



AAH Policy

FUNCTIONAL AND EFFICIENCY REVIEW OF THE NATIONAL ARCHIVES OF AUSTRALIA JUNE 2019

The [Australian Academy of the Humanities](#) (AAH) welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission to the Functional and Efficiency Review of the National Archives of Australia (NAA).

The Academy is the peak national body for the humanities in Australia and one of the nation's four Learned Academies. Established by Royal Charter in 1969, the Academy has over 600 elected Fellows who are leaders and experts in the fields of education and research that investigate human cultures, values and beliefs.

In our brief submission we address the Review's Terms of Reference about the "enduring role" of the National Archives in the "protection, preservation and use of Commonwealth information" – with particular emphasis on how it might best perform this role in the digital age.

The NAA is a unique institution:

1. Most Australians have some presence in the NAA's collections. These are an invaluable resource for the full range of Australians who want to understand the lives of their forebears right through to advanced academic and professional research communities.
2. The NAA holds military and migration records of exceptional significance with relevance to the personal lives of Australians as well as to the story of our nation.
3. The NAA has prioritised being accessible in every state and territory through its public research centres, providing important infrastructure for professional, academic and amateur/family researchers. This is a service which reflects a unique commitment to the communities it serves.

We are aware that the National Archives Advisory Council has expressed its concern that the current funding position of the NAA, which has been impacted by savings measures (including the efficiency dividend), is such that there is a risk to its meeting its legislative responsibilities. This is particularly concerning given the NAA's unique remit and has consequences for our modern democracy.

We are aware of concerns that researchers and professional associations have with the NAA's capacity to service demand, processing times and obstacles with clearing records through originating Departments. The Australian Historical Association's suggestion of a body modelled on the [UK example](#) which can represent "the public interest in deciding what records should be open or closed" has merit, and we support consideration of other such mechanisms for advice and consultation with stakeholder communities.

Submissions to last year's [Inquiry into Canberra's National Institutions](#) highlighted concerns with the NAA's ageing infrastructure and legislation not keeping pace with digital

AUSTRALIAN ACADEMY OF THE HUMANITIES

transformations. There is a clear need to modernise infrastructure to enable the NAA to perform its legislative responsibilities into the future and to also service its research user base in a changing operating environment. One of the recommendations of the Inquiry was that digitisation is a fundamental part of this process, with specific attention to collections at risk:

“the Australian Government acknowledge the need for the digitisation of analogue audio-visual items in the collections of the institutions, to ensure that all such material is digitally preserved by 2025, and develop a clear and coherent whole of government strategy across institutions to get this done.” ([Telling Australia’s Story – and why it’s important](#), p.126).

For humanities researchers, the NAA is a fundamental part of the data, information and research infrastructure that builds innovation and research capacity in Australia. Much of the data that humanities researchers need to undertake advanced research is a combination of public sector data and data collected, managed and held by cultural and collecting institutions.

The 2016 [National Research Infrastructure Roadmap](#) identified the role of archives, alongside galleries, libraries, and museums as integral partners in a collective enterprise for national-scale infrastructure for Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences (HASS) and Indigenous research to “drive transformations in the way researchers discover, access, curate and analyse social and cultural data”. The Government’s response to the Roadmap includes a major [Scoping Study for HASS and Indigenous Platforms](#) which “will be undertaken in collaboration with key stakeholders to explore the technical requirements, existing activity that can be leveraged, implementation approaches and co-investment”.

Already projects such as the [Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences Data Enhanced Virtual Lab](#) (HASS DeVL) in partnership with projects such as the [Prosecution Project](#) have started to develop use cases and workflows for data sharing and interoperability. They have been able to make very productive use of the digitised archive as it stands but there remain major challenges to achieving transformations in productivity that can only be overcome by strategic investment in digitisation.

The Academy would welcome the Review’s consideration of ways to strengthen research sector advisory mechanisms and a discussion of the potential for more strategic collaboration with the research sector. The NAA is a major resource for all Australians. It should be encouraged to continue to outreach with stakeholder communities, including citizen researchers.