

27 November 2006

Committee Secretary
Senate Environment, Communications, Information Technology and the Arts References
Committee
Email: ecita.sen@aph.gov.au

Dear Sir / Madam

Submission – Inquiry into Australia’s Indigenous Visual Arts and Craft sector

On behalf of Griffith University and Queensland College of Art (a component division) I wish to make a submission to the Inquiry into Australia’s Indigenous Visual Arts and Crafts Sector. Griffith University has a substantial range of interests relating to the circumstances of Australia’s Indigenous citizens, but for the purposes of this document I will restrict myself to the matter at hand and our specific commitment to the education and training of Indigenous artists.

We believe that this inquiry is timely, and that the Indigenous Arts and Crafts sector represents not only a significant economic phenomenon, but also an area of activity and pride that is increasingly essential to both the Indigenous community and to Australia’s sense of self-identity.

Queensland College of Art, Griffith University, is a significant site for the provision of education and training that directly and positively impacts on the Indigenous Visual Arts and Craft sector. Accordingly, this submission will outline Queensland College of Art’s history and current delivery of education and wider support to Indigenous arts practitioners and educators. It will also comment on some key points in relation to the inquiry’s terms of reference, specifically in relation to previous attempts to address the sector, and will offer several recommendations.

History

Queensland College of Art (QCA) was founded in 1881, and thus this year celebrates its 125th anniversary. As the dominant Fine Art, Design and Film school in Queensland it has enrolled many Indigenous students and has been central to various debates regarding the education and culture of Indigenous people. Some examples: In the 1950s the artist Joe Rootsey, a man of the Barrow Point people (Amu Wuringu clan) came to the College to study under the sponsorship of the Native Affairs Department. This prompted considerable

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media attention and attention for the College. For many years the Queensland College of Art operated Australia's only studio degree program in Indigenous Art. A considerable number of Australia's best-known Indigenous artists have had a connection with the Queensland College of Art as students, teachers or visitors.

Current Infrastructure / Primary Mechanisms for Delivery

Queensland College of Art, via its courses, community outreach, public programming and gallery exhibition programs, seeks to deliver and facilitate both Indigenous owned and driven artistic careers and Indigenous cultural projects in Indigenous and non-Indigenous settings. We believe that Queensland College of Art offers the only degree-level university program in Australia to combine theory and practice exclusively for Indigenous students. The *Bachelor of Contemporary Australian and Indigenous Art* [BCAIA] has been offered since 1996, and has as its primary objective:

“...to facilitate Indigenous students to obtain a degree in visual arts while working within a framework of Indigenous culture which runs through the program itself. It is planned in accordance with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander principles and philosophies, and teaching respects the various cultural obligations and laws regarding ways in which techniques and images may be used. It is designed to prepare Indigenous Australians for practice as professional artists, and is structured for flexible delivery across school leavers through to mature aged students.”
[Queensland College of Art Program Planner]

The BCAIA unit, under the direction of Jennifer Herd, is staffed by Indigenous artists and has strategic co-ordinating roles with other areas of Griffith University such as the GUMURRI Centre, local community / artist networks and community groups throughout Queensland. Mentoring for students is provided through the participation of major contemporary Indigenous Australian artists such as Fiona Foley and Richard Bell, augmented by the presence of respected local artists such as Noel Doyle, Vernon Ah Kee and Bianca Beeton. Each is affiliated to the unit in varying capacities to provide crucial teaching and mentoring, confidence building and professional opportunities for students attending the unit. Students also utilise many other resources within Griffith University.

We are proud of the significant national contribution of artists identifying as Indigenous who attended or are still involved with Queensland College of Art, such as Tracey Moffatt, Gordon Bennett, and Dennis Nona. Here it is important to note the range of options available to students from Indigenous cultural backgrounds. Students can enrol in the BCAIA program specifically designed for Indigenous persons, or elect to study in 'mainstream' courses such as the Bachelor of Fine Arts or Bachelor of Photography or Bachelor of Design. They may also undertake higher degrees, both on a course-work and research basis. Indigenous students have completed both Masters and Doctoral degrees through the Queensland College of Art.

All of these courses provide Indigenous artists with the opportunity to survey the range of contemporary media and studio techniques available and to upgrade and extend their own skills. They are also introduced to strategic approaches regarding the potential funding, production, promotion and marketing of their artistic output within the industrial and

market environment.

Queensland College of Art also interacts with the sector via the development and management of significant travelling exhibitions, featuring Indigenous art, often entailing original research and the production of supporting publications. These exhibitions tour to Indigenous communities and regional areas (e.g. Cairns, Rockhampton, Torres Strait), galleries in major city centres (such as Sydney, Melbourne and Adelaide), and international venues (via collaboration with networks in Germany, Japan and USA). Significant public events, such as artist talks, workshops, symposia and gallery tours are an everyday part of encouraging wider student and public interaction with Indigenous art and cultures.

Successful outcomes for graduates come not only in the form of traditional non-Indigenous measures of success, but also in the achievement of personal, family and community milestones, and in increased understanding of cultural values. Those associated with CAIA typically report enhanced notions of personal identity and an awareness of community health matters. Indigenous graduates of the Queensland College of Art have developed individual exhibiting practices, become community arts workers, and undertaken placements as curatorial interns in major institutions such as Queensland Art Gallery. We believe that positive benefits have also accrued to those Indigenous Queensland College of Art students who have not completed their programs of study.

Challenges

The fact that teaching and research departments like BVCAIA at Griffith do not exist within other Australian universities is significant. The truth is that Griffith faces many challenges in recruiting, supporting and graduating Indigenous students. We believe that the two major areas of concern are:

- Issues to do with enabling and diploma courses, and decreasing Indigenous enrolments generally across the TAFE sector.
- Economic factors affecting indigenous students.

Living allowances and financial pressure are also the major reasons for students' attrition once they are the system. Jennifer Herd, BCAIA Convenor, has found that social and cultural issues, including isolation from home communities, are compounded by the difficulty of financial survival, manifest in the constant need to find work in order to cover the cost of living during study. This situation has worsened with variations to financial aid options, and with changes to ABSTUDY entitlements for potential and current students. Indigenous students often come from financially straightened family circumstances, and therefore are not able to rely of the same levels of support as some other student cohorts.

We suggest that the Inquiry consider the observations of the ***Review Into the Impact of ABSTUDY Policy Changes***, initiated by minister Dr Brendan Nelson, in March 2004, viz:
...it is possible that the ABSTUDY changes played a contributing role in continuing weakness in enrolments through apprehensions in the Indigenous community, delayed responses to reductions in the real value of the ABSTUDY living allowance, and problems in service delivery.

The AVCC Submission to the Review into the ***Impact of ABSTUDY Policy Changes that Came into Effect in 2000*** (February 2005) provides a useful analysis of the

ABSTUDY changes and the decline in Indigenous enrolments from the university perspective. It concludes, in brief, that the set of circumstances in play was complex and downplays the direct impact of ABSTUDY changes, arguing that the decline in enabling and diploma courses was a more decisive factor. This submission does however state unequivocally that "The evidence from university practitioners with first hand knowledge of Indigenous higher education issues suggests that change to ABSTUDY was one of a range of factors at work." This accords with our own observations. Students on ABSTUDY reported that after the changes life got harder. A number also commented that they changed to AUSTUDY because they felt less harassed in maintaining their entitlement.

Remote Areas

Substantial educational opportunities for Indigenous arts workers in Queensland are located only in Brisbane and Cairns. At the other end of the scale, there are minimal professional development and arts training opportunities available to Indigenous visual arts and crafts workers in remote locations such as Far North Queensland and Western Queensland. Any training that does take place in remote locations is usually severely under-resourced.

Queensland College of Art staff, students and graduates would like to be in a position to form stronger linkages and undertake outreach activities in conjunction with art centres such as UMI Arts, West Cape Cultural Centre, and Yalga Binbi Cultural Centre. Organisations such as QIAMEA, Arts Queensland and Queensland Museum and Gallery Services could all usefully contribute to such a network. This could also provide a useful means of empowering students who might then go on to undertake TAFE and university level study.

Recommendations

We offer five recommendations regarding matters in relation to the sector generally and our concerns regarding scholarship and other living allowance mechanisms for indigenous students. We suggest:

[1] Consideration by the Inquiry of *Arts, Business, Culture. A Research Report on an Indigenous Cultural Industry in Queensland (1997)*, commissioned by Arts Queensland. The broad range of proposals in this report still seem relevant and urgent.

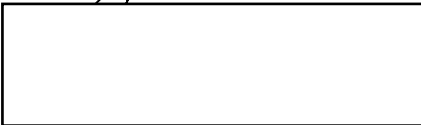
[2] Consideration by the Inquiry of the recently conducted *UMI Arts Ltd Consultancy Report*, commissioned by the Board of UMI Arts Ltd. This report has not yet to be made public, but as far as we are aware it is the most recent and comprehensive report into the current circumstances affecting Far North Queensland Indigenous arts practitioners. If it is possible to do so there may be value in disseminating this document to prompt discussion among public policy and arts industry workers.

[3] Re-examination of the decline in the number and value of ABSTUDY grants, and of related scholarship entitlements, with a view to recommending the prioritising of support for increased numbers of scholarships (at a reasonable monetary level) to students in the Indigenous Visual Arts and Craft sector.

[4] Consideration of the range of scholarships and traineeships available for visual art and craft focussed students attending *proven* institutions such as QCA, Tropical North Queensland Institute of TAFE and South Bank Institute of Technology (Brisbane).

[5] Determination of funding sources for temporary residency projects which would allow Queensland College of Art and similar entities to offer workshops, classes and coaching for remote-area Indigenous visual arts and crafts workers.

Yours faithfully



Ian O'Connor
Vice Chancellor and President