such as the Cannes Film Festival.
- **Need for strong First Nations voices, and advocacy:** to navigate intellectual property rights, call for adequate representation, and to ensure authentic storytelling.
- **Need to improve the collection and analysis of data:** relating to First Nations screen practitioners and businesses, to inform greater understandings of the barriers and opportunities that exist.

Screen Australia and other screen agencies and organisations currently have a variety of programs and initiatives that seek to address identified barriers. However, more support is required to upskill, sustain and elevate First Nations screen practitioners and businesses. With additional resourcing, there would be opportunity for Screen Australia and the First Nations Department to enhance and expand current efforts, which include:

- **Aligning public and private sector approaches** to improve communications across stakeholder groups who are invested in First Nations screen funding, training programs, and talent and business development. For example, the First Nations Department is planning a landmark First Nations Screen Summit in November 2024 to bring together First Nations screen practitioners and thought-leaders from across the country and screen sector. The summit will build understanding and consensus around building a National Framework for First Nations Professional Development. It will also provide opportunity for First Nations practitioners to create networks, liaise with funding bodies and industry, and strengthen their craft.
- **Creating sustainable careers and talent development pathways,** through designing and implementing tailored initiatives, and collaborating with other agencies and

³ For more information on barriers and opportunities, see: [The Next 25 Years: Screen Australia First Nations Department Strategy](#).

sector organisations. Programs and initiatives may assist to address current sector-wide skills shortages. Recent collaborations led by the First Nations Department have included the *First Nations Creators Program* with Instagram Australia and the *First Facts: First Nations Factual Showcase* in partnership with Network 10. The establishment of a National Framework for First Nations Professional Development, as outlined above, will be a vital step in addressing barriers to career development and requires genuine cross-sector and inter-agency consultation.

- **Supporting First Nations representation and authenticity across all screens, platforms, roles and areas of the industry.** The First Nations Department has had a dramatic impact on the visibility of First Nations characters in Australian television and online drama.⁴ This improvement is also credited to the Department’s ongoing partnership with the ABC’s Indigenous Unit, NITV/SBS, the state and territory screen agencies and AFTRS. Ongoing support and targeted initiatives are vital to promote representation of First Nations peoples both in front of, and behind the camera.
- **Promoting cultural safety on set,** including the design and implementation of tools, resources and programs to promote safe working environments. It is also imperative that non-First Nations filmmakers ensure respectful and safe working arrangements and environments. The First Nations Department is undertaking a review and refresh of its *Pathways & Protocols* guide⁵, which is the Australian screen industry standard for working with First Nations people, culture and concepts.
- **Adapting to new technologies which are resulting in new forms of creating and consuming First Nations screen content.** The rise of digital platforms has presented new opportunities for First Nations content to connect with different audiences, and for First Nations communities to increasingly engage with screen content. Reports suggest that First Nations children in particular are highly engaged by the digital environment, such as online content and digital games.⁶ Screen Australia and the First Nations Department is focused on adapting with changing technologies and following audiences to ensure that content connects with audiences at home and abroad.
- **Maintaining a strong focus on funding resources for First Nations content, talent and businesses.** The First Nations Department’s budget varies year-on-year, but has increased on average over the last five years.⁷ Screen Australia continues to allocate as much as possible to the First Nations Department, however this is dependent on demand and Screen Australia’s overall funding from the Government.

Impediments to building the economic and social infrastructure required to support economic prosperity in the long term

⁴ Screen Australia (April 2023), [Seeing Ourselves 2](#). First Nations representation in TV and online drama has risen from 5% of main characters between 2011 and 2015, to 7% between 2016 and 2022.

⁵ Screen Australia (April 2009), [Pathways & Protocols: a filmmaker’s guide to working with Indigenous people, culture and concepts](#).

⁶ eSafety Commissioner (March 2023), [Cool, beautiful, strange and scary: The online experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and their parents and caregivers](#).

⁷ Screen Australia [Annual Reports](#). In 2017/18, the First Nations Department spend was \$3.3 million. In 2022/23, around \$6 million in funding was approved through the First Nations Department.

Screen Australia is legislatively required to “support and promote the development of a highly creative, innovative and commercially sustainable Australian screen production industry”.⁸ There are currently many challenges that affect the commercial sustainability of First Nations screen businesses, including unclear business and talent pathways, the effects of digital disruption on business models, and general economic conditions impacting the cost of screen production in Australia.

Screen Australia is focused on designing and implementing initiatives to support First Nations screen businesses. For example, in 2022/23 the First Nations Department allocated over \$1 million into Enterprise Business and People Funding, and Screen Australia launched the First Nations Game Studio fund to assist games studios led by First Nations developers to grow and solidify their businesses.

While this is a high priority focus area for Screen Australia, sustained Government support is crucial to the commercial success of First Nations screen businesses. The First Nations Department’s budget fluctuates year-on-year with demand, and in response to Screen Australia’s overall budget. With an increased and sustained investment from Government, the First Nations Department would be able to create programs that deliver meaningful impact and increase the number of opportunities for First Nations screen practitioners and businesses to build long term prosperity.

Options to unlock capital and leverage intellectual property, the Indigenous Estate and First Nations skills to elevate First Nations people as economic partners

Retaining Indigenous Cultural and Intellectual Property (ICIP) rights in screen content is essential for First Nations peoples to assert cultural sovereignty, preserve cultural heritage, empower communities, promote authenticity and secure economic opportunities within the screen industry.

It is imperative that First Nations practitioners and businesses are aware of their rights and the importance of retaining intellectual property in their screen content. Screen Australia assists First Nations practitioners and businesses on their understanding of intellectual property rights through the *Pathways & Protocols* guide and specialist advice where required. However, there is a need for greater advocacy and stronger First Nations voices to assist in navigating this fast-developing aspect of the sector to ensure that ICIP rights are properly respected and protected.

Artificial Intelligence (AI) is an area of focus for Screen Australia. While AI may be a valuable tool for First Nations content creation and culture (for example, through the preservation of stories and languages), there may be unfavourable impacts on ICIP rights of First Nations practitioners. Screen Australia is devising a set of guiding principles to support the Australian screen industry, however further industry consultation and research may enhance understandings of the potential impacts of AI on ICIP rights, as well as First Nations content creation, skills development, innovation and culture.

⁸ [Screen Australia Act 2008](#) (Cth) s6(1)(a).

The international and intergenerational experiences of fostering economic independence for First Nations communities

The First Nations Department is a globally recognised leader in this space, having served as a model for counterparts overseas such as Canada’s Indigenous Screen Office. The First Nations Department connects with organisations across the sector, including First Nations groups from countries such as New Zealand, Norway and Canada. There is significant opportunity for increased collaboration with these international groups; to maximise the potential of existing co-production arrangements and to foster economic independence for First Nations communities across the globe through tailored knowledge sharing programs and learning experiences.

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If the Joint Committee would like further information, please contact Kate Hickey, Head of Strategic Policy and Insights by email: 