



Response to the Tune Review

Associate Dean Research, 28 June 2019

Arts & Social Sciences at UNSW Sydney is pleased to be able to contribute via the Advisory Council to the Tune Review of the National Archives of Australia (NAA).

The NAA houses our national record – including materials pertaining to topics as diverse as crime, politics, indigenous studies, Australian foreign policy and Australia's society, culture, science and economy. As such, in our Faculty, it underpins research and teaching in fields as diverse as Australian History, Asian Studies, Social Sciences, Public Health, Literature, Law and the Environmental Humanities. In short, these archives support a wide range of scholarly endeavour crucial to the global standing of scholars and researchers in Australia – which in turn underwrites an enormous export industry in tertiary education. Moreover, these archives are crucial to bringing scholars here to enhance global knowledge about and engagement with Australia. Accordingly, ready access to materials in the NAA is of vital national interest.

The suggestions which follow echo those of the Australian Historical Association, the Professional Historians of Australia and UNSW Canberra.

Capacity to fulfil legislated function

We note the NAA Advisory Council's recent statement that, due to underfunding, it is struggling to meet its legislated functions as a national repository. This is a critical risk to researchers, future generations of Australians, and to future governments all of whom share a public interest in the records of past regimes.

Timely access

At present, the NAA is unable to provide timely access to materials and has imposed new limits on the number of items researchers may request due to chronic understaffing. Some files take months or years to be processed for viewing, creating untenable lags in researcher access.

Our colleagues at UNSW Canberra relate that as much as 60 per cent of the archive's holdings are not searchable through Record Search, a system which itself is difficult to use and in need of urgent upgrading.

The problem of understaffing appears to be exacerbated by flawed procedures that require the circulation of materials to the department that produced them for clearance. These processes do not meet international best practice.

Liberal access

Historians have reported increasingly restrictive decisions to redact or withhold materials after the expiration of the 50-year restriction rule, many of which carry no relevance to present government concerns. Such restrictions stifle research and are corrosive of democracy. We hope, therefore, that clearance processes will not only be expedited, but made more liberal.

Digitisation

We encourage the archives to review its digitisation pricing and procedure so that it can better partner with members of the public and government-funded researchers to make more material freely available at lower cost. For example, the archive could allow research assistants or volunteers to assist in the digitisation process in order to digitise important collections cheaply. Volunteers are inducted by the UK National Archives for this purpose. Digitisation should be not be a revenue raising service as it is a vital democratising function.

We thank you for considering our submission.

Sincerely,



Professor Lisa Ford
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