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Studio A response to National Employment Disability Strategy Consultation Paper

Studio A is grateful for the opportunity to comment on the *National Disability Employment Strategy Consultation Paper* April 2021.

Studio A is a social enterprise, based in Sydney, that provides professional pathways for artists with intellectual disability. Studio A's mission is to tackle barriers faced by artists with intellectual disability to earn income from professional art practice and pursue sustainable creative industry careers. Works by artists with disability are largely absent in our cultural collections. The Australian Government's Arts Funding and Advisory agency, the Australia Council says *"Almost 1 in 5 Australians live with disability. Yet Australia's diversity is not fully reflected in our arts. Artists with disability...continue to be underrepresented"* (Australia Council Corporate Plan, 2019-23)



Mathew Calandra and Meagan Pelham working on Studio A's 'Love owls and mermaids singing in the rainbow pop' mural commissioned by The Art Gallery of NSW for Archie Plus, 2020. Image by Diana Panuccio/AGNSW.

Through highly tailored support programs, Studio A artists are valued, visible and earn income from their creative practice: achieving professional artistic status. Studio A artists' intellectual disability include autism, Down syndrome and developmental delay. By leveraging support from State and Federal governments, foundations and donors, Studio A tackles the social and employment barriers they face: lack of access to education, training and limited work opportunities.

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Founded in 2016, Studio A's initial strategy was to test the commercial viability of its creative services and artists' capacity to perform as professional artists. Between 2017-2021 Studio A demonstrated:

- Artists flourish and deliver as professionals when provided with the right support systems
- Strong markets exist for artwork produced by artists with intellectual disability, driving commercial income, for example:
 - A number of Australia's leading corporations have developed relationships with Studio A, forging opportunities for artists to earn income and engage with staff. These include Westpac; LendLease; Stockland; Liberty Special Markets.
 - Australia's major cultural institutions commission work from Studio A: Art Gallery of NSW; Australian National Maritime Museum; Carriageworks; enriching Australia's cultural life whilst generating fees for artists
 - Merchandise partnerships and licencing arrangements with design companies have resulted in a range of attractive design products, including being named by Time Out magazine as Number 1 ethical souvenir in 2019.

Delivering to these markets and these projects generates significant creative income and profile for Studio A artists. It provides a sense of purpose, the opportunity to contribute (very publicly) to society and offers an important sense of connection and community.

This is evidenced by Studio A's FY20 Impact Assessment:

- 97% increase in artists sales from FY19
- 14 partnerships with leading arts and design organisations
- Artists created over 1,000 sq metres of public art in high-profile locations commissioned by major clients (Lendlease, Stockland, City of Sydney, Westconnex)
- Artists work featured in 11 major exhibitions including in the Archibald Prize Finalist Exhibition at the Art Gallery of NSW.
- 90% of Studio A artists reported having a bigger circle of friends and feeling more positive about the future through being part of Studio A.

The *2019 National Arts Participation Survey* (Australia Council, 2020) found that Australians with intellectual disability are highly creative and strongly engaged as creators of arts and culture. Yet, despite growing audience appetite - and market - for work from diverse perspectives: such as from people with intellectual disability, these artists are underrepresented in Australia's cultural life. According to *ABS 2018 Disability and the Labour Force*, 68% of people with intellectual disability are not in the labour force. Those in work are more likely to be employed as labourers compared to people without disabilities.

For people with intellectual disability with creative talent and drive, economic participation in the arts sector is a viable pathway, and are increasingly operating in professional contexts. However, limiting perceptions around the professional capacity of artists with disability still dominate.

There is a continuing need to actively position successful professionals with intellectual disability as leaders and foster opportunities for practice in the arts for people with intellectual disability.

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Studio A are excelling in creative leadership outcomes and professional opportunities we secure for artists. This was captured in the 2018 ABC Iview documentary series featuring 6 Studio A artists: <https://iview.abc.net.au/show/art-bites-studio-a>. In 2020 artist Emily Crockford was an Archibald Finalist and Art Gallery NSW commissioned seven Studio A artists to create 300 sqm mural in their grand Entrance Court. In 2019/20 all Studio A artists earned income as artists.



Emily Crockford alongside her mural 'Oysters Eating Rainbows' in the Karingal Underpass, Kingsgrove. Commissioned by Westconnex for their Public Art Program, Canal to Creek. Image by Document Photography.

Specific Comment on the Consultation Paper

Studio A was delighted to see the front cover of the Consultation Paper (the Paper) feature the work of an artist with disability, Robin Warren, and how his artwork flows through the design of the paper. This clearly demonstrates how the work of artists with disability can energise and enliven places and things - including government documents. It will hopefully encourage further commissioning of artists with disability.

Studio A is providing comments on the following questions posed by the Paper.

- Are there barriers or concerns for jobseekers with disability not covered in this consultation paper?
- Are there barriers or concerns for employers not covered in this consultation paper?
- Feedback on the proposed vision or priority areas.

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Addressing opportunities in “non-standard employment”

The Paper’s introduction references the “changing nature of work...the definition of an employee is changing and non-standard employment is becoming more prevalent (eg gig economy, self-employment, freelance etc)”. This is also mentioned at a few points within the paper.

However, the main focus of the paper, with its proposed strategies and actions, is traditional “job” employment. This is understandable, the employment system can be tackled systematically (ie skilling people, educating employers). It is also a system that typically offers greater security and embedded benefits sought by many people.

Yet, there are valuable outcomes that can be achieved by careful targeting and support programs for people with disability to **generate self-employment or operate freelance**.

Artists are a subset of the broader group of self-employed and freelance workers. Studio A believes the essential requirements for a sustainable professional career as an artist are the same for the growing freelance opportunities offered in the contemporary Australian economy:

- Developing solid skills in your chosen field (eg graphic art, painting)
- Access to affordable space to create/operate from (studio space)
- Funds to purchase/access to the necessary tools and equipment (computers, paints)
- Growth through continual learning and development
- Understanding your market
- Marketing your work and yourself
- Selling your work
- Operating a small business (contracting, invoicing, financials, insurances, taxes)
- Securing commissions/gigs/engagements
- Protecting and exercising your intellectual property

This list identifies the gaps and barriers people with disability face in operating effectively in “non-standard” employment. Without these skills, knowledge, spaces and tools or access to them provided especially for you, it would be almost impossible to build a sustainable career or vocation.

Every day Studio A supports artists with intellectual disability to grow their creative practice and generate income, that is to operate freelance. Studio A’s experience has shown that there is a strong market for the work of artists with intellectual disability, and with the right support this market will deliver income, profile and purpose for artists. It has built and brokered many income-generating opportunities and commercial demand for Studio A artists through our growing partnerships with major cultural institutions and corporate supporters. These catalyse the economic and visibility impact of Studio A artists.

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The Strategy's Priorities could be enlarged to include:

- Building the capacity, skills and confidence of people with disability to operate in freelance, self-employment capacities (“non-standard” employment) and
- Encourage and motivate the market to procure and commission works and services from people with disability through, for example, inclusive procurement policies, practice and platforms (particularly by government); case studies, tools and information.



Meagan Pelham modelling a fashion collection featuring her artwork, created in collaboration with Australian fashion house Romance Was Born. Images by Tanja Bruckner.

Person Centred Approach

Studio A wholeheartedly supports the person centred approach referred to in the Paper: “The disability employment support system must shift focus more on jobseekers as individuals, taking into account their strengths, ability, rights and aspirations.”

As a supported studio, Studio A exists so artists with intellectual disability can thrive and achieve their creative and economic aspirations. It is driven by the explicit goals of the artists it supports. Each artist has evolving professional goals. Every year artists formally identify their artistic and personal goals, determining their support from Studio A: fully controlling what they create and how they grow.

Success as a professional artist involves much more than making art work. You need to digitally document work, prepare a CV, write exhibition and grant submissions and actively market yourself. When successful you need to understand legal agreements, prepare and manage invoices and promote your success.

If you cannot manage these activities due to an intellectual disability, you are locked out.

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To highlight this we refer to the example of one Studio A artist, who is supported by Studio A because they have Down syndrome. This artist struggles with literacy, independent travel and living: Does not email, cannot negotiate artist agreements nor grant applications. The artist gets overwhelmed by administrative information. When interviewed - for example - by journalists they can reply 'I can't think in my head'.

Artists with intellectual disability are particularly vulnerable to exploitation. Most Studio A artists would accept \$20 for an artwork worth \$2000.

These artists' disability make administrative, legal and marketing activities a major obstacle. Studio A supports artists in all these areas.

In 2019/20 all Studio A artists earned income as artists. They now relish the challenge of painting giant murals at Art Gallery NSW, being commissioned to paint a highly personal portrait, or creating a graphic novel. They win awards, deliver major public art projects and feature in TEDxSydney and ABC documentaries.

Careers have sky-rocketed. Emily Crockford was selected in 2020 as an Archibald Prize Finalist and awarded the National Arts and Disability Award. Meagan Pelham's designs are sold in an exclusive collection of fashion house, Romance Was Born. Thom Robert's work was exhibited in the prestigious "The National" exhibition 2019, that showcased 70 of the most exciting contemporary artists. Collaborative works by Studio A artists were displayed on giant hoardings in more than a dozen locations across the City of Sydney; in the major public area of the recently opened UTS Central (University of Technology, Sydney); and in a huge mural on the grand wall in the Entrance Court of the Art Gallery of NSW welcoming audiences to the Gallery.

It is through this deeply personal-centred approach and support that this is achieved. This is a successful model.

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