

THINK TANK



MAKE IT HAPPEN HQ



BREAKING BARRIERS, NOT JUST GROUND

MARCH 2025

A BLUEPRINT FOR INCLUSIVE
INNOVATION IN WESTERN AUSTRALIA

RESPONSE TO REPORT 43 "BREAKING NEW GROUND:
INNOVATION IN WESTERN AUSTRALIA"

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Introduction:

Make It Happen HQ is at the epicenter of insights unique to First Nations innovation and the experiences of the First Innovators. First Nations Entrepreneurs Cara and Adele Peek co-founded Make It Happen HQ Innovation Hub and Think Tank, based in Broome Western Australia. The only one of it's kind in the Nation. Make It Happen HQ deliver programs across regional, remote, rural, and urban centers, with international connections and partnerships.

Acutely aware of the barriers faced by people in these communities, Make It Happen HQ has identified several critical oversights in the Inquiry into innovation in WA and the subsequent report "Breaking New Ground: Innovation in Western Australia", by the Standing Committee on Public Administration. Whilst this report is centred on the West Australian Innovation Ecosystem, the barriers mentioned are applicable across the Australian innovation landscape. It therefore stands to reason the solutions would break barriers and ground across the nation subject to sufficient investment.

*SOCIAL AND CULTURAL INNOVATION,
PARTICULARLY WITHIN INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES,
PROVIDES OPPORTUNITIES FOR ECONOMIC GROWTH
THAT ALIGN WITH THE UNIQUE NEEDS AND VALUES
OF REGIONAL AREAS.*

Material Oversight:

1. Under-Resourcing of Regional Hubs:

The report acknowledges regional innovation but overlooks the chronic under-resourcing and lack of access to capital of key hubs in areas like Broome and Geraldton, due to the expectation to apply for mainstream grants against commercial, well established non-first Nation entities. These hubs serve as vital engines of local economies and innovation ecosystems but are hamstrung by insufficient access to venture capital networks, reliable broadband, and operational support. Strengthening these established hubs, rather than dispersing limited resources across new initiatives, would unlock the vast economic and social potential these communities have to offer. With strategic investment in existing hubs, Western Australia can fully realise the innovative capacity of regional and remote areas.

By addressing these needs—providing targeted investment in infrastructure, access to venture capital, and digital connectivity—the government can build on what has already been established, maximizing the impact of these communities without reinventing the wheel. This approach recognises and respects the grassroots efforts made by local leaders and specialists who, despite minimal resources, have driven forward innovation in these challenging environments.

2. Neglect of Non-STEM Innovation:

Innovation is not limited to STEM fields. In fact, cultural and social innovation, particularly within First Nations communities, represents a significant and often overlooked opportunity. These forms of innovation are not only culturally relevant but also contribute to economic growth and community well-being in regional areas. The report's overemphasis on STEM fails to capture the broader innovation landscape that includes social entrepreneurship, land stewardship, and community-driven projects—all of which generate measurable social return on investment (SROI) alongside financial ROI.

Recognizing the value of cultural and social innovation would diversify Western Australia's innovation portfolio, making room for unique region-specific innovations to flourish.

By supporting these forms of entrepreneurship, the government can build a more inclusive, dynamic innovation ecosystem that benefits all regions, not just urban centres. Which would undoubtedly lead to foreign trade and investment.

3. Venture Capital Accessibility:

Regional and Indigenous entrepreneurs face significant barriers to accessing venture capital, which remains heavily concentrated in Perth and even more so in Sydney and Melbourne. This isolation from financial networks stifles the potential of regional innovators, who often cannot access the critical funding needed to scale their businesses. The innovation pipeline in these areas is at risk of being underdeveloped simply because entrepreneurs lack the financial backing to turn their ideas into reality.

Bridging this gap by facilitating more equitable access to venture capital for regional and Indigenous entrepreneurs would unlock untapped potential across the state. Ensuring that financial resources are distributed more evenly will enable these innovators to thrive, bringing their groundbreaking ideas to market and contributing to a more robust, diverse economy.

4. Complicated Grant Processes:

The current grant application processes are complex and often prohibitively costly, particularly for regional innovators. The requirement for matching funds, coupled with the extensive bureaucracy involved, means that many under-resourced entrepreneurs are excluded from opportunities that could propel their projects forward. Moreover, many grant assessors lack the cultural understanding needed to evaluate regional and Indigenous projects accurately, leading to a disconnect between applicants' needs and the criteria for funding.

Simplifying the grant application process and removing the need for matching funds would create a fairer, more accessible system for regional entrepreneurs.

*ONE OF THE UNDER-REPRESENTED AREAS OF THE TECH AND START UP WORLD IN WA OTHER THAN **ABORIGINAL FOUNDERS** IS **FEMALE FOUNDERS** WHERE WE SHOULD HAVE A MUCH BIGGER, MORE THRIVING FEMALE-FOUNDED ECOSYSTEM THAN WE DO*

Additionally, mandating cultural intelligence training for grant assessors would ensure that projects from regional, remote, and Indigenous communities are evaluated in their proper context. This training would enable assessors to recognise the unique challenges and innovative potential of these projects, leading to a more equitable distribution of funds.

1. Regional Successes and Challenges:

Regional hubs across Western Australia have demonstrated incredible potential, but their success has been limited by a lack of resources and support. Rather than diverting resources to create new hubs, the government should focus on bolstering the existing ones. These hubs, established by local specialists with deep regional knowledge but limited capital, are already doing the hard work of fostering innovation in their communities. They are also trusted by the community because they are representative of the community and with the right support—funding for staff, infrastructure, digital connectivity, investor readiness preparation and access to venture capital—these hubs could generate substantial economic and social returns for Western Australia.

Investing in existing hubs allows the government to leverage the dedication and expertise already on the ground, creating a cost-effective, scalable solution that unlocks regional potential without reinventing the wheel. Supporting these established hubs honours the contributions of those who have driven innovation with minimal resources and ensures that their work can continue to grow and benefit the wider economy.

2. Restructure Grants for Regional Innovators:

Simplifying the grant application process and removing the requirement to match funds would level the playing field for regional innovators, allowing more entrepreneurs from remote and under-resourced areas to access vital resources. Grant processes should be streamlined to reduce the bureaucratic burden on applicants, particularly those from regional areas where resources are already stretched thin.

In addition, mandating cultural intelligence training for grant assessors is essential. This training would equip assessors with the understanding needed to evaluate regional, remote, rural, and Indigenous projects fairly, ensuring that innovative projects from these areas are not overlooked.

Establishing paid regional expertise panels, including experts with on-the-ground experience in regional entrepreneurship, would further ensure that grant evaluations are relevant and contextually appropriate.

3. First Nations-led Assessment Panels:

First Nations-led assessment panels should be established to evaluate Indigenous-led projects, ensuring that these innovations are reviewed with cultural understanding and respect. Indigenous entrepreneurs face unique challenges that are often misunderstood or undervalued by conventional assessment criteria.

Having First Nations experts involved in the evaluation process would ensure that projects are assessed against criteria relevant to their specific context and goals, increasing the likelihood that culturally significant projects receive the support they deserve.

Additionally, creating dedicated funding streams for Indigenous entrepreneurs would acknowledge the amplified barriers they face and provide targeted resources to help them overcome these challenges. By supporting Indigenous entrepreneurs with culturally appropriate assessment processes and funding opportunities, the government can unlock significant innovation potential within First Nations communities.

4. Culturally Safe Innovation and Entrepreneurship Mentorship Programs:

Developing culturally safe mentorship and investor readiness programs specifically designed for Indigenous entrepreneurs would provide crucial support for these innovators. These programs should connect Indigenous entrepreneurs with mentors—both Indigenous and non-Indigenous—who understand the unique challenges of balancing cultural values with entrepreneurial goals. By providing culturally relevant guidance, these programs can help Indigenous entrepreneurs navigate the complexities of growing their businesses while maintaining their cultural integrity.

5. Investing in Capacity Building in Indigenous Communities:

Building the capacity for entrepreneurship, leadership, and innovation within Indigenous communities is essential for long-term success. Strengthening local talent and leadership within these communities will enable them to develop and scale their projects, contributing significantly to both the regional and national innovation ecosystems. Investing in capacity building is a strategic move that empowers Indigenous communities

to take ownership of their innovation pathways, driving economic growth while preserving cultural heritage.

6. Support for Non-STEM Innovation:

Expanding the scope of innovation to include social and cultural entrepreneurship is critical to creating a more inclusive and diverse innovation landscape in Western Australia. Social and cultural innovation, particularly within Indigenous communities, provides opportunities for economic growth that align with the unique needs and values of regional areas.

Recognizing and supporting non-STEM innovations will diversify Western Australia's innovation portfolio and open up new opportunities for community-driven projects to thrive.

7. Facilitate Strong Leveraged Partnerships:

The government must play an active role in facilitating partnerships between industry leaders, universities, philanthropists, and regional hubs. These partnerships can provide much-needed mentorship, access to capital, educational resources, and more, creating a self-sustaining network of innovation that benefits both regional hubs and the broader WA innovation ecosystem. Building strong, leveraged partnerships will ensure that regional innovation is fully integrated into the state's overall innovation strategy, maximizing the impact of these collaborations for all stakeholders involved.

Conclusion:

While Report 43 "Breaking New Ground: Innovation in Western Australia" provides valuable insights, it overlooks several critical areas of regional and Indigenous innovation including the barriers to achieving their potential. The Report bypasses the systemic challenges fueled by bias in all sections of the innovation ecosystem. Though not unique to Western Australia, these challenges are exacerbated by the compounding impact for entrepreneurs that are indigenous and regionally based, even more so for those that are female.

By addressing these oversights and implementing the solutions outlined above, the government can unlock the vast, untapped potential of Western Australia's regional and Indigenous communities, creating a more inclusive, diverse, and dynamic innovation ecosystem.

WESTERN AUSTRALIAN GOVERNMENT RESPONSE TO STANDING COMMITTEE ON PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION – REPORT 43 – BREAKING NEW GROUND: INNOVATION IN WESTERN AUSTRALIA

The government response addresses some concerns mentioned in "Breaking Barriers not Just Ground" but often through general or high-level commitments with a lack of metrics to validate the responses:

1. Funding: Broad references to existing funding mechanisms without specific changes to address long-term sustainability or structural inequities highlighted.
2. Cultural Relevance: References are made to ongoing consultation with Indigenous communities lacks specifics about tailored program implementation, innovation and investment-relevant skill sets and experience of the advisory Boards, committees or staff and
3. Systemic Change: Some acknowledgment of systemic barriers but limited actionable detail on addressing root causes.

Key Findings

1. Alignment: While there is some overlap in recognizing the need for consultation and support, the government responses lack depth and specificity in addressing the nuanced and expert recommendations proposed in "Breaking Barriers not Just Ground."
2. Gaps:
 - The need for sustainable funding models is insufficiently addressed, as the government emphasizes existing frameworks rather than proposing reforms in the funding models, including assessment, geographic equity in assessment and distributions.
 - Systemic barriers are acknowledged but not met with clear, transformative actions.
 - Cultural and regional relevance is mentioned but not operationalized in concrete strategies or outcomes.

Conclusion

The government responses do not adequately or comprehensively address the material oversights and solutions proposed in "Breaking Barriers not Just Ground." There is a significant need for more targeted, actionable measures to bridge the gaps identified in Report 43 and even more so to address the gap herein.

Government policy adjustments, informed by Indigenous and Innovation experts tracked through measurable outcomes and supported by a permanent budget line item would provide Western Australia with the targeted innovation boost it requires to catch up and then excel.

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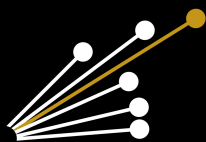
The First Nation Think Tank is the first of its kind in Australia. MIHHQ aims to partner with innovative, forward-thinking organizations to produce collaborative, policy-informing research that supports Indigenous foreign trade policy and investment with the ultimate goal of addressing closing the gap targets and leveraging economic self-determination in Indigenous communities.

PROJECTS

POLICY

IMPACT

INNOVATION



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

CARA PEEK

Cara Peek is a multi-award-winning social disruptor from Remote Northern Australia. She identifies as many things – a Yawuru/Bunuba woman, a successful lawyer, a diverse entrepreneurial leader, and an innovative Cultural Intelligence Strategist.

She has worked closely with many regional communities across Australia, the U.S., and Canada as part of her personal mission to create deep, positive social change for First Peoples globally. As Co-Founder of The Cultural Intelligence Project (TCIP), her work predominately addresses the need for more global conscious business practices, with a hard lens on female empowered narratives within this space.

TCIP is dedicated to the business of culture and is the authority on cultural intelligence – to promote the importance of conscious business to advance First Nation people.

Cara's accolades include:

- 2024 CEO Monthly - Most Empowering DE&I Consulting Business Leader
- 2023 Influential Businesswomen Awards – Best women-owned conscious business platform
- 2023 NBN Innovation Awards – Indigenous Business Category
- 2021 National Agrifutures Rural Woman's Award
- 2020 Agrifutures Rural Woman's Award WA
- 2019 AMP Tomorrow Maker
- 2019 Churchill Fellow
- 2017 Uluru Statement from the Heart – Signatory

