

## National Cultural Policy Submission

22 August 2022

**This submission is on behalf of a government body, the National Library of Australia.**

The National Library of Australia (the Library) welcomes this opportunity to comment in response to a proposed new national cultural policy.

We are a National Cultural Institution charged with collecting and providing access to Australia's stories, culture and knowledge. We hold a massive and incredibly diverse collection exceeding 10 million physical items and approaching 3 petabytes of digital content. We also have more than 40 years' experience in national collaboration for enhanced cultural outcomes.

The Library's work already strongly supports the five foundational pillars of the proposed policy. The Library strongly supports development of a comprehensive, cohesive and multi-decadal policy which leverages Australians' deep and wide engagement with, and participation in cultural activities, and invests in our rich cultural inheritance and potential.

This response focuses on ways in which the Library could – with support – contribute further to the Australian Government's desired outcomes. The Library has a full and contemporary suite of ambitious strategies to guide implementation of tangible actions that will deliver significant benefit to Australia's education, social cohesion, economy, innovation, regional stability and prosperity. The Australian Government already has a series of successful programs and infrastructure which – with sufficient additional support – could help the Government to fulfil its ambitions for the nation.

We note the submission from National and State Libraries Australasia (NSLA), of which the Library is a member. That submission speaks to NSLA's nation-wide and trans-Tasman collaboration to achieve system-wide cultural and infrastructure improvements for Australian communities and citizens.

### 1. First Nations

The Library has a long and proud history of collecting and preserving First Nations stories, especially through its oral history program, with First Nations recordings dating back to 1959. We were entrusted by the Australian Government with recording, preserving and administering the *Bringing Them Home* oral history program, which ran from 1998 to 2002 and recorded 340 interviews. This is Australia's most significant oral history project and has fundamentally changed the ways in which Australians understand the history of the stolen generations. We continue to develop this collection strength: alongside many individual interviews, we have recorded more than 200 interviews in our *Seven Years On* program with First Nations leaders, and the *Bringing them Home after the Apology* oral history project saw 31 interviews conducted between 2009-2011, recording the life stories of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people following Prime Minister Rudd's Apology. In the last 5 years, 13% of all new Library oral histories were with First Nations Australians. We are training First Nations interviewers, with several recent interviews conducted in languages such as Yawuru and Warlpiri. These interviews record life histories – but they are also full of story, poetry and song.

**The Opportunity** is for a whole of Australian Government embrace of truth-telling in the service of the *Uluru Statement from the Heart* and Makarrata Commission. The Library would be honoured to be charged with collecting and preserving truth-telling in the form of a dedicated oral history program modelled on *Bringing Them Home*, drawing on the Library's proven track record in this area, and world-leading audio preservation and delivery technology. These testimonies would become part of the National Collection and be preserved

forever by the Library, returned to community Digital Keeping Places for local control and access, and made available online through Trove *only* with appropriate permissions (many *Bringing Them Home* interviewees generously agreed to share their stories online with the nation).

Large libraries and archives like the Library are full of textual and pictorial documentation of First Nations languages, culture, arts and custom, often created by non-Indigenous explorers, anthropologists, linguists, artists and pastoralists. These records are of immense value to First Nations communities – but are often hidden deep in archival collections and are complex to deal with due to uncertain Indigenous Cultural and Intellectual Property (ICIP) ownership. Our national ability to engage deeply with communities around documentary heritage, locate relevant materials and digitally repatriate them is severely limited by lack of a national framework, lack of a suitable resourcing model, and limited numbers of First Nations librarians and archivists able to participate in and guide this work (see 4. Stronger Institutions). We note the Government is exploring ways to strengthen engagement with First Nations individuals, communities and organisations and will be active participants in this work.

**The Opportunity** is for a whole of nation approach to engaging with First Nations communities, in ways and in timeframes that suit communities, and recognise the issue of un-or under-remunerated cultural labour. Developing such a framework would require dedicated resourcing and need to be led by the most appropriate national agency or agencies. To move beyond framework to delivery, Australia needs a national fund supporting digital repatriation of ICIP containing materials to relevant communities, who must retain the right to determine who can see, hear, or use these materials.

We *know* that there is strong demand from First Nations communities to engage with collections held by cultural organisations around the country. Trove – our national digital culture service – is more heavily used by First Nations people than population size would predict. Trove’s First Nations landing page, developed in collaboration with First Nations Australians and Trove Partners, showcases a range of content relating to First Nations peoples including blogs, help pages and collection features curated by First Nations communities and Trove Partners – all with cultural safety warnings. Users can identify material that should be marked as culturally sensitive or needs further consideration of restrictions and access conditions.

In partnership with AIATSIS and libraries around the country, we ensure that all First Nations library materials are coded to allow searching by Australia’s hundreds of First Nations languages and their variant names, making it easy for communities to identify content that is relevant to them. We also support a national [code-a-thon](#) in which Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples ‘tag’ resources in Trove that are related to their peoples, communities, and languages. **The opportunity** is to work with communities (‘nothing about us without us’) to further surface documentary heritage that First Nations communities can use to strengthen language and culture, kinship ties, and to tell their own stories in their own voices.

## 2. A Place for Every Story

Australian society is amid a major digital transition that fundamentally changes the ways in which collecting and memory institutions must operate. The sheer volume and dynamic nature of content documenting our society, including its creative and cultural arts, is daunting. The need to make sense of, capture, securely store and provide meaningful access, now and in the future, is a significant challenge for the Library and one that we are well positioned to leverage.

The Library’s collecting is marked by rich variety and mass volume. Each year we add many tens of thousands of physical items and millions of digital files to the collection, encompassing a great diversity of material types, content, focus and subject matter. We strategically acquire a wide range of unique materials documenting the lives and activities of Australian people, places and events, including digital material such as social media, blogs and web sites. We comprehensively collect Australia’s leading news sites and

Australian Federal and State government sites. We have conducted an annual harvest of the entire Australian web domain for more than 20 years.

We strive to ensure that the Library's collections remain relevant to all Australians, in all their diversity. We aspire to enable all Australians to understand their diverse social, cultural and intellectual histories, including an understanding of their place in the Asia-Pacific Region and the world. We have been very successful in focused collecting of the stories of Australians with Chinese heritage and Fijian Australians in recent years. We have tested and refined our targeted approaches to communities. We know that they work, and that the Library's efforts in this space have strengthened community trust in the Library. The community knows that the Library is a home for the stories of *all* Australians.

**The opportunity** is to accelerate this work, engaging more directly with under-served communities to ensure that their stories form part of the national collection, forever. With uplift to appropriation to support these collecting activities, the Library can strengthen its targeted collecting activities to ensure that all Australians can see themselves and their story in our collections.

### 3. The Centrality of the Artist

The National Library of Australia is the home of Australia's written culture. In keeping with our legal deposit obligations, we collect every book – novel, poetry, drama, biography, history, politics, social science, science, technology, nature and more – and every journal, newspaper, map, newsletter, and piece of sheet music published in this country, whether in physical, electronic or online form. While libraries around the country hold parts of our book culture, only the National Library is its comprehensive home.

**The opportunity** is to celebrate this unique role by ensuring the Prime Minister's Literary Awards – Australia's richest awards – are held at the National Library of Australia every year, mirroring arrangements in place for state-based awards. A steady, known, and majestic home for celebrating the Awards and streaming live to the nation will build community awareness, and provide winning artists with a strong sense that the nation is proud of their achievements.

Our collections provide the fuel for Australians hungry to understand their histories and cultures, and it inspires artists to make new work from those stories – from First Nations choreographers using collections to make new dance works, to scriptwriters mining historical sources to bring Australian stories to the screen. Our experience is that there are more Australian stories, and more strands to the Australian 'narrative' than we can possibly imagine. The shape of those stories and narratives is dynamic and continues to change as Australia changes. We offer two philanthropically funded Creative Fellowships each year – but could do so much more.

**The opportunity** is to add a strand to existing arts funding streams to support residencies in National Cultural Institutions, offering more artists and culture practitioners the chance to connect with Australia's past stories and art to make new work. This stream could focus on First Nations, Culturally and Linguistically Diverse, regional, rural and remote Australian or young artists – those for whom it is more difficult to delve into national collections.

The Library cares deeply about protecting the economic, moral and cultural rights of creators, and about fostering an environment in which publication of Australian stories and intellectual thought can flourish. We also know that current Copyright legislation is a barrier to making older parts of our collection – where it is clear there is no continuing economic value, and significant uncertainty about the identity and location of creators – more accessible for Australians who cannot visit major institutions. As a National Cultural Institution, and through NSLA, as a member of the Australian Libraries and Archives Copyright Committee (ALACC), the Library has provided significant input into recent Copyright reform discussions, including their practical applicability in a national discovery service.

With over 70% of recent Australian publications deposited digitally, and Australian library patrons increasingly borrowing eBooks from their local public libraries, it is essential that our current Public Lending Right scheme is updated to take Digital Lending Rights into consideration.

**The opportunity** is to update Copyright legislation for the modern environment, and to implement Digital Lending Rights so that authors are appropriately recompensed for library use of their works.

#### 4. Stronger Institutions

Our nation's cultural collections – physical and digital – need to be here for the Australian community today, tomorrow, in ten years, in 100 and in 1000 years. To achieve this aim, our cultural institutions – and especially our National Cultural Institutions – must have robust and sustainable physical and digital infrastructure. We must have the digital and workforce capabilities to take our work from the present to the future. These capabilities are essential to serve a larger and more diverse population who are expecting to engage with their national collections in traditional, new, and yet unimagined ways.

Our National Cultural Institution buildings are majestic and are visited by millions each year – but almost all are suffering from decades of under-investment in maintaining and enhancing these capital assets, with serious consequences. Our buildings serve as venues for reading, writing, listening, viewing, learning, performing, wondering, marvelling, laughing, weeping, meeting and conversing. They are visited by millions each year. They also serve as places to store our vast and irreplaceable collections. Multiple Parliamentary inquiries have noted the parlous state of, in particular, National Cultural Institutions' storage facilities.

The impacts of 35 years of efficiency dividends have disproportionately affected National Cultural Institutions. While significant efficiencies have been gained – for the National Library, through early, bold and transformative use of digital technologies – these are far outweighed by the responsibility to serve a larger and more diverse nation, via increased channels. The Library has progressively reduced many of its programs over recent decades: all with significant thought and regret; none without long-term impacts on what the nation's Library can offer its citizens.

**The opportunity** is to ensure financially sustainable futures for our National Cultural Institutions, including adequate funding to maintain our heritage buildings, to store our collections in appropriate conditions, and to – at least – ensure no further services are lost to the Australian people. **The opportunity** is also to invest in shared digital and physical infrastructure and capability – across the National Cultural Institutions, and with the potential for the Institutions to play the leadership roles required to maximise the value of Australia's cultural collections across the nation.

Australia is fortunate to have single national systems for digitisation and delivery of Australia's historic newspapers, for collecting the huge and growing Australian web domain, and to meet national and state specific legal deposit requirements. These systems were all developed by the National Library, using various partnership models, with public access to content via Trove.

But we do not have national systems for digitisation, born-digital collection, digital preservation, management, delivery and re-use of other documentary formats. Instead, we have inefficient and disconnected systems, losing opportunities to do better together than we can alone. In addition, no single institution can deal effectively with the volume of digital content being created, the number of emerging digital formats, or to manage an increasingly hostile cyber-security environment.

**The opportunity** is to build shared National Cultural Institution Digital Access infrastructure, leveraging all we have learned through Trove's first decade. This proposal – already well-developed – has solid support across the Commonwealth's National Cultural Institutions. Six institutions – the Library, AIATSIS, National Museum of Australia, National Gallery of Australia and National Film and Sound Archive – are ready to be early adopters of the proposed infrastructure; remaining national institutions could be onboarded in

subsequent stages. The incremental cost of onboarding additional institutions – including smaller and less digitally capable organisations beyond the Commonwealth - would be low, offsetting the considerable upfront investment required to build the infrastructure.

Access to a joined-up national collection through a single front door, or via multiple channels, devices and personal connections, has obvious benefit for our audiences. It would support all five pillars of the National Cultural Policy. Collectively, our information, data and digital assets will benefit from a long-term plan to maximise interoperability, re-use, collection security and quality assurance. Untapped and previously unlinked data assets could produce and open new information for use by interested stakeholders. The possibilities of these future uses are well-articulated in a recent report, [Custodians and Midwives](#), the result of deep collaboration between the Library and the ANU School of Cybernetics on the potential for AI and machine learning enabled systems to help generate meaning from vast datasets.

**Smaller community institutions** also need support to preserve, manage and provide access to their unique and precious collections. The Community Heritage Grants program is a long running, highly regarded Australian Government partnership, which brings together the Office for the Arts with our largest national collecting institutions (the Library, National Museum of Australia, National Archives of Australia and National Film and Sound Archive) to support community-based organisations. Since its 1994 inception, the program has allocated more than \$8m in grants to regional museums, local libraries and historical societies, sporting clubs, churches, arts and crafts guilds, Indigenous, multicultural, LGBTQIA+ and other community groups, so that they can preserve, manage and share their unique collections with their communities.

A 2021 review confirmed strong demand for the existing grants, and very strong demand for digitisation support. However, funding for this program is not indexed and has been static for many years: fewer grants can be made; and participants can achieve less with each grant.

**The opportunity** is to uplift base Community Heritage Grants funding, and to index funding on an annual basis. In addition, a new stream should be added to support collection digitisation, to be shared through Trove or other national services, or to be managed in First Nations Digital Keeping Places.

All cultural institutions are struggling to attract and retain highly qualified and skilled staff. While the current employment situation has exacerbated this issue, there are some core areas of capability that have and are likely to remain in short supply without nationally coordinated effort. These include sufficient qualified and experienced First Nations staff to help cultural institutions build deep and long-term capability, and a nourishing work culture in which Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people grow, lead, and are recognised for their contributions to our mission. We need sufficient digital technologists to build and maintain the systems required to care for and provide access to our collections, and to build new ways by which audiences can engage. In the case of libraries, a diminishing number of universities provide professional post-graduate courses, requiring a total rethink of how to secure the future workforce. The Australian Library and Information Association is actively developing a Professional Pathways strategy to support this need.

**The opportunity** is to carefully consider the needs of cultural institutions in future jobs and skills summits and policies, and to develop a long-term plan to develop the workforce capability our institutions need to thrive in the decades ahead.

## 5. Reaching the Audience

The Library leads the nation in reaching the full breadth of the Australian community, at home and abroad, enhancing Australians' ability to understand themselves, their history and their stories through ready access to their cultural collections.

Our onsite Reading Room and reference services, our exhibitions – drawing almost exclusively on our own rich collections – our public programs and our publication program enjoy undiminished support: except for the recent pandemic years, our visitation is at least as strong as it was in a pre-digital environment.

However, diminishing resourcing and increasing demands for other services means the Library can now only tour exhibitions, or partner with institutions to develop exhibitions, if National Collecting Institutions Touring and Outreach Exhibition (NCITO) funding is available. The funding pool is increasingly unable to meet demand, and institutions like the Library – for which exhibitions are an important but minor part of the business – are unable to invest to develop exhibition concepts to the point where they can compete with exhibition driven organisations. These factors mean, for example, that an important opportunity to develop an exhibition in partnership with a state library, to celebrate the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Mabo decision, was lost.

**The opportunity** is to increase NCITO funding to support exhibition touring to national audiences, and to sequester part of the funding to enable initial concept development and testing.

Beyond these traditional – and important – in person engagement activities, the Library's unique opportunities to reach the broadest and most diverse audience are in the digital environment. We receive more than 20 million digital visits annually. This includes engagement through our website, social media, online programming, expert reference services, collection copy services, and our Digital Classroom – our principal offering for school-aged Australians.

However, it is Trove that sets the Library – and indeed Australia from an international perspective – apart.

Trove is the window to many parts of our collections *and* the digitised collections of hundreds of Australian libraries, archives, museums and galleries. It is world leading technology that is the envy of many countries. Trove is a resource for historians, social scientists, cultural researchers, family historians, writers and artists. It is used by those who create new knowledge and new art for the nation. It is also a site of true public exchange and engagement. Members of the public add their knowledge to digital collection items through tags and comments, and curate publicly shareable lists on topics as diverse as SP betting in the Riverina, World War 1 soldiers, and the glories of the Australian lawnmower. The Library was a pioneer in crowdsourcing corrections – our 'text correctors' commit their time to correct the often-imperfect lines of text generated by applying Optical Character Recognition. This demonstrates the Australian public's desire to contribute and participate in the work of their National Library.

Such is Trove's success that it is one of only two Australian Government websites to make a recent report on Australia's top 15 global internet domains, the other being the ABC. However, Trove has now been running on short-term tied funding for more than five years. The Library cannot sustain Trove from its base appropriation; short-term funding also makes it impossible to make forward investment decisions, and to effectively utilise available resourcing.

**The opportunity** is to sustain Trove in the medium term, and then articulate it to the larger national digital infrastructure solution proposed above. Behind the Trove interface is a set of world-leading systems, that can be modernised for a cloud environment, and shared on behalf of similar institutions. Trove has a huge national audience – an audience that demonstrates without doubt how engaged Australians are with their culture and history. We can maintain and enhance Australia's reputation as an international leader in this space – but only if long-term and sustainable funding is made available.

**The opportunity** is also to establish ongoing funding for digitisation of the nation's documentary heritage. The Library has an ongoing partnership model that sees other institutions fund digitisation of content for delivery through Trove. It also has an ambitious philanthropy strategy focused almost entirely on making more of our collections accessible through digitisation. These programs have – together – seen millions of pages and images delivered for a national audience.

These own-source revenue programs rely on robust digitisation capability and workflows, which can only be achieved if the Library has sufficient resources to maintain its 'factory' capability. Direct funding allocations to National Cultural Institutions or a competitive grants process could ensure this capability is maintained in the medium to long term, supporting the best possible mix of Government, partner, and philanthropic funding to reach the largest possible audience.

This submission can be published online under the name National Library of Australia.

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