



22 May 2026

Towards a new National Cultural Policy: Public Consultation

Submission from the Council for the Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences (CHASS)

About CHASS: We are a peak body with a membership of over 50 humanities, arts and social sciences (HASS) organisations, including academic discipline associations, universities and members from HASS associated industries.

We are grateful for the willingness of staff of the Office for the Arts to meet with us and representatives of some of our member organisations on 8 May to discuss this consultation process.

CHASS welcomed *Revive: a place for every story, a story for every place*, and we equally welcome the opportunity to contribute to formulating its successor. CHASS considers that the well-being of Australian society depends on a vibrant culture of inquiry and practice in the humanities, arts and social sciences (HASS). That includes an emphasis on the importance of education, infrastructure and community. We are also conscious of the complex relationships in arts and cultural policy between local, national and international communities. While this submission will have little to say explicitly about the third of these, we do not underestimate the importance of Australia being able to play a meaningful role in international conversations in HASS. Indeed, this is one of the principal reasons why HASS needs strong investment: it is right that Australian voices, perspectives and creativity are present in larger conversations about what it means to be human. But our focus below is more on the interrelationship of the local and national.

Pillar 1: First Nations First

CHASS strongly supports increasing investment in securing First Nations data sovereignty and it welcomes the strengthening of protocols and processes within government, universities and cultural institutions, led by Indigenous people, for ensuring the protection of Indigenous Cultural and Intellectual Property. The importance of ensuring ethical use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) is magnified by the challenge of securing Indigenous control of Indigenous knowledge where there is a serious level of risk.¹ The Australia Council for the Arts Protocols for using *First Nations Cultural and Intellectual Property in the Arts* (2019) should be reviewed to take account of recent developments in AI. The wider task of crafting social cohesion demands the elimination of racism, including racism against First Nations peoples.

Recommendation 1: That government policies governing Artificial Intelligence prioritise securing Indigenous Cultural and Intellectual Property including through a review of *Protocols for using First Nations Cultural and Intellectual Property in the Arts*.

¹ Scott Alterator, Alexia Maddox, Clare Southerton and Stefan Schutt, 'Re-authorising Colonialism or re-authorising Indigenous perspectives: The Risks of Generative AI in Indigenous Education contexts' *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 2025, 1–19. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01425692.2025.2586732>.

The teaching of First Nations history and culture remains limited in Australian schools. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures are one of three cross-curriculum priorities in the Australian Curriculum. Notwithstanding the excellent work in producing resources carried out by Indigenous-led projects such as Ngarrngga at the University of Melbourne, impacts on the classrooms of Australia are uneven. This is partly a problem associated with pipelines of expertise connected with both cultural and education policy: the pool of cultural competency among educators in this area remains insufficient for the achievement of curriculum priorities.

As in other areas of our submission, we emphasise the importance of cultural policy in ensuring that there are pipelines adequate to the task – in this case, the challenge of ensuring that Australian education is supported by the expertise and resources needed for effective cross-curriculum education in First Nations histories and cultures. If, for example, as at present there are inadequacies in the pipeline of qualified arts educators or history teachers into schools, and ‘out-of-area’ teaching becomes more common, Indigenous arts and history will be insufficiently supported.

Recommendation 2: That the government consult with the First Nations organisations, practitioners and educators to explore how it can better invest in the creation of opportunities for Indigenous-led improvements in the achievement of cross-curriculum priorities in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures.

Pillar 2: A Place for Every Story

CHASS believes that Australia’s cultural sector needs to create opportunities for the telling of a diversity of Australian stories. It applauds the achievement of the inclusion of mandatory Australian content in streaming services.

Nonetheless, in towns across Australia, many of the places where Australian stories have been told have been shutting their doors. Local historical societies and museums have been important places for the sharing of community stories but being heavily reliant on volunteer labour – often from older Australians – it has become increasingly difficult for them to operate effectively. The impacts on community morale, social cohesion and local economies (through tourism) are all negative, contributing to the image of the ‘dying’ country town.

Revive is to be applauded for having included the Sharing the National Collection initiative providing for the display of art from the National Gallery of Australia around the country. This should be treated as a pilot program that can now be extended beyond the visual arts to other collections, with an emphasis on the sharing of materials in national collections most relevant to localities, regions and cultures. The long-standing notion of a ‘distributed national collection’ needs to be given renewed meaning and vigour. A vibrant culture of storytelling at the national level, reflected in initiatives such as mandatory Australian content on streaming services, needs to be underpinned by local and regional activities and the development of community resources. This is about developing practitioners and audiences but also concerns uncovering unfamiliar stories including those relating to the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander experience. We point to ground-breaking cultural initiatives such as *The Australian Wars* – a television documentary series and book – as an example of work that depends fundamentally on the local and regional in telling a big Australian story.

Recommendation 3: That the government explores ways of providing greater support for local and regional storytelling initiatives, including by improving access to national collections.

Pillar 3: Centrality of the Artist

One of the issues that has increasingly come to the attention of CHASS in recent years is the pipeline problem associated with the decline of educational opportunities in HASS. It is now undeniable that the Job-ready Graduates scheme is having a deleterious impact on the number of people who leave university qualified to teach in the humanities and arts, practice as artists, writers and performers, and bring professional expertise to the Galleries, Libraries, Archives and Museums (GLAM) sector.

This is the pipeline problem, and it is reflected in the decline of the creative arts and humanities in the universities. Research by Sandra Gattenhof and John Nicholas Saunders reveals declining enrolments in the creative arts subjects in secondary schools and tertiary institutions, a reduction in the number of creative arts degree courses on offer, and a subsequent drop in qualified creative arts teachers in schools. Undergraduate enrolments in the creative arts declined by 4.5% between 2018 and 2023. Forty-eight creative arts degrees were abolished between 2018 and 2025.² Between 2015 and 2024, creative arts commencements in universities declined by 21.8% and ‘Society and Culture’ by 7.5%.³

We believe the successor to *Revive* needs to turn its attention to the pipeline question, which will involve better support for HASS education in schools and universities and support for the training of ‘back-of-house’ creatives including producers and technicians. There is a mismatch between the goals of Australian cultural policy, which include ‘supporting the artist as worker and celebrating artists as creators’ – and the effects of education policy, which are undermining the development of a creative arts workforce.

In August 2024, the government issued Australia’s National Science Statement ‘to shape science policy and leadership across governments, in our labs, in research institutions and in boardrooms’. There is no equivalent for HASS. Among the goals expressed in the Statement was: ‘A diverse, skilled workforce to underpin the translation of science into new industries’. There is no similar Statement or process involving the HASS workforce.

Recommendation 4: That Australia’s new cultural policy include a coherent strategy for redeveloping and strengthening the creative arts and humanities workforce.

Recommendation 5: That the government consider the possibility of developing a National Arts and Humanities Strategy that would set out priorities for the development of national capabilities in a way that is already familiar from such work in relation to STEM.

² Sandra Gattenhof and John Nicholas Saunders, ‘The Polycrisis for Arts and Creative Education in Australia’ *Australian Journal of Education*, Vol. 70, Issue 1 (2026):1-20, DOI: 10.1177/00049441261421275.

³ <https://www.education.gov.au/higher-education-statistics/student-data/selected-higher-education-statistics-2024-student-data/key-findings-2024-higher-education-student-statistics>

Pillar 4: Strong Cultural Infrastructure

Revive contained a strong and admirable emphasis on rebuilding the arts in the wake of their devastation during the Covid-19 pandemic, with considerable and warranted attention to the performing arts. Government budget outlays, at the same time, have offered welcome support to the national cultural institutions which had suffered several years of neglect, extending to the alarming decline of several of the buildings in which they do their business and cyber vulnerabilities arising from outdated infrastructure.

We urge that the new cultural policy needs to build on the work already done to strengthen these national cultural institutions. We appreciate the constraints of the current fiscal environment but also worry over the possibility of negative effects on physical and digital infrastructure. The application of efficiency dividends to cultural institutions amplifies the danger of decline.⁴

Australians across the country now feel a keen sense of ownership of great national resources such as the Trove database, maintained by the National Library of Australia (NLA). The ability of communities to know their histories and tell their stories (See Pillar 2) are increasingly reliant on strong and resilient national infrastructure such as that maintained by the NLA. Communities and researchers also require access, which continues to be a problem for some open period documents at the National Archives of Australia (NAA). Continuing modernisation of the *Archives Act*, as well as a level of resourcing sufficient for the NAA to partner with other agencies in ensuring that legislative requirements for access are met, is essential.

Recommendation 6: That cultural policy prioritises robust physical and digital infrastructure of the national cultural institutions and the enabling of wide access to Australia’s national collections.

Pillar 5: Engaging the Audience

CHASS recognises the importance of developing audiences for the arts and especially ensuring that those who have been excluded from access in the past have opportunities to connect with performances, stories and collections. We believe that the creative arts, humanities and social sciences should be available to everyone who wishes to participate (as most Australians do, in one form or another). But the building of audiences is also an aspect of lifelong learning. If young people are not exposed to arts and culture through positive experiences of learning and playing in their early years and during their formal education, they are less likely to develop a love of the arts. Audience building should, as was said of welfare systems, be ‘from cradle to grave’.

CHASS would like to draw attention to the PACER schools program as one way that government could support more equitable access to culture and the arts. While we would not argue that it is the most important means of promoting arts and culture among the young, better investment and an altered approach to PACER could be potentially powerful for many students at an important moment in their education. The PACER program subsidises school visits to Canberra. The disproportionate take-up by New South Wales schools compared with often

⁴ Joshua Black, ‘Not Neglecting, Strangling: A Short History of a Most Inefficient Policy’, *Australian Policy and History*, 19 April, 2023, <https://aph.org.au/2023/04/not-neglecting-strangling-a-short-history-of-a-most-inefficient-policy/>

meagre numbers from other states and the Northern Territory is indicative of the inadequate level of financial support. A properly national program should not contain these inequities. Moreover, the emphasis in the program on the mandatory visits to Australian Parliament House, the National Electoral Education Centre, the Museum of Australian Democracy and the Australian War Memorial sends a message that arts and culture are of secondary importance to the nation. A mandatory visit to at least one of the major cultural institutions such as the NLA, the NAA, the National Gallery of Australia, the National Museum of Australia or the National Portrait Gallery would send a powerful message about the meaning of Australia: that nations are made not only through law, politics and war, but through the creative imagination and a shared culture and identity.

Recommendation 7: That the PACER program be treated as an opportunity for building audiences for the arts and culture through increased investment and better representation of the national cultural institutions.