



Science & Technology AUSTRALIA

Inquiry into Canberra's National Institutions

8 May 2018

To the Joint Standing Committee on the National Capital and External Territories,

Thank you for the opportunity to respond to the Inquiry into Canberra's national institutions.

Science & Technology Australia (STA) is a peak representative body for over 70,000+ scientists and technologists in Australia. STA considers the national institutions in Canberra to be essential for sourcing, preserving and providing access to some of the nation's most valuable collections and stories.

High-performing national institutions enable researchers across disciplines to draw from a wide range of valuable and nationally significant resources, data and specimens; they also provide public pathways to access and explore the stories that have shaped our communities, our nation, and our world.

Crucial to the success of our national institutions are stable funding, independent governance, effective and comprehensive outreach, and expanded digital capabilities.

Our specific recommendations include:

- legislative requirements of National Institutions (i.e. the Institution's basic programs and functions) be assured through the provision of consistent public funding, that is unaffected by efficiency dividends;
- public investment be flexible enough to allow for the attraction of private financial partnerships for new programs;
- control over content and programs remains independent of any government department or legislator;
- governance structures and funding mechanisms encourage and incentivise enhanced and extended collaboration between national institutions;
- national institutions be empowered to be early adopters of technology for the purpose of amplifying their programs and expanding their outreach.

With priority given to these areas, the important work undertaken by our national institutions has the potential to shape a positive future for us all. Please find our detailed feedback below: thank you for considering our submission.



Kylie Walker
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The importance of Canberra's national institutions

Canberra's national institutions comprise cultural and scientific institutions that are of great significance to the Australian people. These institutions include but are not limited to the National Gallery; National Portrait Gallery; National Film and Sound Archives; Questacon, the National Science and Technology Centre; National Library; National Museum; National Archives; and the War Memorial.

These institutions not only house collections of great significance to Australia's past, present and future, but also provide rich material that empowers researchers to better understand the world around us. One of the most important functions of these institutions is public outreach, which now extends across the nation thanks largely to developments in digital technology.

These cultural and scientific national institutions were visited by groups from more than 10,000 Australian schools in 2016-17, a record number. Questacon alone attracted more than 500,000 visitors¹ in total over the 12 months.

The impact of these visits is cumulative: visitors (and in particular educators) pass on the stories and lessons from our cultural institutions to their own communities.

The institutions are also champions of the less well-known stories of Australian culture and history. They share the wonders of mathematics and physics for example, inspiring fields of scientific endeavour that would otherwise go left untold.

Legislated requirements and public funding

In 2016, an efficiency dividend cut \$4.4 million from the Australian Library resulting in the loss of 22 full-time positions among the core library staff. These cuts came from the Library's digitisation project, which is one of the only mechanisms by which the Library can provide access to its vast and valuable collections to the rest of the country². This directly affects the National Library's legislated requirement "to make library material in the national collection available to such persons and institutions, and in such manner and subject to such conditions, as the Council determines with a view to the most **advantageous** use of that collection in the national interest;³" particularly in a digital age.

Similarly, the National Archives has a legislative requirement (Part 5, division 3, section 40[3])⁴ to provide a decision regarding requests by the public to access records within 90 days of the request being made. Due to a funding shortfall of

¹ ["Questacon Annual Review 2017" Questacon, 2017](#)

² ["National Library funding cuts to have 'grave impact' with 22 staff set to lose jobs" ABC news, 2016](#)

³ ["National Library Act 1960" Federal Register of Legislation, Accessed May 2018](#)

⁴ ["Archives Act 1983" Federal Register of Legislation, Accessed May 2018](#)

\$4 million, the National Archives reported it was unable to meet that requirement in 2016⁵ according to the annual report⁶.

STA is concerned that some core functions of national institutions have been hampered by efficiency dividends and unstable funding. These cuts put pressure on national institutions to focus constantly on funding basic operations and requirements, hampering their ability to excel and to innovate⁷.

Not only does this negatively impact important research, it also detracts from the role of these institutions to maintain, develop and make available to the Australian people these materials and collections.

STA recommends that legislative requirements of national institutions (i.e. basic programs and functions) be assured through the provision of consistent public investment unaffected by efficiency dividends.

The national institutions are varied in nature, and because of these differences, their opportunity to create alternate income streams is also varied.

As an example, Questacon has some of the most successful outreach programs, most of which are funded through private partnerships built on stable internal resourcing. We believe all national institutions should be provided sufficient public seed funding to allow the development of world-class programs, and the capacity to attract private investment to enhance and expand them.

We recommend a system in which private funding is quarantined for the development of new programs, while existing core programs and functions are secured through long-term public investment.

Institutions such as the National Library and the National Archives both provide examples of where a lack of public funding has not only decreased the basic capability of these institutions but is also stifling the development of new programs.

STA recommends that public investment be flexible enough to allow for the attraction of private funding for new programs.

Governance

Governance of the national institutions should maintain a balance between accountability and independence. It is appropriate that national institutions remain accountable to the federal government.

⁵ [“Déjà vu: inquiry into funding cuts for Canberra’s cultural institutions has a familiar ring” The Sydney Morning Herald, 2018](#)

⁶ [“National Archives of Australia and National Archives of Australia Advisory Council Annual Report 2015-16” National Archives of Australia, 2016](#)

⁷ [“A portrait of Failure: Ongoing funding cuts to Australia’s cultural institutions” Community Public Sector Union, 2016](#)

There are also advantages to managing internal administration (such as human resources, financial administration etc.) through a relevant federal government department.

However, the reliance of these institutions on public funding should not place pressure on the institution to tailor content to the priorities of the government of the day. It is important that, as national institutions, they maintain independence in leading public discourse, and are free to inform their work by the best possible evidence.

STA recommends that control over content and programs remains independent of any government department or legislator (while maintaining close collaboration with the relevant national objectives).

There is also much to be gained from greater collaboration between national institutions, particularly when considering the cumulative effect of regional and rural outreach.

This will allow collective leverage of outreach activities and amplifies the potential for institutions to seek sponsorship or support as a consortium.

STA would welcome governance structures and funding mechanisms that encourage and incentivise enhanced and extended collaboration between national institutions.

Conducting outreach beyond Canberra

To maximise their impact, national institutions must be empowered to engage Australians beyond their physical premises in Canberra. Achieving successful outreach is particularly important in regional or rural areas.

Schools are the ideal target for this outreach, as existing programs can be expanded and the benefits amplified through collaboration with teachers.

STA encourages the Committee to consider the benefits of collaborative outreach activities that connect national institutions with local community facilities – such as libraries, schools, community centres, etc.

This outreach would be greatly enhanced by up-to-date digital resources highlighting opportunities and programs to local communities.

STA recommends supporting the development of website to host information on programs available from all of the national institutions.

This would allow potential participants (students, schools, community members, etc.) to keep up to date with what was happening in their local area.

This website should meet best-practice accessibility requirements to ensure as many Australians as possible can engage.

Expanded digital capacity

Expanded digital capacity for our institutions means one thing – amplification.

Our national institutions currently provide access to a variety of digital resources, through platforms such as online libraries, official websites, video conferences or live streams, and other written, photographic and video content. However, the delivery of these to audiences is limited and could be enhanced.

The digital space is growing, and with this growth many more platforms have emerged with which to deliver this content – such as virtual reality, social media, massive online open courses (MOOCs) and apps for mobile devices.

With a ‘digital membership’ for students or members of the public, Australians could be inspired to unlock access to a suite of interactive digital and digitised resources from our institutions.

STA recommends that national institutions be empowered to be early adopters of technology for the purpose of amplifying their programs and expanding their outreach.

The value of face-to-face engagement at our national institutions cannot be entirely replaced using digital tools. Rather, digital access should serve as a gateway, inspiring Australians to access collections in person, and face-to-face programs either delivered in their local area through outreach programs, or when they next travel to Canberra.