

## Submission to the Tune Review of the National Archives

In decades gone by, the National Archives of Australia was a world leader in a number of areas – not least its innovative uses of digitization to improve equity of access across the country to its holdings. It also used to run a quality reference service, and archival qualifications were valued amongst its staff. More broadly, the Commonwealth public service used to include recordkeeping as part of its graduate and other training programmes, raising awareness of the importance of recordkeeping amongst all the public service.

While there are many issues that could be raised, including issues with concerns about the management of and access to records created by outsourced government functions (for example, personal records of asylum seekers held offshore), and the need for ongoing funding for the development of a nationally accessible, trusted and future-proof digital repository, I will restrict my comments to my more recent experiences as an historian with specialist archival knowledge and experience from having worked in cultural institutions.

### **The federated model for the National Archives is broken.**

The principle that records created and once held in what Canberra delicately terms ‘outlier’ states, (in this case Western Australia), are no longer held in that state. Now, records created in, and which are significant to, the identity and history of Western Australia are no longer held in the Western Australian regional office. Thus, the federal model is broken.

The National Archives recently transferred 6km of records to Sydney, including the vast and rich Dept of Veterans Affairs repatriation records which have such significance to WA and which are not digitised. This was conducted without widespread consultation and few, if any, historians, scientists or medical researchers with deep interest in and knowledge of the research potential of those records were consulted. The lack of consultation wasted the opportunity to hear proposals for other records to be transferred that have already been digitized and therefore are widely available, such as immigration records.

Planned research can now no longer go ahead as the resources have been whisked away to Sydney. This transfer from Western Australia was conducted in an opaque manner without full consultation – this poor process has significantly increased the distrust that many have in the National Archives, and its status as a federal organization.

### **We are a long way away**

The policies of the National Archives **actively discriminate against** researchers outside the ‘golden triangle’ of Sydney, Canberra and Melbourne through poor documentation about its holdings, prohibitive costs of digitization and poor quality reference services.

As an international organization, the National Archives may partake in ‘soft-power diplomacy’, but it is also a national organization that should be funded to provide equitable access independent of distance to records it holds.

### **We do not know what is held**

There are many series of records which have yet to have their file titles entered into the searchable catalogue. Until this has been completed, researchers have no way of knowing what is held unless they visit the search room in the particular state where the records are held.

### **There is little quality help through the remote reference service**

The quality of remote reference services has declined to the point that responses to requests, which can take many weeks to receive, are no more than repetitions of what is contained in an initial query. This is at best unprofessional, and poor quality remote references services are now a significant barrier when planning what have become increasingly expensive interstate

research visits.

### **The costs are prohibitive**

The cost of digitizing records reduces access to Australia's heritage and core information and places records at risk through being handled more than necessary. While the National Archives is to be lauded for its principled policy of placing records that have been digitized online for future free public access, the costs of digitizing records can come in at over \$200 for a single file – this is an extraordinarily high price to pay if you have no clear idea as to the contents of the file.

In the past decade funding has decreased so dramatically to the National Archives that those wishing to conduct research using the collections held across Australia now face significant cost and information barriers to the point that research is well-nigh impossible from records held interstate.

### **We'll be dead before we get access**

The significant delays in gaining access to restricted materials are inhibiting research. For example, requests for army and ASIO records that fall off the 'perch' and take longer than 90 days mean that researchers need to repeat requests every 90 days in the hope that within a lifetime this record may be reviewed and released.

### **Recommendations**

The National Archives is a vital component in the mosaic of cultural heritage institutions – they provide the official records that compliment those created by private organizations, individuals and held in publications held in other organizations. The National Archives also have a range of responsibilities that are less visible to the public yet are vital to our democracy – in ensuring that good records are created, managed and preserved

#### **1) Streamline processes to review access to restricted records**

As I understand it, the current system is that the National Archives reviews access to restricted records or those in the open period (20 years) that have not been reviewed in consultation with the creating agency. This means that when there are problems with this process caused by the creating agency, the reputational damage sticks to the National Archives.

I suggest re-engineering the access regimes so that the creating agency is responsible for identifying access regimes for open access period records at the time of transfer to the Archives, and that where the work has not been completed at the time of transfer that the records are presumed to be open.

#### **2) Scan lists of files held in search rooms**

The listings of files held in search rooms where the records are held can easily be scanned to pdf and attached to the series record until such time as each file title has been entered. This then provides interim discovery to holdings.

#### **3) Additional reference services**

Provide researchers in 'outlier' states with enhanced access services to records that take into account the costs and distance from repositories. For example provide enhanced reference services and a service that enables staff to describe the contents of a file prior to digitization (\$200 is a lot to throw away on a file that turns out to be irrelevant).

#### **4) Digitisation costs**

Reduce the costs of digitization, as the benefits spread well beyond the individual to any other interested parties, and also save wear and tear on the original records.

### **5) Broaden your partnerships**

While historians are natural friends of the National Archives, and genealogists its natural advocates, the pertinence of holdings of records vital to our understanding of science and climate are less well known. The National Archives should actively foster partnerships outside the humanities much more widely, and seek representation of scientists on its Council.

### **6) Funding**

The efficiency dividend is killing not only our access to the public record of the government, but killing the records themselves. The National Archives needs to be properly funded to fulfill its records management, preservation and access services in a manner which is equitable to all Australians independent of where they live.

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