Managing Mushrooms, Manuscripts & Molars: applying collection standards across the University of Melbourne

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The University of Melbourne manages over thirty cultural collections of great diversity in size and type. These range from 15km of records at the University’s Archives to eighty-five theodolites, sextants and other instruments in the Surveying and Geomatic Engineering Collection. Our museums include the Grainger Museum, the Ian Potter Museum of Art, the Medical History Museum, the Harry Brookes Allen Museum of Anatomy and Pathology and the Henry Forman Atkinson Dental Museum.

Most of our library branches include a component of rare materials, the largest being Special Collections at the Bailieu Library. Our science holdings include the University of Melbourne Herbarium containing some 100,000 plant specimens as well as a Physics Museum and a Zoology Museum.

Several years ago it became apparent that a set of minimum standards that would apply to all these collections would help departments improve their standard of management and bring consistency across the University. Such standards would need to accommodate the varieties of collection type, the unique history and ongoing relationship to particular academic communities and the disparities in resourcing and staffing between collections. At the same time they must set out fundamental requirements for caring for precious collections. To this end the University’s Cultural Collections Committee supervised the drafting of a document: Policy and Minimum Requirements for Management of Cultural Collections. This drew on the experience of staff and existing frameworks and was approved by University Council in 2006.

In 2007 the University’s Internal Audit Office commenced an audit of all the collections to evaluate the standards and to gather other information on the resourcing needs of collections. At the time of writing the questionnaire results are being analysed and a report with recommendations will be submitted.

It is interesting to compare the University’s requirements with the draft National Standards for Australian Museums and Galleries. In most respects the two documents are consistent. The main differences arise from the fact that the University’s collections are not legal entities in themselves, so we have not made specific requirements regarding legal constitution. Similarly, our collections staff are bound by the University’s procedures for financial management, environment health and safety, human resources and maintenance of buildings. As many of our collections are used primarily for teaching and research rather than for exhibitions, exhibition plans etc are not compulsory.

The University’s Policy and Minimum Requirements will no doubt require review in the future, at which stage the existence of an agreed set of National Standards will provide a useful benchmark for comparison.

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1. For information on the Cultural Collections of the University of Melbourne, see: www.unimelb.edu.au/culturalcollections/

Above: Eucalyptus verrucata, specimen from the University of Melbourne Herbarium. Herbarium specimen of Grampians Gum (Eucalyptus verrucata) collected in 1979 by Julie Marginson for her PhD research. Marginson discovered that this variant is a separate species from Eucalyptus alpina, with which it was previously ascribed, resulting in its reclassification as a new species, Eucalyptus verrucata. This specimen is an isotype of Eucalyptus verrucata. It is a duplicate of the first herbarium specimen made for this new species and is the benchmark on which all subsequent identifications and botanical descriptions are based. Eucalyptus verrucata grows wild only in the Grampians National Park in eastern Victoria.

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