

Towards a new National Cultural Policy: a submission from the National Library of Australia

The National Library of Australia welcomes the opportunity to comment on the next iteration of *Revive: The National Cultural Policy*. As the National Cultural Institution charged with collecting, caring for and providing access to Australia's literary and documentary heritage, we see opportunities to contribute to the policy.

The first national cultural policy in decades, *Revive* came at a crucial time for an arts and culture sector recovering from the COVID-19 pandemic years. Its measures stabilised and expanded Australian artistic and cultural expression, placed strengthened creative input, and provided much needed funding, including the National Library and its flagship Trove service, which has a stable future for the first time. After three years, the arts and culture sector has emerged as a vibrant and vital part of Australian life.

The pillars of the National Cultural Policy have proven to be a strong framework for supporting Australia's arts and cultural ecology. As our Council Chair, Distinguished Professor Larissa Behrendt AO said in her recent address to the Australian Library and Information Association:

"[Revive's] pillars are statements about the kind of cultural nation we are choosing to be. 'First Nations First' is a commitment to truth and to the rightful ordering of story and authority. 'A Place for Every Story' insists that our national narrative is shared, not singular, and that dignity lies in being heard. 'The Centrality of the Artist' recognises that creativity is how we make meaning, challenge power, and imagine futures. 'Strong Cultural Infrastructure' acknowledges that culture does not sustain itself. It requires investment, stewardship and long-term thinking. And 'Engaging the Audience' reminds us that culture only lives when it is encountered, when it reaches people where they are, and when it invites them into the story.

This submission draws on quotes from Professor Behrendt's speech to introduce each pillar.

Revive will respond to new risks, including challenges to creativity and knowledge in the era of artificial intelligence, as well as increasing social division. It also presents a significant opportunity to further embed First Nations cultures and stories within our shared narrative and to invest in education to better harness technological change.

Culture shapes us. Embedded across Government, *Revive* can support a more curious, inclusive, and resilient Australia, where creativity thrives.

First Nations First

"Frameworks of ICIP have started an evolution from colonial collecting to collaborative custodianship. It has seen institutions acknowledge historical harm and undertake roles of repatriation, and it has engaged with the importance of First Nations leadership in shaping interpretation.

This is hard work – and it is work that will take a long time. But it is crucial to undoing the damage that has been done by the appropriation of knowledge and culture – and its misuse – in the past. And it is a concrete step to a more inclusive, rich and vibrant sense of who we are."

Revive – which moved First Nations from the margins to the centre – coincided with significant progress by cultural institutions in recognising First Nations voices and knowledge. This reflects decades of work by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander professionals across the GLAM sector and has contributed to both the formal recognition of Indigenous Cultural and Intellectual Property, and significant cultural shifts within institutions.

The Challenge:

While arts and cultural institutions are changing practice, this work has largely been managed within institutions without additional funding. As a result, progress has been constrained and pressure on institutions' First Nations teams has increased. Rising demand for access to materials has compounded these challenges, leaving institutions struggling to meet these expectations. Investment in systems, training and consistent procedures has also been limited, resulting in heavy reliance on individual cultural expertise to meet high

volumes of requests and provide sector advice. These roles are often insecure, reflecting time-limited and off-budget funding which contributes to high turnover among First Nations staff.

The Library sees three **opportunities** to grow this pillar:

- **Legislate Indigenous Cultural and Intellectual Property (ICIP).** Continue to progress Commonwealth ICIP recognition to embed respectful relationships and enable a more complete representation of Australia.
- **Invest in First Nations-led and designed capability.** Initiatives that build sustainable systems, workforce capability and sector standards across arts and culture, including:
 - Credentialed Indigenous librarianship programs developed and run by the higher education sector would establish professional practice in this field, providing both resources and training
 - Employment and leadership pathways in arts and culture, including structured mentoring and peer networks
 - A centralised cultural competency training program for GLAM workers and provision of an “ICIP hub” of resources for collecting organisations to direct better practice.
 - System improvements to manage and govern First Nations and ICIP material
 - Targeted initiatives to improve community access to significant and large collections through appropriate description and digitisation
- **Strengthen repatriation efforts.** Maintain and expand support for the repatriation of cultural materials.

A Place for Every Story

“Our stories are national narratives. They help shape who we are, what our values are, how we see ourselves. These are the stories that we tell the world about who we are. Whoever frames that narrative gets to direct what kind of nation we are. And for this reason, these national narratives are contested, but the best place for that contest to take place is not through divisive politics but through the exchange of stories that will create greater empathy.”

Storytelling lies at the heart of all human societies. It shapes critical thought, empathy, imagination and connection. Australia’s cultural institutions both foster and sustain these stories.

The Challenge:

In a volatile environment, Australia’s core values of inclusion, diversity and equity are under increasing pressure, alongside a rise in hate speech, bias, and the mis- and disinformation that fuels it. This is often accompanied by a flattening of Australian history that obscures its diversity and complexity. Through services like Trove, the Library enables Australians to develop a more accurate and nuanced understanding of Australia’s context, reflecting the many stories that have shaped our nation.

As the Library has learned, partnerships with any community are not built and maintained through one-off initiatives. They require ongoing investment in developing and sustaining relationships.

The National Library sees an **opportunity** to support partnerships between cultural institutions and communities to highlight Australia’s multi-faith and multicultural character since European settlement. Complimenting the work being done in the First Nations First pillar, co-designed initiatives that support communities to tell their own stories could support government, media and education programs, and reinforce a more inclusive and accurate national narrative.

Centrality of the Artist

“As a storyteller, you construct narrative ethically. You choose whose voice speaks. You decide where the camera lingers. You contextualise. You verify. You take responsibility.”

Without writers and artists, there are no stories. While the first iteration of *Revive* responded to the pressures placed on creatives by the COVID-19 pandemic, the next iteration must address the transformative impact of AI on creative practice. As with the introduction of the internet and digital distribution, these changes will be profound. Libraries are well placed to support Australians through this transition – as they have in the past – and to help ensure it is inclusive, transparent and equitable.

The Challenge:

The rapid, ubiquitous expansion of generative AI offers significant potential if it is developed to strengthen human creativity and knowledge creation. Without centring artists, writers and researchers, the adoption and diffusion of AI risks fuelling misinformation, undermining creative expression, marginalising creatives, and threatening the sustainability of creative industries.

The Library has identified two **opportunities** to grow this pillar:

- **Establish an opt-in AI licencing scheme.** The development of an opt-in scheme for authors to control the use of their work and ensure fair remuneration into the future, modelled on the trusted Public Lending Right Scheme, administered within the arts, supported by the National Library of Australia. This would complement robust copyright protection, and pose an alternative to extractive AI approaches.
- **Strengthen media and information literacy.** Deliver a nationally co-ordinated approach to media and information literacy to build critical thinking and understanding of authenticity and knowledge construction, integrated with the media literacy strategy. It should draw on deep expertise in the library sector and within the National Library. It will rely on an expanded presence of teacher librarians in schools.

Strong Cultural Infrastructure

“The next iteration of the National Cultural Policy is a chance for us through our sectors, our institutions ... to continue to advocate for the things that will ensure the vibrancy and centrality of our culture and cultural institutions.”

Revive, alongside targeted investment in National Cultural Institutions, strengthened the foundations of Australia’s cultural infrastructure. With it, the National Library secured the future of Trove, replaced critical infrastructure and supported a substantial expansion of content, with an additional 4,693,686 pages of material incorporated under the policy.

The challenge:

In a volatile economic environment, ongoing investment will ensure that National Cultural Institutions effectively serve all Australians. All institutions face escalating costs, especially to maintain the online systems and physical spaces that provide access to most Australians. Not all infrastructure is in buildings or IT systems. Challenges facing arts boards operating within a heightened environment have highlighted the need for structural support around governance.

Additionally, Australia’s local and specialised collecting sector faces specific pressures. Organisations are often dependant on volunteers and precarious funding, despite being rich with community connection. It can be challenging for this sector to engage with existing programs, which often assume skills and existing infrastructure.

The Library has identified three **opportunities** to grow this pillar:

- **Strengthen governance capability.** Fund the creation of training packages for arts boards to operate in a climate of heightened reputational risk. This would enable effective oversight aligned with strategic objectives and risk appetite, while supporting broad, confident board participation.
- **Expand community collection support.** Index funding for the Community Heritage Grants program to maintain support for smaller collecting institutions, complimented by initiatives to support digitisation and access via Trove.
- **Champion inclusive cultural institutions.** Position *Revive* to lead in promoting inclusive, pluralistic arts and culture institutions, supported by continued investment in accessibility initiatives for both online and onsite spaces.

Engaging the audience

“In every library there is someone discovering a voice that sounds like theirs for the first time. Someone learning that their history matters. Someone finding language for grief, for curiosity, for resistance, for hope. Someone realising they are not alone.”

Australia’s arts and culture belongs to all Australians. The first iteration of *Revive* provided an expansion of governance structures and programs to reach previously excluded audiences. It also provided much needed support for Australian writers.

The Challenge:

Writers need readers. The decline in long-form reading – alongside rising consumption of short-form and doomscrolling – presents a significant challenge. Reading fosters empathy, strengthens social connection, and supports mental health and resilience. Research indicates that stronger national leadership, sustained investment, and targeted initiatives to promote books to all Australians, can reverse current trends.

The Library sees an opportunity to **prioritise reading as a national objective**. Elevating reading as a cultural and public policy priority, leveraging existing initiatives across Writing Australia, Australia Reads, and state, territory and public sector libraries to coordinate and amplify existing initiatives, supported by additional investment in targeted reading campaigns, under a National Reading Program to maximise their impact.

Final comments

In a fractured age, we face challenges to inclusion. Arts and culture have long grappled with this, yet too often our institutions have been inaccessible – both to those with access needs and to communities and cultures that have not been reflected in them.

Trove's transformative impact on Australian research came from reaching kitchen tables, and the people who sat around them, who had never used a research library before. In the same way, our cultural spaces must be welcoming and inclusive, regardless of background, and accessible to all.

This requires a cultural policy which champions plurality and fosters cohesion through inclusion. One that celebrates knowledge and imagination and welcomes everyone to the table.

Libraries remain among the few places where people can encounter and consider different perspectives, develop critical thinking, broaden their horizons and change their minds – and we want all Australians to engage with them.

Summary of Opportunities:

- Legislate Indigenous Cultural and Intellectual Property (ICIP).
- Invest in First Nations-led frameworks, training and systems to expand GLAM cultural capability.
- Strengthen repatriation efforts to First Nations
- Highlight Australia’s multi-faith and multicultural character through co-designed programming.
- Establish an opt-in AI licencing model for future remuneration.
- Strengthen media and information literacy.
- Strengthen governance capability of arts boards.
- Expand community collection support grant programs.
- Champion accessibility in our cultural institutions.
- Prioritise reading as a national objective.

Questions on this submission can be directed to [REDACTED], National Library of Australia.