

I am writing to support the stronger recognition of reading and literacy as core elements of Australia's cultural infrastructure in the next National Cultural Policy.

While literacy is often framed as an education issue, it is just as fundamentally cultural. Reading shapes how Australians engage with stories, ideas, identity and each other. It underpins participation in cultural life and influences how we connect, communicate and contribute to society.

Australia is facing a growing challenge in this space. While more than two thirds of Australians read for pleasure, many report reading less than they would like. At the same time, 44% of Australians have low or very low literacy, and more than 2.3 million adults lack the basic skills needed for everyday tasks. One in three children cannot read proficiently, reinforcing that this is an ongoing, structural issue rather than a temporary trend.

These figures matter because reading is closely linked to outcomes that extend well beyond literature. Regular reading supports mental health, social connection, employability and civic participation, and builds empathy and understanding across communities. Declining engagement in reading therefore has broader cultural and social consequences.

One area I believe requires more focused attention is the persistent gender gap in reading. Young men aged 15–24 are the least likely group to read for pleasure in Australia, and overall participation among men remains lower than among women across most age groups. In my view, this reflects not just individual choice but the cultural signals men receive about reading—what it represents, and whether it is seen as something for them.

There are, however, clear examples of what works. Community-based initiatives such as *Tough Guy Book Club* successfully engage men by reframing reading as a social activity rather than a solitary task. Bringing people together in informal settings to talk about books helps normalise reading and connects it to broader ideas of community, identity and wellbeing. These kinds of models demonstrate that participation barriers can often be cultural, and that they can be shifted.

For me, this points to a clear role for cultural policy. If we want more Australians reading, we need to treat it as a shared responsibility and invest accordingly.

I would encourage the Australian Government to:

- Set a clear national ambition for reading participation, with a focus on groups with lower engagement, including men and boys
- Invest in a sustained national campaign that presents reading as accessible, social and relevant to everyday life
- Support community-led programs that bring reading into existing social spaces, such as clubs, workplaces and local networks
- Strengthen libraries and local institutions as accessible entry points for reading and participation
- Recognise reading as a cross-cutting issue that connects to health, education and social outcomes

Importantly, efforts to engage men and boys should be intentional and embedded, rather than treated as niche or optional initiatives.

Reading is not just a personal activity, it is a foundation for cultural participation and a driver of social and economic outcomes. A future-focused National Cultural Policy should recognise literacy and reading engagement as essential infrastructure.

From my perspective, the question is not whether we should invest more in reading, but how deliberately we choose to act on what the evidence is already telling us.