

University museums and collections

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Peter Stanbury has worked with university museums and historic houses for most of his career. In 1992 he was one of the co-founders of the Australia-wide association of university museums, CAUMAC – the Council of Australian University Museums and Collections. In 1998 he proposed the formation of an international university museums group at ICOM in Melbourne. He currently advises the vice-chancellor of Macquarie University, Sydney, on museums, collections and heritage, and is executive officer of the Museums and Collections Standing Committee of the New South Wales Vice-Chancellors' Committee.

This issue of *Museum International* and the next will be devoted to university museums and have been designed to provide insights into a variety of university collections and their staff. In the following pages, university curators tell of their collections, current programmes, achievements and experiences. These are important, not only to other university curators, but to the museum profession as a whole, and to those responsible for national heritage. University staff have a wide range of skills and look after a spread of collections of remarkable size and significance. University curators are keen to share their resources and to co-operate with other museum professionals. Such co-operation among museums is becoming increasingly important, especially in regard to staff development, research projects and funding.

The articles in the two issues are intended to stimulate thinking and be a focus for communication among university curators and with museum colleagues in other sectors. It is hoped that such interaction will strengthen understanding between sectors, regions and countries, which would help forge a better future and greater protection for the heritage of the region that we know best – our own.

Strengths and challenges

There is little need to emphasize the significance and scale of the collections of great universities: for example, the ancient collections of Utrecht and Uppsala in Europe; those of Oxford, Glasgow and Manchester in the United Kingdom; those at Harvard, California and British Columbia in North America; and Sydney, Melbourne and Otago in Australasia. Patrick Boylan¹ and others have recounted the glories of such institutions,

and almost everyone familiar with museums will know of noteworthy items in their local university collection. For every major and well-known museum there are scores of smaller, often specialized ones, which also contain important collections of regional and national value that were originally amassed for teaching and research. Today, they make up an essential part of a country's heritage and are becoming ever more accessible to a wider public.

Universities everywhere are broadening the range of their funding sources. Governments no longer supply the bulk of their budgets, and money from research, teaching, technology, investments, real estate and consultancy now form much of their income. They have innovative outreach programmes to attract students and obtain support and their museums can play a key role by providing a welcoming, open door onto the campus.

However, many university collections are housed within departments that face increasing costs and decreasing funds and that must give priority to maintaining academic strength in teaching and research. Competition among universities ensures that 'customers' who have paid for instruction will not be happy sitting on the stairs of an overcrowded lecture theatre or working with outdated equipment. Current research is increasingly reliant on costly technology and skilled assistants, both of which become more expensive year by year.

The outreach activities which are important for the university as a whole become less important for a department struggling to balance its budget. In consequence, university collections now face reduced staffing and funds. Some university 'curators' essentially work in a voluntary

capacity at odd moments between their academic duties and after hours in order to serve their university's goals and maintain the integrity of their collection. Though some university teaching may be less collection-based than formerly, high-school students want to visit university museums to be stimulated by real objects in an increasingly virtual world. Their visits, often their first steps on campus, may influence their choice of subject or university. Such enrolments bring welcome money to a discipline and the university, but rarely enrich the original catalyst for their choice, the university museum.

Thus, university curators are between a rock and a hard place, trying to serve, without adequate resources, several masters at the same time: the university, the academic discipline, local schools, and those overseeing the nation's heritage. The last, usually government agencies, want to know that the nation's movable heritage is easily accessible and is being responsibly maintained by the owner.

Fourteen years have elapsed since Warhurst wrote 'The Triple Crisis in University Museums'.² The crises that concerned him were those of identity and purpose, lack of statistical information about the collections and staffing, and resources and funding. The article provoked discussion and action. In the United Kingdom the Museums & Galleries Commission featured university museums in its 1987 Report;³ Drysdale in 1990 published the first of many regional surveys of university museums in the United Kingdom,⁴ and in 1992 the Museums Association published a report on the relationship of higher education and collections.⁵ Subsequently, many lists of university museums have been made in different countries, some of which were followed by reviews that have

stimulated better policies and management.

To take one example, at my own university (Macquarie University in Sydney), following a national review, we now have a university-wide policy for museums and collections, which has been formally approved by the University Council. We are using a second-generation Strategic Plan for the fourteen collections and there is an Advisory Committee composed of curators which reports matters of concern directly to the vice-chancellor. All museums have their own management committee. A museums and collections newsletter is circulated to the senior executive, heads of departments, those involved in university museums and the wider museum community. Brochures for the museums are regularly updated, and there is an established Web page which is accessible worldwide.⁶ Curatorial staff represent the university in a national association, the Council of Australian University Museums and Collections (CAUMAC), and at state level, on a Standing Committee for museums and collections established by the state Vice-Chancellors' Committee (representing twelve universities in New South Wales and the Australian Capital Territory). The Standing Committee meets three times a year at different university venues to encourage communication, discuss matters of mutual concern and bring them to the attention of the appropriate authority, and to organize staff development days and joint travelling exhibitions. The Standing Committee was set up in response to the first of two Federal Government reviews of university museums, *Cinderella Collections* (1996) and *Transforming Cinderella Collections* (1998).⁷ The vice-chancellor of Macquarie University, Professor Di Yerbury, and the present writer were members of both reviews.

Despite these improvements in policy, management and advocacy in my university there is still much to be done. Departments take decisions to reduce the number of staff hours for curatorial work in the museum – sometimes to zero – and museum budgets are often small or non-existent. Our response at Macquarie has been to negotiate alternative staffing solutions (for example, an education outreach officer with responsibilities for a collection, and employment of a part-time postgraduate student) and to look for ways to increase the sources of income.

At Macquarie, in spite of such setbacks, we are relatively fortunate; however, the situation is more critical in many other universities. The difficulty often stems from the lack of a clearly defined purpose for the collections and the absence of recognition by senior management of that role. Surveys and data collecting are important elements in defining the museum's mission and in drawing up a clear plan, both of which could make it easier to find the necessary funding.

Why are university museums special?

What is it that makes university collections unique, both within the university campus and within the larger group of 'ordinary' museums? Why are university museums special? The answers are clear: university museums have unequalled access to the skills and knowledge of academics and have had a head start in the electronic revolution; no other group of museum workers is surrounded by such a strong tradition of scholarship, research and publication, all of which provide staff with a privileged entry to knowledge and render them valuable contacts for those working in other types of museum; no other group of museums is expected to serve such a

variety of communities and become so intimately connected with the education of secondary, tertiary and postgraduate students; finally, university museums are expected to maintain a cloistered scholarly following while at the same time mount contemporary exhibitions sufficiently attractive to bring outside people into the strange, unfamiliar territory of the campus.

Universities have the opportunity to introduce both secondary and tertiary students to museums over extended periods of time. Their collections play an essential role in teaching specific fields of study. It is difficult to imagine medical or veterinary students not studying anatomical collections, or art students not visiting the university gallery. Works of art and sculpture, often displayed throughout the campus, also subtly educate and influence both students and staff during the years spent on campus.

University museums make a further significant contribution: when students, whatever their field of study, find visits to university museums meaningful and rewarding, their understanding of the important role that museums play in our heritage is fostered. Their commitment to preservation is deepened and may remain with them throughout life, influencing decisions made in work and leisure. The start of a career may be considerably assisted as a result of the practical skills learned and contacts made by voluntary assistance in a university museum.

University museum staff are usually given less museological assistance by their employer or local museum association than any other museum personnel. They often have insufficient contact with those in other museums and frequently feel isolated and lack the necessary influence

to alter their situation. Training and communication are areas in which they need help and support. Although they are expected to contribute to institutional outreach programmes, they must not create unwelcome controversy nor undue publicity, or upset the institutional scholars and the conservative administrators. They are urged to seek external funds to counter the diminishing or non-existent internal funding, yet must do so within departmental and institutional research and teaching grant systems. University museums are often not eligible for grants that are available to other museums. The university's senior executive body may consider it inappropriate to pass statutes to guide the management of collections, but university curators are nevertheless expected to conduct themselves in such a way that reviews or inquiries will not uncover poor practice. Staff frequently find themselves stressed by the tension of vaguely specified and competing expectations.

Dedicated staff shoulder the responsibility of attempting to protect and preserve collections made by distinguished scholars because no one else in the institution seems to care. Those who look after university museums often find that their museological duties are not considered relevant by promotion committees; the responsibilities and the rewards of those who care for university museums are not reflected in their duty statements, which formally mention only their other university responsibilities. University museum staff are expected, with limited resources and ambiguous status, to maintain institutional, national and even international treasures.

Collections are assets with a monetary and, especially in the case of university museums, a spatial value. Few museums

have such poor safeguards against capricious disposal of collections and alienation of space as do university museums. Proposals to close museums often materialize as real threats that need to be countered at short notice. The maintenance of the building fabric in which university collections are housed is frequently neglected because these areas are often ignored in the university's capital-management plan and the collection staff not consulted. Universities must demonstrate responsibility for the collections in their care by consulting widely both within and outside the campus.

University collections have many expectations placed on them. Some curators find themselves unable to counter lack of funds, disinterested line managers, poor accommodation, ill-defined career paths and increasing demands on their time. They need help before they abandon hope. If they lose the battle, the nation may lose a collection which may have taken decades to build.

Achievements and goals

There are many fascinating stories on the following pages. Some authors recount how they have brought new life to their museum by linking it prominently to the city, as well as to the campus. Another innovation has been to bring several university museums into a building complex more accessible to the wider public, as for example, at the Utrecht University Museum in the Netherlands.

At the 1998 ICOM meeting in Melbourne an international university museum and collection group was proposed. As there were already national university museum groups in the United Kingdom, North America, Australia and elsewhere, as well

as conferences devoted to university museums, it seemed that there was potential for an international network. The idea was to assist communication, foster interchange of ideas and speed the progress of better practice. University museums almost invariably have access to the Internet and this makes communication much simpler than it was a few years ago. Macquarie University has established a convenient starting point to search for university museums worldwide at: www.lib.mq.edu.au/mcm/world/.

Advantages of establishing a worldwide university museums group include:

- Lessening the isolation felt by many curators of university collections by increasing regional and international contacts (networks).
- Development of partnerships between university museums, and between those museums and other institutions, thus encouraging the sharing of resources.
- Greater access to university collections, better research, teaching and public outreach, increased social and cultural development.
- Concerted work to protect and maintain university collections, especially those in immediate danger.
- Provision of guidelines for professional standards of management, staffing and museology for university collections, an often overlooked component of national heritage.

These benefits could be augmented with the establishment of a Web site to develop and maintain:

- A Web-based journal written by inter-

national representatives who contribute both scholarly papers and news items (material for exchange, new methods, positions vacant, new exhibitions). International video-linked conferences will also become a practical possibility in the near future.

- Virtual exhibitions available in summary at one site on the Web.⁸ Having many virtual university-based exhibitions linked to and accessible from one site would provide a valuable extension to normal publicity.
- Exchanges of staff, opportunities for staff development and mentors could be facilitated from a single Web site with the co-operation of granting bodies and institutions in host countries.
- A forum to identify priorities for the needs of university museums, including national reviews, and drawing these to the attention of relevant bodies (for example, discussion about collections that are little known to the general public, such as herbaria, living collections, sculpture parks).

This proposed consortium of university museums is important from the point of view of the rest of the museum sector because it would focus attention on the unique resources in university museums, provide opportunities to experiment with different models of organization, financing, and research, encourage the development of professional practices and ethics, extend the information technology within universities for the benefit of a wider public (a fascinating possibility is the development of personalized virtual museum tours⁹), foster discussion and promotion of cross-cultural issues and the appreciation of difference, and promote concerted and co-operative defensive

action for endangered heritage. The substance of these points is similar to the stated aims of ICOM and UNESCO for the next few years, and the annual conferences of Forum UNESCO: University and Heritage have already made important contributions to this area.

The message of the university museum issues of *Museum International* is simple: the people associated with university museums need assistance and interest in their collections. They wish to work with colleagues towards a future in which there is increased understanding of others, a greater sharing of knowledge, and security for local heritage. ■

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Notes

1. P. J. Boylan, 'Universities and Museums: Past, Present and Future', *Jouradas de Museos Universitarios* (Universitat d'Alacant, Spain), No. 1/2, 1999, pp. 11–21.
2. A. Warhurst, 'The Triple Crisis in University Museums', *Museums Journal*, Vol. 86, No. 3, 1986, pp. 137–140.
3. Museums and Galleries Commission, *Report 1986–7* (specially featuring university collections), London, Museums and Galleries Commission, 1987, 72 pp.
4. Laura Drysdale, *A World of Learning: University Museums in Scotland*, London, HMSO, 1990, 11 pp.
5. Museums Association, 1992, 'Museums and Higher Education', *Museums Association Annual Report, 1991–1992*, pp. 4–15, London, Museums Association.
6. www.lib.mq.edu.au/mcm/
7. D. McMichael et al., *Cinderella Collections: University Museums and Collections in Australia*, Canberra, Australian Vice-Chancellors' Committee, 1996, 226 pp; Di Yerbury et al., *Transforming Cinderella Collections: The Management and Conservation of Australian University Museums, Collections and Herbaria*, Canberra, Australian Vice-Chancellors' Committee, 1988, 331 pp.
8. For example, nine universities in New South Wales have combined to create an exhibition, *Cinderella's Gems: Art and the Intellectual Mission*, which will tour three Australian states over a two-year period. A selection from the exhibition is available at: www.all.mq.edu.au/gems/index.htm/
9. Maria Milosavljevic, Robert Dale, Stephen J. Green, Cecile Paris and Sandra Williams, 'Virtual Museums on the Information Superhighway: Prospects and Potholes', in *Proceedings of CIDOC '98, the Annual Conference of the International Committee for Documentation of the International Council of Museums, 10–14 October 1998, Melbourne*, www.dynamicmultimedia.com.au/papers/cidoc98/