

National Cultural Policy Submission

Federation of Australian Historical Societies

Submitted: On behalf of an arts peak body

What challenges and opportunities do you see in the pillar or pillars most relevant to you? Feel free to respond to any or all pillars:

First Nations

Changes in the practice and focus of Australian History, our historiography, have been at the centre of national recognition of Australian Indigenous people, their longevity on this continent, their rich culture and the devastating impact of European colonisation. Without historical research and writing, such recognition is unlikely to have occurred. The research that supported the Mabo case provides a prime example. However, there remain ongoing challenges to continue this research and publication, perhaps especially at the local and regional level. FAHS has long encouraged local historical societies to recognise and research Indigenous history in their locality, and to engage with local Indigenous communities where they exist. Assistance and guidance is required to enhance the sensitivity, knowledge and skills researching and recording Indigenous history, both before and after colonisation. There are many thousands of Indigenous and Indigenous related items (eg weapons and images) held in local collections, and these need to be appropriately recorded and preserved.

A Place for Every Story

Historians are great story tellers. They research and disseminate the stories of our past. Volunteer community history organisations create countless numbers of these stories about their communities - our nation and culture are the sum total of these communities and their stories. Volunteer community organisations deserve recognition and support to maintain morale, membership and technological capacity to tell stories of our culture.

The Centrality of the Artist

The term 'artist', in this context, means those creative people who 'perform' in their chosen practice. It should be recognised that History is a creative practice just as much as writing a novel, performing a ballet or opera, or producing artworks. Across Australia there are approximately 100,000 members of voluntary community history and heritage societies, and most of them are involved in the collecting, preservation, researching and dissemination of our national cultural history and stories. It is important that the NCP recognises History as an integral part of Australian cultural heritage, and historians as the 'artists' who create it. In the past History has not always been viewed in the Arts departments at national and state levels as a creative cultural activity. This has served to limit the capacity of historians to create and perform. Volunteer community historical societies need recognition in the NCP for their creative contribution to our cultural heritage. Morale and enthusiasm are easy to stimulate in volunteer organisations, but neglect can crush them.

Strong Institutions

Australia's 1200 community history and heritage societies, with approximately 100,000 members, represent a significant part of the preservation and dissemination of Australian culture. They have collections of millions of items, many unique and irreplaceable, which form a significant part of our

Distributed National Collection. In most cases membership numbers and local enthusiasm are good, but changing demographics and competition from other creative and community activities challenge their ability to maintain their work. Without the contribution of these community organisations, our culture would be much poorer. FAHS works to encourage and stimulate this work through national networking, advice, training manuals, etc. FAHS currently receives no recognition or support from government and is entirely based on voluntary contributions. If FAHS is to be a strong national cultural institution and to assist the strength of community groups, the NCP needs to recognise its work.

Reaching the Audience

Through their collection, preservation and communication of our community history and stories, volunteer community history and heritage organisations reach a far greater 'audience' than all but our best-known professional historians. What they produce is of immediate interest and value to communities and can do much to promote a sense of community wellbeing. An example - a suburban historical society recently moved into shop front premises and filled the windows with historical pictures of the area. Immediately people began to stop to examine the images. At this basic level, the stories are being communicated and appreciated by an 'audience' that would otherwise not be aware. One challenge for our organisations has been to adopt and keep up with the new opportunities provided by the web and social media. It is a costly and time-consuming business to do this, and requires up-to-date skills, knowledge and technology. A significant proportion of societies are digitising collections, use collection management software (sometimes harvestable by Trove) and have a webpage. Those with more resources use Facebook, Twitter and social media. This is an enormous project of national significance, but community groups are working hard to reach their 'audience' with minimal support and recognition. It is a significant challenge that should be recognised in the NCP.

Please tell us how each of the 5 pillars are important to you and your practice and why. Feel free to respond to any or all that are applicable to you:

First Nations

Historians have been fundamental in the growing 'recognition' of Indigenous people, and promoting pride that Australia boasts the longest living human culture. It is excellent that the NCP promotes Indigenous culture to the top of its list of goals. FAHS fully supports this and wishes to play its role in facilitating the capacity of the voluntary community history movement to forward this work. We seek to develop their capacity to research and disseminate Indigenous history, and to work with Indigenous people towards reconciliation by recognising their culture and our shared history.

A Place for Every Story

History is central to our culture because it tells the stories of our people, communities, states and nation. Researching, disseminating and exhibiting our historical stories of places and people contributes significantly to our sense of community and culture. The role of voluntary historical organisations in this activity has long been recognised in wider society, and the time has now come for recognition in the NCP and Arts.

The Centrality of the Artist

There is substantial research that has demonstrated the social and mental health benefits of volunteer work. The 100,000 members of community organisations are our 'artists' in this work, and are the central players in the performance of community history. This should be recognised in the NCP.

Strong Institutions

The volunteer community history movement should be recognised in the NCP as part of the Arts and creative culture, just as much as government and commercial institutions. The NCP provides the opportunity to recognise these community institutions and to strengthen them by promoting their work as part of our cultural heritage.

Reaching the Audience

Voluntary community history and heritage organisations publish and disseminate their work to a large 'audience' through various forms – hard copy publications, lectures, exhibitions, digital distributions, etc. While they are already reaching a wider 'audience' through digital and other modern technologies, it is important that they receive appropriate recognition to stimulate and sustain this work – and this is another opportunity provided by the NCP. This is a chance to ensure that Australian creativity thrives in the digitally enabled 21st century.

Are there any other things that you would like to see in a National Cultural Policy?

FAHS welcomes the NCP as an opportunity to strengthen the capacity of the cultural sector to contribute to national life, community wellbeing and the economy. We also assert that it is important that the Policy and Arts recognise History as integral to Australian culture and heritage, and as a creative cultural activity. Within this, volunteer community historical societies should be recognised in the NCP for their contribution to researching, collecting and disseminating our cultural heritage.