

29 April 2021

Submission on the Indigenous Voice Co-Design Process Interim Report

Diversity Arts Australia welcomes this opportunity to contribute to the Indigenous Voice Co-Design Process.

Diversity Arts Australia is the peak national organisation for ethno-cultural and migrant racial equity in the arts and creative sectors. Diversity Arts, based on Darug land (Western Sydney, NSW), works to build a creative sector that reflects Australia's cultural, linguistic and social diversity and believes creative expression is a fundamental human right, which strengthens and connects communities.

Diversity Arts combines service provision — resources, events, research, training — with creative production. We act as a broker between artists, industry, educators and government, and commission content from artists that articulates key issues and showcases leading practice. While our focus is on cultural and linguistic diversity in the immigrant and refugee settler space, we work intersectionality and in solidarity and partnership with First Nations artists, communities and organisations.

The importance of the Uluru Statement from the Heart

The Uluru Statement from the Heart is an invitation from Australia's First Nations leaders and representatives to build a better future together. It outlines a roadmap for truth, treaty and a First Nations voice in our decision-making that offers both powerful symbolic change and practical tools to address the long-term, systemic and ongoing wrongs and harms of colonisation and dispossession.

The Uluru Statement offers a generous invitation to share in the world's oldest living continuing culture as a "gift to their country" and to take clear steps towards a "fair and truthful relationship" with the people of Australia.

The Uluru Statement from the Heart provides leadership and direction, informed by many First Nations peoples and voices. It is innovative. It is visionary. It is practical. It is an example of transformative democracy through civic engagement.

Diversity Arts welcomes this invitation and supports the call for First Nations-led processes of truth-telling and agreement-making. We see a powerful role for arts and culture in this process and will work to see the principles of Makarrata realised in the cultural life of immigrant and refugee settler communities.

The importance for Indigenous people to have a say in the matters that affect them

Diversity Arts Australia supports the principle of “First Nations First”. In our racial equity work we are guided and strengthened by the leadership of Indigenous thinkers, artists and educators. A constitutionally enshrined Voice would provide invaluable advice on cultural policy formulation and the best ways to support cultural leadership and participation for First Nations leaders, practitioners and audiences in Australia’s arts and cultural industries. National, Local and Regional Voices would inform our approaches and practices, and improve our capacity to work collaboratively with First Nations communities - drawing on the leadership, advice and practice models of these new structures to further creative exchanges and capability-building partnerships in the work we do across Australia.

We know that First Nations artists and audiences are great participants in Australia’s arts and cultural life [Australia Council National Arts Participation Survey 2020] - and comprise many of Australia’s most significant and globally recognised visual artists, performers, musicians, filmmakers and writers. In our work, we have found that culturally diverse artists, creatives and organisations actively engage, collaborate and support First Nations artists and communities as part of their practice and programs. However, indicative research suggests that First Nations people remain underrepresented in leadership and decision-making positions in Australia’s cultural industries [Diversity Arts Australia, Shifting the Balance 2019]. It is vital that First Nations perspectives lead and inform decisions to ensure that the work of our cultural institutions and commercial practices reflect appropriate protocols, intellectual property ownership and moral authority for First Nations artists, communities and audiences. We believe clearly articulated sovereignty and governance principles as integral to achieving these aims.

We must foreground First Nations rights, stories and histories, without erasing or appropriating the diversity of First Nations perspectives and voices.

More broadly, Diversity Arts Australia recognises the need for a cultural reckoning around how we are governed and whose voices are heard in decision-making and legislative development, especially regarding decisions that affect the lives of Australia’s First Peoples.

To address both historic and current systemic inequities in the legal and legislative instruments of the State, we must build new accountabilities into our governance, policy development and implementation processes. To achieve social and political justice that has tangible outcomes, First Nations people must be in a position to take leadership on the laws, policies and services that impact them, their communities and their lives.

A Voice to Parliament in the Constitution

First Nations voices are fundamental to our national story. These voices must be valued, promoted and acted on to ensure they are heard for generations to come. We believe a Voice to Parliament would make a difference in the lives of First Nations community members by leading to more robust conversations and tangible actions that work towards equity, inclusion and justice at an institutional level. Diversity Arts Australia supports a membership model for the National Voice that includes equity measures, and ensures previously unheard Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have the same chance of being selected as established leadership figures.

The Uluru Statement from the Heart places faith in the Australian nation and its public institutions to work towards constitutional and legislative changes. We support moves where First Nations people are able to exercise full agency and sovereign control over their lives so they have the power and resources to make meaningful changes not only in their own lives and communities, but to the collective future of the nation.

The ongoing and intergenerational impacts of colonisation, genocide and dispossession are all too evident in the continued disproportionate incarceration of young First Nations people, the high rate of deaths of First Nations people in custody, poorer educational outcomes and the ongoing health crisis in First Nations communities. A Voice to Parliament enshrined in the Constitution provides a practical and forward-looking mechanism to begin to address the “torment of powerlessness” that the Uluru statement identifies at the heart of these issues. It formally recognises the critical leadership and authority of First Nations peoples to self-determine structures of governance, institutional frameworks and processes of engagement that shape their everyday lives and opportunities.

The Government should make a formal commitment to a referendum once a model for the Voice has been settled to ensure that a First Nations Voice to Parliament is protected by the Constitution. We strongly support an Indigenous Voice enshrined in the Constitution. It is vital to go beyond symbolism to ensure that Australia’s governing structures are informed by First Nations perspectives, advice and leadership.

The principle of self-determination is the most fundamental of human rights. Only when collective self-determination for First Nations people is a reality and embodied in principle, practice and law, can we move forward with moral authority, greater equity and shared ownership of our common future.

With treaty and truth, and the insights of First Nations perspectives in a constitutionally enshrined voice, all Australians will benefit from the extraordinary gift of First Nations diverse living cultural forms and expressions.