



Australian Historical Association


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Australian Historical Association: Response to Australian Cultural Policy

History and historians play a crucial role in Australian culture. They are foundational to other fields in the arts, with historical research often underpinning film, theatre, literature and even dance. History is both a scholarly pursuit and a widely shared leisure activity: millions of Australians visit museums and galleries each year, while thousands more read and create histories, from family history to large-scale television documentaries and prize-winning books.

Any serious cultural policy for the future must make space for history and historians, and **we would like to see this reflected in the next iteration of the policy.**

While we note that much has been achieved in the implementation of *Revive* since it began in January 2023, much remains to be done. We address the challenges and opportunities in the three most relevant pillars below:

First Nations First

Indigenous history and Indigenous historians have a crucial place in a national cultural policy that recognises the history, culture and diversity of First Nations peoples. Such a policy needs to support the galleries, libraries, archives and museums that are essential to telling the truth about Australia's past. Such institutions continue to be under-resourced: for example, AITSIS Press, an important publisher of works in Indigenous studies and Indigenous history, is currently unable to accept new submissions, limiting the publication options for Indigenous historians.

Centrality of the Artist

Historians work in many institutions and occupations, and historical training (via the Bachelor of Arts) provides a foundation for many careers in the arts. However, in universities, attacks on the humanities have decimated secure career paths for many historians, undermining the future of the discipline.

Compounding this challenge is the persistence of the failed Job-Ready Graduates policy. By increasing fees for humanities degrees by more than 113%, the policy has discouraged many young people from low socio-economic backgrounds from studying the humanities. The AHA is extremely concerned that fewer and more exclusive enrolments in humanities degrees will have significant implications for the ways in which Australian history, culture, heritage, and values are understood, enacted, and taught in the future.

Strong Cultural Infrastructure

The additional funding delivered to Australia's national cultural institutions in 2023 was extremely welcome. However, the AHA continues to advocate for the **abandonment of the efficiency dividend for these institutions.** These institutions collect and maintain materials essential to understanding Australian history, society, culture and politics, and they collect this not just for artists, historians and writers, but for all Australians. These institutions are mandated not only to collect and preserve, but to expand their collections. Continuous budget cuts reduce staffing and limit their capacity to perform

their statutory functions. Over time, this jeopardises cultural facilities and public programs. It has also prevented the preservation and digitization of fragile or at-risk records and caused excessive waiting times for access to materials, a problem that has been especially pronounced at the National Archives of Australia. The ability of historians to tell national truths has been undermined by a lack of resources in national collections and unreasonable wait times to gain access to documents.

The AHA is also concerned that the governing boards and councils of the national cultural institutions are drawn from a narrow range of (legal, business and political) expertise— while historians (especially historians working in universities) are often excluded. These institutions sometimes behave in ways that reflect this lack of connection to research communities. We believe that the government can improve the representativeness of these governing bodies. Appointing more historians with appropriate standing and experience to the boards and councils of major national cultural institutions will ensure that the implications of policy changes are properly understood.



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18 May 2026