

Regional Arts And Social Impact
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CASE STUDY

DRESS THE CENTRAL WEST

The Regional Arts and Social Impact research project

The Role of the Creative Arts in Regional Australia: A Social Impact Model is an Australian Research Council Linkage Project which addresses the challenge to effectively target regional arts funding to programs and activities that build capacity and have lasting impact for end-users. It delivers a framework for evaluating the arts, to argue for the arts to be included in a broader understanding of community and national wellbeing and success. This framework will position Australia as an international leader in articulating and responding to the social impact of the arts.

The project is being delivered in the remote and geographically dispersed regions of Central Western Queensland and the Northwest Corridor of Tasmania. Both communities have active and unique arts ecosystems while also experiencing significant economic disadvantage and social isolation. The Central Western Queensland site comprises seven local government areas and has the highest rate of youth unemployment in the country at 28.4%. Burnie in Northwest Tasmania is a recognised area of social disadvantage, with 45% of young people not completing high school. Both communities are much more than these statistics, and their capacity and challenges are reflected throughout much of regional and remote Australia.

The following case study from Central Western Queensland exemplifies the role of art, culture and creativity for supporting social impacts including collective wellbeing, pride and hope. It demonstrates the interconnections and interdependencies between the social, cultural and economic outcomes of arts and culture in remote communities, and the potential for place-based creativity to achieve lasting impact across these three domains.

Case study: Dress the Central West



Woollen garment created by community members for Dress the Central West 2019. Photograph supplied by Red Ridge Interior Queensland.

Dress the Central West is a wearable art project and community event which responded to the social and economic impacts of long-term drought. Produced by non-profit arts organisation Red Ridge Interior Queensland, Dress the Central West combined participatory art and craft elements, First Nations art and storytelling, and community performances to produce a professional and high-profile performative work which brought people together to celebrate the beauty of their community and landscape during a time of shared hardship. The project began in early 2019 as a series of wearable art workshops facilitated in towns throughout the central western Queensland region, and centred on the theme 'beauty within the drought'. Guided and mentored by Brisbane-based artist and designer Claudia Williams, participants created garments from local and "found" materials – such as sheep's wool, stock feed bags, twine, tree bark and feathers – to represent their region's agricultural industries, landscapes, and many stories. The project culminated in fashion parades and gala events held in Blackall and Longreach in June 2019.

Dress the Central West attracted local and state media attention, and the garments have since been modelled and displayed at other events across the state, including state regional arts conference

Arts Ablaze in October 2019, and an exhibition at the State Library of Queensland in Brisbane in February 2020. The project has inspired and enabled a number of other high-impact initiatives throughout the community, including First Nations fashion label *Red Ridge the Label* which now sells internationally, and the performative work *Matya*, which is another case study of this project. This case study was informed by individual interviews, field observations during site visits to central western Queensland in 2019 and 2020, and analysis of mainstream media coverage of the project. The following discussion focusses on the significant economic and social impacts of Dress the Central West, and the deeply collaborative and participatory processes which supported these outcomes and legacy.

Collaboration and collective success

Red Ridge Interior Queensland (www.redridgeinteriorqueensland.com) is a small social-impact arts organisation based in the remote town of Blackall, a sheep and cattle producing community 1,000 kilometres north west of Brisbane. All of Red Ridge's projects and initiatives respond explicitly to community-identified needs and embrace art, culture and creativity as critical tools and local assets for addressing challenges and supporting central west communities to thrive. Red Ridge developed the idea for Dress the Central West through collaborative processes of consultation and co-design to determine the most immediate needs of community members, and the most desirable outcomes for the project. An interviewee described that "at the end of the day what you really want to achieve is buried in your project. The project's not what you want to achieve, it's the things inside the project that you want to achieve and the project just becomes the vehicle" (interviewee CWQ004). Opportunities for skills development, intergenerational connections and collaborations, music and performance, and building young women's self-confidence and deportment were amongst the community's identified priorities (ibid.). The community were also acutely affected by long-term drought and wanted an activity and event that brought people together, generated feelings of hope and pride, and fostered wellbeing during a time of extreme adversity. Dress the Central West was developed around these needs and objectives and continued to evolve through ongoing community conversations in order to achieve them.

Rich networks, formal and informal relationships, and sustained collaborations within and beyond the arts and cultural sector are critical to the design and delivery of arts and cultural programs and activities in rural, regional and remote communities.

Small arts organisations in rural, regional and remote Australia recognise their work as intensely collaborative and inherently intersectoral (Gattenhof et al. 2021, 74). Red Ridge, for example, collaborated with multiple local service providers including neighbourhood centres, healthcare and employment services, local government, non-profit organisation Central West Aboriginal Corporation, local businesses and individuals to deliver the project. An interviewee described:

It's the network of people, community, family, friends, industries, other service providers. That was a classic example with Dress the Central West. We had no money to start with and the project just kept growing and growing ... we had no idea how we were going to fund it. But all of a sudden people would say, 'okay I've got a spare X amount and I can support it with this' and we were just able to work with that network to make it succeed (interviewee CWQ004).

The organisation secured funding through philanthropic bodies Tim Fairfax Family Foundation and the Foundation for Rural and Regional Renewal (FRRR), and state government funding for arts and culture.

Red Ridge's intersectoral and inclusive approach provided multiple and various avenues for individuals and organisations to become involved in and connect with the project. For instance, Central West Aboriginal Corporation became a key project partner and collaborator throughout the project, leading the design and making of garments with First Nations community members to depict culture and stories. For example, the Sun Woman dress drew upon a Bidjara Dreaming story of the Sun Woman being pursued across the sky by the Moon Man. The dress was modelled by a local First Nations woman at the gala events in June 2019 and was displayed as part of the State Library of Queensland's *Spoken: celebrating Queensland languages* exhibition in 2020.



The Sun Woman dress was featured on the cover of Junkies magazine in October 2019.

Over several months, more than 40 wearable art workshops were held in the towns of Winton, Longreach, Barcaldine and Blackall. While these workshops were mostly attended by adult women, the gala events which concluded the project involved a greater diversity of the community. Held in Blackall and Longreach on May 30th and June 1st 2019, these events involved 110 volunteers, 34 models, 34 dancers, 10 makeup artists and four hair stylists (Red Ridge Interior Queensland 2019). Men participating in the Work for the Dole program and local work camp built the production set and stage, while young First Nations women modelled the garments on the catwalk. Men ushered audiences and managed the bar, and community groups provided catering at the events (interviewee CWQ009). Each gala event showcased 33 individual garments and drew audiences of over 300 people from towns and outlying sheep and cattle stations.

Noting the small population sizes of central western towns, participation and engagement with Dress the Central West was significant. The project prioritised authentic community engagement, participation, and supported local individuals and groups to emerge as leaders. Through their involvement in and contributions to the project, community members and groups such as Central West Aboriginal Corporation were positioned to feel a great deal of ownership and pride towards the project, and success was framed as a shared achievement and experience:

It's the community's project. Success is not for one person, success is for a whole heap of people and things only grow and succeed if everybody's involved. Dress the Central West wasn't just [Red Ridge], it was the Central West Aboriginal Corporation. But it was based on respect, on confidence, on relationships, networks, and on supporting each other. I think that is the model of Dress the Central West. We had four towns working on the project separately, then we came together as a whole region (interviewee CWQ004).

While media coverage of the gala events highlighted the beauty of the garments and the creativity and innovation of the groups and communities who had created them, there was an equally strong emphasis on how the project brought people together and facilitated community cohesion and supportive social relationships. The *Queensland Country Life*, for example, highlighted drought as a shared local burden and the project's aim to "find a way of helping people to reconnect with their communities, stories and culture after battling drought for six relentless years" (Cripps 2019).

Shared experiences of hardship, acknowledged and addressed through a collaborative creative project sustained by supportive relationships and trust, fostered feelings of pride and collective success.



Dress the Central West gala and fashion parade, Longreach, June 2019. Photographs supplied by Red Ridge Interior Queensland.

Creativity and community wellbeing

As an explicit response to both the social and economic impacts of widespread drought, Dress the Central West involved underserved cohorts and directly connected community members with physical and mental health services. Red Ridge collaborated with health service providers including the Royal Flying Doctor and Central West Hospital and Health Service Services, and the wearable art workshops became an avenue for clinicians to connect informally with community members. While health providers “wouldn’t get up with a screen and talk about mental health like that ... they’d be present at the community workshops, helping with the garments and having informal chit chat” with participants about their experiences of drought (interviewee CWQ009). Arts and cultural programs and activities are recognised as providing important avenues for overcoming inequalities of access to health services (APPGAHW 2017, 11; Sonke and Baxley 2016, 106; Sonke et al. 2019, 6). Such programs

reduce barriers to healthcare by connecting people to systems, services, and community members. In fact, the arts are uniquely positioned to create a neutral hub across which seemingly disparate groups of people can come together to create solutions to accessing health and human services (Sonke and Baxley 2016, 106).

Art and culture support collaboration and partnerships between otherwise unconnected cohorts, organisations and sectors – such as arts organisations and health services. They can make health and care environments more humane, less threatening, and provide a sense of hope and connection (Sonke and Baxley 2016, 106).

While many people attending the wearable art workshops may have been reluctant to attend formal information sessions about mental health, the creative and hands-on workshops seemed to provide spaces that were safer and more inclusive for health conversations. Creative workshops were acknowledged as “a good way to get your message out there ... When you’re sitting and you’re painting you’re just chatting – it’s not like I’m talking to you about your mental health. When they say art therapy is the best, we’ve proven that” (interviewee CWQ011).

Participants and stakeholders made explicit links between involvement in Dress the Central West and both personal and collective wellbeing. One workshop participant told the *Queensland Country Life* newspaper:

When I first saw the workshops advertised, I thought what the heck I might just go along and give it a go, not really being a self-confessed creative person or understanding the concept of the whole project ... I just needed an out from the daily grind of living through the drought, the monotonous load of caring for our property's stock and my family. I just fell in love with the project, amazed at what 'us' as a community were creating, and just wanted to keep coming along (Cripps, 1 June 2019).

Participation in arts and cultural activities provide opportunities for developing a sense of belonging with others (Ennis and Tonkin 2017, 346), for making sense of and expressing experiences (Lee et al. 2020, 109; Saavedra et al. 2018, 910), and for co-creating shared meanings (Marsh 2015, 312). For participants of the wearable art workshops, an “escape” which provided connection with others and fostered feelings of shared pride were key wellbeing outcomes. An interviewee summarised “you just think you’re coming to a workshop and think ‘yes I’d like to do this’, but to see the knock-on effect – it’s really quite empowering, especially in the middle of drought. Drought affects everyone, whether you’re on a property or in town” (CWQ010). The workshop series, completed garments,

and final gala event provided participants with an opportunity to gather for a positive occasion and experience a sense of pride which was both personal and collective in nature.



Arts Queensland Facebook post, November 2019.

Dress the Central West was described as having significant individual outcomes for the First Nations young women who modelled the completed garments in the catwalk parade and gala event. First Nations interviewees described four young people who had struggled with self-esteem and self-image and for whom involvement in Dress the Central West has had a lasting positive impact on their self-confidence (interviewee CWQ010; interviewee CWQ011). Similar anecdotes were related by other interviewees who described individual outcomes that were deeply personal, and perhaps only visible to those who belong to the community. For example, “[y]ou see the impact in people, you saw who they were a week ago to who they are through the impact of their engagement in the project. The whole community will tell you it has changed that person’s life” (interviewee CWQ004).

While such outcomes are individual and personal, they connect strongly with collective outcomes and experiences. For instance, increased individual self-esteem was attributed to collaborating with others to deliver the project, and positive effects extended beyond those directly involved in the project to include participants’ family members and

audiences (interviewee CWQ009). The large volume of social and mainstream media reportage on the workshops, gala events and legacy projects evidences the widespread interest in and enthusiasm for Dress the Central West across the region and state. The project has featured on six mainstream media platforms¹ and in several special-interest magazines and blogs². An interviewee identified the key outcomes they perceived from the project stating “just so much community pride on so many levels, whether you were the creator, or the person on the runway, or you got to watch the show. It just really connected with the community” (ibid.). Quality arts and cultural programs that are sensitive to local contexts and relevant and appropriate for distinct populations are those which are most likely to enhance wellbeing and produce positive health outcomes for individuals and communities (Ings et al. 2012, 18; APPGAHW 2017, 70). As a project designed to directly respond to community-identified needs and showcase and celebrate local stories and cultures, Dress the Central West supported wellbeing across personal, social and cultural dimensions.

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¹ ABC Western Queensland (radio); Beaudesert Times (print and digital); The Weekly Times (print and digital); Queensland Country Life (print and digital); Rural Weekly (print); Rural Queensland Today (radio).

² Junkies magazine, October 2019; Visit Scenic Rim, October 2019; Arts Queensland, October 2019; State Library of Queensland, November 2019.

Economic outcomes

In remote communities, the social and cultural impacts of arts and culture are often inextricably linked to economic outcomes for individuals and communities (Bartleet et al. 2019, 164). In addition to supporting significant wellbeing outcomes, Dress the Central West leveraged and “nurtured” people’s skills and creative capacities and created paid employment opportunities for local professionals (interviewee CWQ004). The observations of interviewees reflected scholarly literature showing that drought profoundly affects the social and economic character of places through reduced consumption expenditure in local towns, and increased mobility as residents relocate in search of work (Edwards et al. 2009, 119). Responding to such challenges, Dress the Central West drew on and enhanced the skills of local hairdressers and make-up artists instead of flying professionals into the community from elsewhere. Employing local people was an important part of the project’s impact for those individuals, which had ripple effects within the broader community. For one hairdresser,



Preparing for the Dress the Central West fashion parade at Arts Ablaze, Kooralbyn, October 2019. Photograph supplied by Red Ridge Interior Queensland.

when we gave her this project she got so much magic out of it. She was so re-energised that she could see hair is not just for a salon but hair is for theatre, for performance ... she loved the challenge of it and it reconnected her back to her professional career ... And I think for our communities that is the impact: you’re recognising and using local [talent] and nurturing and building that capacity, and you’re offering them new opportunities (interviewee CWQ004).

This anecdote highlights economic and social, personal and communal outcomes. Through providing an avenue for hairdressers, makeup

artists and models to extend their skillsets and represent themselves to their community as diversely skilled professionals the project stimulated career satisfaction and personal pride. These personal outcomes also have public impact as new challenges, employment and self-esteem building opportunities were a means of stemming the outflux of young professionals in the region.

Legacy

Dress the Central West laid the foundation for a variety of new opportunities, community events and high-profile initiatives, particularly for First Nations artists and community members and artists. Following the success of the wearable art workshops and gala events, Red Ridge worked with community members to explore further opportunities to depict local stories and cultures through fashion. First Nations Elders and artists Anpanuwa Joyce and Aulpunda Jean Crombie from Birdsville, Queensland, collaborated with Red Ridge to depict their art on textiles for inclusion in the Global Indigenous Runway Project at Melbourne Fashion Festival in March 2020. Inclusion and recognition of central western Queensland art, culture and stories in a major national event generated personal pride for the artists and important outcomes First Nations young people who saw that personal dreams and success could be achieved at any age (interviewee CWQ004). Further, as articulated by an interviewee in northwest Tasmania, “there’s not a huge diversity of different jobs that young women in a highly agricultural and industrial area are seeing as ways of living their future” (interviewee B003). Strong local leaders and role models are critical for expanding young people’s visions of the kinds of careers and futures that are possible.

Red Ridge and Joyce and Jean Crombie built on the success of Melbourne Fashion Festival to launch First Nations fashion label *Red Ridge the Label* (<https://www.redridgethelabel.com.au/>) in May 2021. The prints and garments are designed by the artists and produced in Blackall by local small businesses. The artists highlight cultural maintenance and transmission as critical functions and values of the label:

this is our way of teaching the younger generation. They learn from us. Our language is our art ... To have these stories on different materials, and even a catwalk, means so much to us. We are telling our stories through our artwork and these dresses – that is a first for us. If we don't pass our culture on to our young ones we will lose it (Red Ridge the Label 2021).

Art and creativity play an important role in maintaining traditions and practices unique to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples (Linderman et al. 2017; Jones and Birdsall-Jones 2014). Aboriginal arts centres, for example, are important sites of cultural and identity maintenance, and places of learning, care, work and income (Jones and Birdsall-Jones 2014, 302). Such functions are also evident in *Red Ridge the Label* which, for the artists, is a way of keeping culture and stories alive.



Red Ridge the Label: <https://www.redridgethelabel.com.au/pages/about>

Red Ridge the Label sells around Australia and internationally and has been included in state and national events including Brisbane Fashion Month and the Women of the World (WOW) Festival. In addition to significant cultural and economic outcomes, *Red Ridge the Label* contributes importantly to place identity by giving “local heritage a public viewing. People all over the world are getting an insight to what we have to offer ... it is part of us and it’s what we do and whether tourists come and appreciate it or not we’re going to continue doing it because it is us” (interviewee CWQ008).

Read more about Dress the Central West

Blog post: Celebrating Aboriginal stories and culture through fashion and performance, *Regional Arts and Social Impact blog*, 3 June 2021. <https://research.qut.edu.au/raasi/2021/06/03/celebrating-aboriginal-stories-and-culture-through-fashion-and-performance/>

Journal article: Mackay, S., Klæbe, H., Hancox, D., & Gattenhof, S. (2021). Understanding the value of the creative arts: place-based perspectives from regional Australia. *Cultural Trends*, 1-18. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/09548963.2021.1889343?journalCode=ccut20>

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