Sustaining university collections in a changing climate: 
the University of Melbourne

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By Belinda Nemec, University of Melbourne

Abstract

The museums, archives, herbaria, rare book libraries and other cultural collections owned by universities mostly serve different purposes today from when they were originally established, usually for the purposes of supporting teaching or research. Over time, academic disciplines rise and fall in popularity; pedagogical and research methods change; university funding in Australia has shifted away from government subsidies towards student, corporate and philanthropic sources; and the interests and enthusiasms of individual staff and students fluctuate.

The University of Melbourne is attempting to manage its 32 cultural collections in a way that is sustainable in the long term, and therefore able to cope with these continuing changes. It is also keen to use the collections to help the University deliver its ‘triple helix’ of teaching and learning, research and research training, and knowledge transfer.

This paper outlines the steps taken to date towards this goal. These include establishing a central, co-ordinating committee structure with a small team of central staff to assist all collection managers across faculties and departments; more consistent management policies and procedures supported by an internal audit program; increased communication and cooperation between collections; a dedicated student projects program; a grants program; fundraising efforts; and increased promotion of the collections within the University community through publications, events, exhibitions and web presence.

The views and opinions expressed in this paper are those of the author, and not necessarily those of the University of Melbourne – Belinda Nemec, May 2007
Sustaining university collections in a changing climate: the University of Melbourne

Australian universities have been working hard over the last decade and more to survive, adapt, and hopefully thrive in a fast-changing political, social and economic environment.

Continuing reductions in government financial support to tertiary education have made the universities more dependent on income from students, including local and international full-fee paying students, as well as from commercial activities, corporate support and philanthropy.

At the same time, many students are struggling to support themselves financially, or are anxious to pursue a career that will enable them to pay back in reasonable time the substantial debts they are accruing through HECS, FEE-HELP or other loan arrangements.

Academic faculties and departments feel obliged to focus their available resources on maintaining and upgrading those facilities which are directly applicable to teaching and research. It is very difficult for them to allocate scarce money, space and staff to activities which they and their students would perceive as being of secondary usefulness, such as the care of their cultural heritage represented by their historical collections.

Similarly, academic libraries are increasingly investing in electronic and online resources, sometimes to the possible detriment of physical collections. While the switch, for example, from journals in print format to online format is generally welcomed by users for the easy searchability and accessibility from remote locations, and by librarians for the reduced processing time and physical storage requirements, this trend can conflict with the interests of the irreplaceable rare books, manuscripts and other cultural collections which by definition exist as real rather than virtual objects. While general printed-format collections are perhaps taking up less space in libraries, more space is needed for computing facilities in order to access their virtual replacements. These facilities are, however, expensive to purchase, maintain and regularly upgrade, leaving less money for the preservation of physical collections such as rare books.

It has been my observation that specific subject expertise is not as highly valued by library management in the current environment. Transferable information technology skills are considered more useful. We are fortunate at the University of Melbourne to have expert curators in many of our museums and collections, although in some of our smaller libraries such as architecture we no longer have a specialist librarian. But without the specialised subject knowledge that can only be built up over many years, collection development can founder as a result of lack of curatorial vision and knowledge of the field.
The significance of rare materials offered to the library can go unrecognized resulting in missed opportunities, or, conversely can be overestimated, resulting in inappropriate acquisitions.

The University of Melbourne, although one of the wealthier universities in Australia, is subject to the same financial and organisational pressures as all other Australian universities. In addition, our university is implementing a radical reform of its curriculum. This is called the Melbourne Model and will start with first year undergraduate enrolments in the 2008 academic year.¹ The Melbourne Model is based on six broad undergraduate programs followed by a vocational postgraduate degree, research higher degree or entry directly into employment. The emphasis is on academic breadth as well as disciplinary depth (whereas the latter was the emphasis of the old degree structure).

Basically, the Melbourne Model undergraduate students will undertake one of six new three-year Bachelor degrees: Arts, Sciences, Biomedicine, Environments, Music, or Commerce. Students may then move directly into the workforce, or remain at university to undertake a more specialised graduate professional degree in a discipline such as Medicine, Dentistry, Law, Architecture, Nursing or Teaching. Other students may take an honours program after their three-year bachelor or move into a master by research or from honours or masters into a PhD.

By leaving subject specialisation to a later stage of the educational process, it is hoped that all graduates will have a greater breadth of knowledge. It also recognises that it can be difficult for 16- and 17-year olds to predict the career they wish to pursue. By leaving their options open in the earlier years hopefully they can make a more informed choice at a more mature age.

This new curriculum holds significant opportunities for using the Cultural Collections. The new Bachelor degrees, for example, require every student to enrol in subjects outside their discipline. ‘Breadth’ subjects are being developed which will include students from all six undergraduate degrees. Under the leadership of the University’s Centre for Cultural Materials Conservation, Melbourne is developing a breadth subject called ‘Learning Cultures’ that will expose students to an information resource that many may never before have encountered: the object, as opposed to the text. Students will work with some of the wide variety of collections at the University and will benefit from lectures by experts in both managing and using collections.

Another feature of the Melbourne Model is the **Melbourne Experience**. Our University emphasises the campus experience. While it does offer some e-learning modules, it does not offer entire degree programs by distance learning. It wants to encourage students to be on campus as much as possible, to engage directly with their peers, the staff, and the place itself.

The collections can play an important role here. We are fortunate in having a campus rich in architectural history and beautiful landscaping, all complemented by more than sixty outdoor sculptures and murals, plus another thousand-plus artworks in foyers, reception areas, lecture halls, offices and the like. In addition, a number of our collections are open to drop-in visitors: The Ian Potter Museum of Art, the Henry Forman Atkinson Dental Museum, the Medical History Museum, the Physics Museum and the Grainger Museum (the latter due to re-open in 2008 following conservation works).

Informal activity surrounding cultural collections can help students enjoy their campus experience, meet people from outside their academic cohort, and gain an understanding of local culture and history. One element of my role as Cultural Collections Co-ordinator is administering a small grants program for which all the collections may apply. Some grants have been for ‘display enhancement’. For example, the Physics Museum commissioned a new set of interpretive panels to provide a sense of space and presence, and to outline the major themes of its permanent display area.

The potential audience for this collection extends beyond physics students and staff. It includes early X-ray tubes, electrical measuring instruments, and in particular, the history of the University of Melbourne’s key role in developing a local optical munitions industry during the Second World War. Installation of the panels has alerted many people to the existence of the Physics Museum and has attracted favourable comment and feedback. The displays are more easily understood, particularly by the non-specialist visitor.

The Surveying and Geomatic Engineering Collection also received a grant to commission new interpretive panels and to purchase better showcases. The presentation of this, the smallest of all our 32 collections (totalling about 80 objects illustrating the history of surveying, and the teaching of surveying, in Victoria) has been significantly improved as a result.

The genesis of each University collection lies, for the most part, in teaching and research. For example, the measuring chains, steel bands, theodolites and global positioning system instruments in the Surveying and Geomatic Engineering Collection were originally used to teach young surveyors. As technology develops the earlier tools become obsolete in the field and their interest becomes a historical one. Fortunately, this historical significance was recognised by some Geomatics staff and a
selection of items was preserved. But without a permanent administrative structure, well-publicised policy and minimum requirements, and a collection catalogue and other management infrastructure, such collections can lose corporate support, and their place in the organisation. Fashions come and go in academic teaching. The 1970s for example saw a resources boom in Australia’s mining sector, with a real emphasis on the teaching of earth sciences. This academic area has subsequently declined and, as Andrew Simpson has written, the substantial collections have in some cases been sadly neglected. In Melbourne’s case, many of the most significant mineral specimens have been transferred over the past twenty years to Museum Victoria, but while this has ensured that the specimens will be preserved in the public sphere, their link with the University has been broken and the transfer has not solved the underlying problem of managing the remaining specimens, a few of which are of historical significance to the University, but the bulk of which (and it is quite a large volume) are of low significance, due in no small part to the loss, over time, of relevant documentation. This collection has no paid staff and no budget and languishes in a basement. Universities need to recognise that they are custodians of elements of the distributed national collection. Their responsibilities therefore extend beyond meeting the teaching and research needs of the current generation of students. While universities today may be largely privately funded, although public-spirited (to use Melbourne’s own definition), the collections were created in different times, and will (hopefully) survive into future different times. Decisions on the resourcing of collections need to be made in this longer-term historical context.

‘Knowledge Transfer’ is the name given to the third strand of Melbourne’s ‘Triple Helix’ (the first two strands being Teaching and Research). Knowledge Transfer is difficult to define precisely, but broadly it involves connecting students, employers and the community. It can involve, for example, staging an exhibition that will attract local residents onto the campus, commercialising a scientific innovation, or publishing an article about a piece of academic research in a general, non-academic and non-university magazine. It also involves students undertaking professional placements or internships. Since 2004 we have offered a Cultural Collections Student Projects Program which has attracted students from degrees and subjects including Curatorial Studies, Public History, Engineering, Music, Law, Information Technology, Library and Information Studies, and Museum Studies. These projects are open to students not only from Melbourne but other universities, and so far this opportunity has been taken up by students from Deakin, Curtin, RMIT, Monash, and Charles Sturt Universities and Swinburne TAFE. Projects are for a set number of hours per week across one semester and are

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supervised by a collection manager (who may be a curator, registrar, librarian or archivist) with support from the Student Projects Co-ordinator. Each project is clearly defined with a set outcome and timeline, and all student applicants are individually interviewed and matched to a suitable project. Some students undertake the project to fulfil a coursework requirement, such as Lucy Spencer, a Master of Public History student at Monash University, who wrote her Public History Research Thesis on the historical plaster models in the Harry Brookes Allen Museum of Anatomy and Pathology.

Other students simply want to improve their CVs, or even indulge a personal interest. Maria Tallarida, a Master of Art Curatorship student at Melbourne, sought some extra hands-on experience working with collections. She catalogued and photographed a series of architectural drawings produced by students at the University’s Architectural Atelier between the 1920s and 1940s, now located in our Architecture and Planning Library.¹

In tandem to the cataloguing, a grant was obtained to flatten and rehouse these architectural drawings. The outcomes of these projects are beneficial both to the students and the collections, as many of the collections are under-resourced and without student involvement these tasks might not be undertaken.⁴

While University of Melbourne students are given priority in this program, welcoming students from other universities is consistent with the principle of Knowledge Transfer, and we hope it may also result in certain cases in attracting students from other universities to study at Melbourne. The Melbourne Model opens a new avenue for students to study Law, Medicine, Dentistry, Architecture and other professional degrees at Melbourne by enabling them to apply after finishing a bachelor’s degree elsewhere, while Masters and PhD students have long been drawn from other undergraduate programs. A positive experience at Melbourne with the Cultural Collections may encourage them to think favourably of the University of Melbourne for further study.

Another cohort of students that benefits from the collections is the group undertaking the relatively new Master in Cultural Materials Conservation.⁵ Many of these students work on collection items for coursework components relating to condition assessment and treatments. All are required to undertake


a significance assessment task using University collection items. Some also write their research papers on items in the University’s collections.

Of course, thousands of students in subjects as varied as fine arts, history, literature, cultural studies, history and philosophy of science, anthropology, botany, zoology, medicine, nursing and dentistry use the cultural collections every year during their coursework and for research papers. The Melbourne Model will involve a gradual reduction in total student numbers from present levels, combined with a shift in balance from undergraduate to postgraduate enrolments. It is likely therefore that demand for the cultural collections as research resources will increase, for example the use of the University of Melbourne Archives by history PhD students.

Creating global citizens. Another emphasis of the new Melbourne Model is Creating global citizens: international experience. This is achieved through knowledge transfer, cross-border collaborations and global partnerships. Students are encouraged to undertake study abroad, study a language, engage in online projects with students from an overseas partner university or contribute to joint international research initiatives.6 We hope to expand our Student Projects Program into an international exchange with collections located in some of the Universitas 21 institutions, an international network of research-intensive universities of which Melbourne is a member.7 University of Melbourne, at the initiative of Professor Jaynie Anderson, our Herald Professor of Fine Arts, has been instrumental in establishing an online U21 Museums Gateway that introduces the collections in U21 institutions.8

Raising awareness of our own collections within our own University community is also important. Since taking up the position of Co-ordinator of Cultural Collections in January 2004 I have sometimes been surprised at the lack of knowledge among academic and professional staff, and students, of these unique resources. More recently our team has established a central Cultural Collections website, managed by my colleague Andrew Stephenson. This has been enormously useful in disseminating up-to-date information about the collections, in advertising exhibitions and events, and in providing useful links, including links to the individual web site of each collection.9

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A substantial element of the central site is the long list of research, publications and catalogues produced by scholars as a result of using the collections. This was designed to show how essential these collections are to a research-intensive university such as Melbourne. The list of books and journal articles drawing upon the University of Melbourne Archives, for example, is particularly impressive.  

Other recent initiatives include the relaunching later this year of the former University of Melbourne Library Journal as a University of Melbourne cultural collections magazine. This will be a high-quality, although non peer-reviewed, twice-yearly publication which invites contributions from staff, students and anyone else working with any of the University’s 32 Cultural Collections. Not only will this publication showcase the depth and diversity of the collections and their relevance to research across a wide range of disciplines, but it will give students a chance to publish the results of their collection-related work, a valuable step in building up their CVs and gaining experience in the submission, editing, and publication process.

If we are to attract students and staff to work with our collections then we must ensure that those collections are in a fit state to be worked with. They need to be catalogued, accessible at short notice, kept securely and in good condition, and supported by knowledgeable staff. The resources available to each collection to achieve these ends vary widely across the University. The University of Melbourne Art Collection for example, which is managed by the Collections Management Unit of the Ian Potter Museum of Art, has the benefit of a modern, climate controlled, purpose-built museum with large gallery spaces, secure and well fitted-out storage, and experienced registration staff. Others such as the Physics Museum and the Surveying and Geomatic Engineering Collection are cared for by technical or administrative staff who must fit this task in among a very full schedule of work managing a laboratory program or an academic department. Some of these collections receive no annual departmental budget allocation whatsoever. The establishment since 2004 of a central Cultural Collections team to work with the caretakers of all the collections across all campuses was thought to be a more efficient way to share expertise, provide specialist advice, and encourage co-operation and co-ordination among the collections. I have outlined this work in previous papers, but our most recent steps have been the

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development of a *Policy and Minimum Requirements for the Management of Cultural Collections*\(^\text{12}\) which was approved last year by University Council and is mandatory throughout the University. This document includes a definition of a cultural collection (as opposed to a teaching collection); a process for establishing new cultural collections (something we wish to avoid if possible, preferring to incorporate new items into an existing collection structure); the need for an acquisitions policy; a deaccessions policy; compliance with a code of ethics; a disaster plan, bin and training; a significance assessment report; loan documentation and policy; collections access policy; and a copyright and reproduction policy. To help collections comply with these requirements we developed a series of proforma or template documents for them to use. Some of these forms are compulsory, such as the existing University of Melbourne inward and outward loan agreements, while others can be used as a guide for developing a locally useful document that meets specified standards.

Promulgation of the *Policy and Minimum Requirements* has been followed this year by an audit against these requirements undertaken jointly by the Cultural Collections Committee and the University’s Internal Audit Office. All collections were asked to complete an audit questionnaire. The results of the audit are currently being collated. A number of collections will then be selected for a site visit.

The University’s Cultural Collections Committee was established in 2004 and has provided the central co-ordinating mechanism across the Collections. Recently the chairmanship of this committee was transferred to the Pro-Vice Chancellor, University Relations. This is quite a new position in the University structure and has been responsible for, among other things, the development of a University-wide Cultural Policy.\(^\text{13}\) This document acknowledges the importance of the Cultural Collections and will guide the allocation of University resources available for cultural purposes to further the University’s priorities of teaching, research, and knowledge transfer. Already the alignment of the collections with a very senior position in the University hierarchy and the adoption of this Cultural Policy are bearing fruit. For example, a recent approach to one of the University’s major bequest funds has resulted in a substantial amount of funding being allocated towards Cultural Collections cataloguing and conservation. Fundraising efforts for other collection-related activities such as the redevelopment of the Grainger Museum are also benefiting.

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Of course, we still have a long way to go in ensuring that the cultural collections at the University of Melbourne are being sustainably managed and used. We have thousands of highly significant rare books, maps, scroll paintings, orchestral scores, concert programs, and objects that are uncatalogued; kilometres of archival material unlisted; and a conservation backlog that has been costed at many millions of dollars. Some collections have no staff; others have no website; many have no access to display facilities, or to storage spaces of acceptable standard. Near disasters still occur occasionally, such as the recent last-minute rescue from a deserted loading bay by two of the Cultural Collections team members of a collection of highly significant early-twentieth-century technical drawings. Such incidents are less frequent than previously however, and the University as a whole is, I believe, gradually developing a better appreciation of the significance of its cultural collections, its obligation to preserve them, and their potential usefulness in furthering the University’s ambitions in teaching, research and knowledge transfer, to help foster well-rounded, imaginative graduates in all disciplines.
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