



The University of Melbourne's eScholarship Research Centre (ESRC) is a social and cultural informatics research centre, involved in a number of history and archives projects across a range of academic fields. We welcome the opportunity to provide this submission to the National Archives of Australia's Functional and Efficiency review.

The ESRC and its predecessors have been involved in supporting archival work and infrastructure since 1985, and has worked with the NAA on a number of projects in varying capacities. These have ranged from working as partners on ARC grant-funded projects, liaising closely with the NAA to provide information (for example, for projects or exhibitions), accessioning and transferring records to the NAA and using the NAA's collection as a valuable source of records and information for the audiences our projects support. ESRC staff members have also been recipients of Ian MacLean Grants, enabling the fostering of important new research. The NAA is an important partner and source in the work we do. There are, however, limitations on the type of information available, and the way it is provided.

If the NAA is to fulfil its role as the "memory of the nation" it must be modernised both in terms of its capacity and its outlook. Memory is not just the storage of information. It allows for that information to be retrieved when needed. And it is "vital to experiences, it is the retention of information over time for the purpose of influencing future action" (Baddely, 2007).

Whilst the NAA provides significant value to our national heritage, the financial restraints currently facing the institution have impacted on staffing, processing, digitising, and request response times.

For the NAA to fulfil its role as a vital national institution, there are a number of initiatives that will allow for better access to the information contained within the archives, either physically or digitally, ensuring the NAA remains relevant in the national dialogue that challenges not only who we've been, but who we can become.

We have grouped our comments into the areas suggested for consideration in the Review Terms of Reference. It is clear that many issues cross over multiple areas and have multiple effects on how the NAA operates.

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**1. a) The functions performed by the National Archives in discharging its role, and any functions it should cease, continue, transfer or commence;**

The NAA has provided high quality and necessary support to a number of projects that have informed our view of Australian history. We have found the NAA to be highly responsive, and to add significant value at low cost to collaborative projects, such as the Leadership in a Century of Australian Democracy project.

The NAA holds a history of Australia that remains largely secret. Whilst some areas of our past have been written into the national psyche, much of what is known relates to our colonial history, and to the world wars (Cook's landing, Gallipoli, the ANZACs). Australia's history is rich and varied, encompassing many cultures, many ways of life, and multiple prisms through which to see seminal events, giving us a greater understanding of who we are as a people, and the paths that have led us to our current position.

The ESRC has been the beneficiary of the Ian Maclean Award on two occasions (Nikki Henningham in 2005 and Gavan McCarthy in 2007), and notes other important projects have been supported by this Award (e.g. Bruce Smith's work with business archives in 2004). The professional support provided by the NAA exponentially furthered the value provided by seed funding alone, achieving significant outcomes that would not otherwise have been possible at such low cost.

For instance, Dr Nikki Henningham, Executive Officer of the ESRC's Australian Women's Archives Project, received the award in 2005 to locate records relating to the experience of migrant women in Australia and augment the existing holdings of official archival repositories. The project entailed detective work to track down valuable records hidden away in back offices, garages or even under beds; time consuming and labour intensive work that could not have been undertaken without the funding and support of the award. Dr Henningham's labours were published in documentary history website Being Seen and Heard: Migrant Women Organising in Australia (<http://www.womenaustralia.info/exhib/bsah/people.html>). The research was also used to support subsequent projects in collaboration with the NAA, most significantly The Encyclopedia of Women and Leadership in Twentieth Century Australia (<http://www.womenaustralia.info/leaders/>) in 2012.

The Ian Maclean Awards encouraged academics to use the NAA to tell our lesser-known stories. They discovered unexpected stories, (e.g. Eileen Chanin and Steve Miller's 2006 work to recover the untold history of Australian art schools) and stories that give us a fuller account of who we are, that can inform our future as well as our present. The Indigenous Archives Collective is one such important project that was supported by the Award at its inception (to Shannon Faulkhead and Kirsten Thorpe in 2010), and has since gone on to become a multi-faceted, enduring and important archival project. These Awards were discontinued in 2012, leaving many stories untold, forgotten to the memory of our nation.

**Recommendation: The Ian Maclean Awards are recommended.**

**2. b) The capability and resourcing of the National Archives to efficiently and effectively fulfil its essential functions;**

There are a number of issues with the current capacity of the NAA to deliver services that meet current expectations.

The NAA has developed a program of digitisation to make paper records more accessible. Currently, any records that are digitised become public - those that have closed sections are not digitised. This scheme would work better if it was more responsive to the content of the record – making public sections that are not sensitive, and allowing closed sections to remain closed. The non-sensitive information of larger records can also be made public and easily accessible, when a responsive approach could close some sensitive sections of records when they are digitised.

**Recommendation: Develop more responsive processes to allow the contents of records to be open and/or closed to reflect their content.**

State offices can only provide records relating to their own state - those needing to access records that may have been created interstate have to make a physical journey to Canberra to access these records. This is becoming increasingly important as low use state-based records have been relocated back to Canberra for preservation purposes.

In addition, while records are digitised on request for members of the public, there can be significant delays and costs associated with this. The NAA has implemented the Agency Digitisation Service for government agencies wishing to access unclassified records in the NAA's custody. This service could be expanded to include requests from members of the public, to facilitate records access (particularly in remote or regional areas), protect physical records and decrease records request processing times.

**Recommendation: Consider expanding the scope of the Agency Digitisation Service so it is available for members of the public. For records that cannot be digitised, ensure all states offices can make records held in the Canberra office available in their home state or territory.**

Archives can be inaccessible to vulnerable people for a number of reasons: literacy, ability to travel, ability to navigate complex and unfamiliar systems, and discomfort or trauma at negotiating a bureaucracy that may have previously caused them harm. This effectively ensures that the history of the nation, including the history of individual people, remains inaccessible to those who have the greatest interest in accessing them.

The NAA is not currently able to fully meet the recommendations of a number of Royal Commissions and Inquiries, including those identified in the Bringing Them Home, Forgotten Australians and Lost Innocents (Child Migrants) reports, and the final report of the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse; and are unable to provide services that are trauma informed and culturally aware. In some areas, it may be possible for the NAA to partner with support organisations, such as Link-Up or the Find & Connect Support Services, to provide supported records access and release processes.

**Recommendation: Provide more ways of accessing records, digitally or through support organisations, and practice supported access to records that may cause trauma. This access includes the use of language, comfortable accessible spaces, and providing a more human and less bureaucratic interface to those likely to be affected by records (ie Care Leavers, Stolen Generations).**

It has been well publicised that the NAA has difficulties meeting timeframes for access release requests, and that there is a significant backlog of records to be examined for release (almost 26,000 as per the NAA 2017-18 Annual Report). Additionally, the Report on the inquiry into Canberra’s national institutions notes that “the inability of the National Archives of Australia (NAA) to provide access to previously unexamined ‘open period’ documents in a timely manner has had an ‘adverse impact on the brand of the Archives’.”

This has become a significant issue for the NAA. While improvements to the Archives Act and technological innovation may be able to cut some processing times, responding to access requests is a time-consuming exercise that requires adequate resourcing.

Responding to records access requests is a key function of the NAA and enables its records to be accessed and used by all Australians. It is imperative that this work be properly resourced and staff are properly trained and supported in doing this work.

**Recommendation: Increase staff capacity to allow for improved processing times for records access requests.**

**Recommendation: Review practices of international archives to determine a faster way to provide public access to records that is more responsive to sensitive information.**

**Recommendation: Exempt the NAA from the efficiency dividend.**

**Recommendation: No further average staffing levels (ASL) cuts; increase staffing to complete the core functions of the NAA, as determined by the NAA.**

### **3. c) The efficiency of spending by the National Archives and its budget position;**

“In evidence given to its inquiry the Committee received a resounding endorsement of the value and role of Canberra’s national institutions, including that they are ‘fundamental to our self-understanding as a people and a society’, and that together, they represent ‘who we are—to understand what it means to be in Australia and to have a greater belief in ourselves’.” *Telling Australia’s Story —and why it’s important Report on the inquiry into Canberra’s national institutions.*

It could be considered that, out of all the national institutions, the NAA is in a position to fulfil this role most completely – in fact, it may be the institution best able to ensure Australians “better understand their heritage and democracy”.

The NAA holds a history of Australia far more comprehensive and nuanced than the few pervasive myths and stories our nation relies on to form our identity, and to influence important decisions about the future.

Current funding arrangements for Canberra's national institutions favour military history, which is now more significant in our culture than it has been at any time in our past and has a significant impact on how we see ourselves. However, our history stretches back far before the World Wars, and continues on long after them. Our identity is formed of numerous interlinked parts, many cultures, many identities.

The NAA can tell this, complete, story of our nation. It is the institution that holds the key to our rich history and the many layers of our identity, including waves of migration, the many women who built this country and who's stories remain locked in the archive, and the ongoing contact between European settlers and the oldest living culture in the world.

If the NAA is to perform its role as the memory of a nation, it must be in a position to retrieve all our stories; to provide a comprehensive history and understanding of what has shaped us, and what will continue to influence us.

We cannot fully embrace ourselves as a nation if our history is only of the few, if it narrows and bleaches the richly coloured threads of our past, and our identity.

#### **4. d) Any barriers (resourcing, legislative or other) preventing the National Archives from fulfilling its core outcomes and functions;**

The NAA outsources the archiving of websites to the NLA through the Pandora Archive, the Australian Government Web Archive and most recently the Australian Web Archive. While there is no need for a duplication in effort across the cultural institutions, it is important that the NAA ensures the websites are accurately and accessibly captured.

Currently the *Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse* website is being captured by the AGWA and is still being made available by the Attorney-General's office. Unfortunately, when the live version is no longer available much functionality will be lost, restricting access to incredibly valuable records. In the archived version of the site the website is no longer searchable, few of the external links work (including those which offer victims and survivors support), some of the PDFs are unavailable, and only one page of the Images & Video library (34 pages) and one page of the Document library (2948 pages) will be accessible. The archived website is also unavailable via Google and other search engines, meaning many people will not realise an archived version exists. It is important that websites that represent a significant moment in our history remain available, usable and include all the content they did when they were live.

Additionally, other forms of online engagement from government agencies are not being captured comprehensively. This includes social media accounts and videos hosted on YouTube. As these are now a key method government agencies communicate with the public, consideration must be given to the capture and archiving of these too.

**Recommendation: Maintain access to websites and other engagement platforms such that these digital records remain as they were prior to archiving, following the practice of institutions such as The National Archives UK and the UK Government Web Archive, for those who most value their information.**