

Response: A new National Cultural Policy (2022)

NATIONAL AND STATE LIBRARIES AUSTRALASIA (NSLA)

National and State Libraries Australasia (NSLA) can be classified as an **arts peak body**. NSLA represents the national, state and territory libraries of Australia and New Zealand. NSLA member libraries are:

- National Library of Australia
- National Library of New Zealand
- State Library of New South Wales
- State Library of Queensland
- State Library of South Australia
- State Library Victoria
- State Library of Western Australia
- Libraries ACT
- Library & Archives NT
- Libraries Tasmania

1. First Nations

Challenges and opportunities for the sector

- Our challenge is in strengthening trust and working relationships between First Nations communities and institutions with colonial origins. This includes making the cultural and structural changes necessary within those institutions to attract and retain First Nations peoples in the workforce.
- We cannot underestimate the importance, complexity and necessary expense of the work involved in ensuring that collections are acquired, described, and accessed in culturally appropriate ways. This includes continual retrospective work on collections acquired in the past.
- We have an opportunity to commit to provision of cultural capability training with proven results (e.g. Core Cultural Learning by AIATSIS); to a policy of recognition and restitution in the way that First Nations collections are managed; and to increasing the proportion of First Nations staff in Australian cultural institutions. We must make use of improved technology to work together and avoid overloading individuals or communities with cultural labour in fielding multiple requests from different institutions across Australia.

Importance to NSLA libraries

The information held within our institutions is a powerful resource for Australian First Nations peoples, and the collection materials we hold can be both enlightening and wounding. The sensitivity and significance of these materials mean that we have a particular responsibility to show leadership in delivering respectful, culturally appropriate services.

Between 2018-2021, NSLA funded one of the most challenging collaborative projects in its history: the Culturally Safe Libraries Program¹. In under three years, cultural capability training (online and in-person) was delivered to 2,000 staff, and continues to be delivered to new staff; First Nations collections workshops were facilitated in nine libraries around Australia; and a [suite of online resources](#) for the library sector was launched to provide practical guidance alongside the [ATSILIRN Protocols](#).

Our work continues in 2022 with further training in Indigenous Cultural and Intellectual Property (ICIP), and a collaboration to develop First Nations collection description guidelines. We will work with AIATSIS, the Australian Library and Information Association (ALIA) and the Council of Australian University Librarians (CAUL), following an international project on descriptive workflows led by [OCLC](#) in the United States. Our challenge is in developing and implementing projects of this scale within BAU budgets.

¹ <https://www.nsla.org.au/our-work/culturally-safe-libraries>

2. A place for every story

Challenges and opportunities for the sector

- Our challenge is in ensuring that our cultural institutions are welcoming to the full diversity of our communities – in practice as well as policy – and that our collections also reflect diverse perspectives.
- Our opportunity is in the technology that makes capturing and sharing Australian narratives easier and more affordable than ever. The challenge alongside this is in long-term preservation and access.

Importance to NSLA libraries

Capturing the full diversity of Australian stories has been a central tenet of NSLA libraries for decades. Our programs, exhibitions and collection policies are all designed with this in mind, and our formal professional networks ensure that good practice is shared. We know that sharing stories contributes to empathy, awareness, understanding, democratic processes and tolerance in the community.

Every story captured, however, must be described, preserved, and made accessible for future generations as well as for today's readers and researchers. This is deceptively challenging for digital material given the expectation that NSLA libraries will safely preserve content in perpetuity. If we want to encourage the development of Australian narratives, we must support cultural institutions in the resource-intensive work and infrastructure required to preserve and share them.

3. Centrality of the Artist

Challenges and opportunities for the sector

- Our challenge is in striking the balance between intellectual property and access. Libraries provide equitable access to Australian content, both to educate and to inspire further creation. We do this in the context of appropriate acknowledgement and remuneration for creators, but there can be tension between the two drivers. Our opportunity is in adopting copyright legislation reform that will allow collecting institutions to provide the broadest possible public access to digital and digitised content while protecting the commercial interests of content creators.
- Library jobs are arts sector jobs. We are suffering from a lack of affordable and accessible pathways to the library profession. We have an opportunity to change this by supporting ALIA's Professional Pathways program², and opportunities for cross-sector work exchange and mentorship.
- Libraries have a strong partnership with the literary sector. We have an opportunity to foster our shared cultural identity by supporting new Australian literature – fiction and non-fiction – and particularly by supporting First Nations literature.

Importance to NSLA libraries

In addition to targeted programs, such as fellowships and residencies for writers and historians, artists and creative workers, NSLA libraries provide the published and original source material behind an inestimable number of creative projects. This can include music recordings and sheet music, oral histories, photographs, posters, manuscripts, paintings and sculptures, rare books, artists' books and sketches. Our libraries also provide staff expertise, facilities and working spaces.

To support creative workers using library collections, we must also support library workers (many of whom are artists or creative workers in their own right). A lack of affordable and accessible pathways into the library profession – and the capacity for libraries to offer competitive salaries – are barriers to our most effective operation as cultural institutions and custodians of the national heritage.

² <https://professionalpathways.alia.org.au/>

4. Strong institutions

Challenges and opportunities for the sector

- Our challenge is with the legacy of project-based or short-term funding models that have left institutions with responsibility for sustaining systems and programs, without the requisite budget.
- User expectations have changed as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic. Services and programs are expected to be delivered in both physical and digital form, and cultural sector organisations have been expected to adapt quickly to deliver these, despite a depleted workforce and restricted funding.
- The impacts of climate change, including natural disasters such as fire and flooding, continue to present a challenge to cultural institutions in keeping collections safe and in managing the costs of disaster recovery.
- We have an opportunity to sustainably fund reliable, scalable national digital infrastructure that can support cultural institutions, smaller arts organisations and individual creative workers right across Australia. The logical basis for this national infrastructure is [Trove](#).

Importance to NSLA libraries

NSLA libraries are critical institutions in the Australian arts and cultural sector. We are not only collecting institutions responsible for preserving our national documentary heritage, but also venues – hosting community programs, fellowships, music concerts, art exhibitions, training workshops, educational programs, and catered functions. This multi-faceted role of libraries must not be overlooked in a new cultural policy for Australia.

Thanks to the success of our public programs, NSLA libraries have extraordinary reach and strong reputations as trusted institutions, but it cannot be assumed that we have the resources to deliver the services expected by communities in addition to the work that we have a legislative mandate to do.

Some of our most important work is invisible to the public, particularly in conservation, digital preservation, and safe storage for invaluable national collections. These operations rely upon increasingly expensive digital infrastructure and physical storage. NSLA libraries have a long history of collaboration in digital collecting, with all Australian members making significant contributions to Trove, and co-investing in the world-first National eDeposit ([NED](#)) service for electronic publications under legal deposit legislation. Support to improve and sustain this national digital infrastructure, and to allow all NSLA libraries to make their collections accessible, will have far-reaching benefits for cultural institutions large and small.

Attributions and publication

NSLA welcomes the opportunity to comment in response to a proposed new national cultural policy for Australia. We contend that supporting the systems and human resources necessary to preserve and deliver Australian content is vital to supporting individual artists and creative workers.

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