

## **A recent survey of the current status of university natural history museums and collections in Australia.**

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### **Abstract**

It has been over a decade since the last sector wide survey of museums and collections in Australian universities. This period has arguably seen the most dramatic changes in higher education. A survey of university natural history museums and collections was undertaken in 2009 to ascertain what changes have been implemented as a result of the numerous recommendations made in the 1998 *Transforming Cinderella Collections* report.

The survey revealed that many still lack the operating policies and procedures necessary for proper professional management and few are integrated into institution wide approaches to material collections despite the large number of significant items held therein. While there has been increased awareness of the importance of preventative conservation strategies, poor resourcing often prevents implementation. Few have disaster preparedness plans in place.

Despite broad contributions in the areas of teaching support, research support and community engagement, there is still a marked over reliance on inadequate internal funding mechanisms. Universities should be encouraged to align the work of these museums and collections with strategic institutional objectives in order to develop equitable and sustainable funding models.

### **Context**

Australian university museums and collections were first recognised as the custodians of a significant part of Australia's cultural heritage in 1975. *Museums in Australia 1975* (Committee of Inquiry on Museums and National Collections, 1975), also known as the 'Pigott Report', acknowledged the unique and priceless material in

many of these museums and collections. It highlighted the inappropriate conditions under which the material was held, the important role funding played in its survival and identified the need for these museums and collections to be safeguarded for the future (Committee of Inquiry on Museums and National Collections, 1975).

The issues highlighted in the 'Pigott Report' were still evident in the mid 1990s. It was also apparent that university administrators were unaware of the number and range of museums and collections under their care. CAUMAC (Council of Australian University Museums and Collections) drew attention to the conditions of university museums and collections in seeking funds to review all museums and collections within Australian universities (Simpson, 2001). The aim of the review was to identify and address the particular concerns of the university museums and collections sector. *Cinderella Collections* (UMREC – University Museum Review Committee, 1996) contained a total of 68 recommendations aimed at a number of different groups including the Commonwealth Government, the AV-CC (Australian Vice-Chancellors Committee), the senior management of universities and the curators of the individual museums and collections (UMREC, 1996), reflecting the fact that the fate of university museums and collections resided with a number of different stakeholders. Two years on, in 1998, the UMPC (University Museum Project Committee) undertook another review, this time addressing not only the extent to which the original recommendations had been implemented, but also the conservation needs of university museums and collections. The resulting report, *Transforming Cinderella Collections* (UMPC, 1998), saw another eleven recommendations being made, only directed at the universities and the AV-CC (UMPC, 1998).

The impact of these reviews on university museums and collections is difficult to ascertain. The implementation of the recommendations has been variable (Simpson, 2001), with many university museums and collections still being perceived as non-essential services in the university's goal of education (Wallace, 2002). Stanbury (2003), however, noted that the reviews had three important impacts; firstly, they made

university administrators aware of, and responsible for, the museums and collections within their institution; secondly, they provided the necessary motivation to write policy and undertake preventative conservation; and thirdly, they developed networks between university museums and collections staff. It was argued that by making university administrators aware of their museums and collections, all other issues could be addressed (UMPC, 1998). Regardless of their perceived impact, the findings attracted a lot of attention from both the university and museum sectors (Yerbury, 2001).

Australia is not the only country to have undertaken reviews of its university museums and collections. Lourenço (2005) provided a useful summary of the reviews undertaken across the university museums and collections sector worldwide. Of particular relevance is the review of all university museums, collections and galleries within the United Kingdom (Arnold-Forster, 2000). This review, and others like it, has similar conclusions as those undertaken in Australia (Arnold-Forster, 2006; Arnold-Forster and Mirchandani, 2001).

Whatever the impact of these reviews, no subsequent investigation has been undertaken in Australia since the release of *Transforming Cinderella Collections* (UMPC, 1998). There are many reasons for an updated review as there have been significant changes to tertiary education in Australia since the reviews were delivered. Furthermore, the AV-CC, one of the primary groups targeted with recommendations, no longer exists (AV-CC, 2006) and those originally directed towards the AV-CC probably require reconsideration.

The recommendations made by the UMPC (1998), need to be implemented if Australian university museums and collections are to be fully integrated facilities within their host institutions. This research addresses the extent to which these recommendations have been adopted by Australian university museums and collections of natural history. Simpson (2003) documented a decline in the resources available to geological collections in Australian universities. Anecdotal evidence (CAUMAC) suggests that there has been

a shift away from the natural sciences over the past decade. This research is therefore focussed on natural history collections only to test the implementation of the earlier review recommendations. By focussing on natural history museums and collections, this research serves as a pilot study for the overall condition of all Australian university museums and collections. Furthermore, as a pilot study, it will allow for disciplinary comparisons to be made, should further research of this nature be undertaken.

Natural history museums and collections are defined as those that pertain to the natural world. Included in this definition are museums and collections of anatomy, biological sciences, entomology, geology, medical sciences, pathology, veterinary sciences and zoology. Living collecting such as herbaria, arboreta and micro-organisms are also considered part of this definition. Museums and collections of scientific implements, history of science museums and collections, anthropology, physics and dedicated map, library and photographic collections were excluded.

### Survey methods

The names and locations of all natural history museums and collections held by Australian universities were compiled, starting with the list given in *Transforming Cinderella Collection* (UMPC, 1998), the total number being 121. University web sites were then used to obtain contact details for these particular museums and collections. Of the 121 natural history museums and collections, contact details were located for 78. The greatest impediment of using university web sites to obtain the contact details of individual museums and collections was that those museums and collections not represented on the web sites were automatically excluded from the research. Whilst it was originally thought that the exclusion of these museums and collections would affect the overall results, it is apparent that this has had little impact on the findings. The results of the postal survey have shown that the recommendations proposed by the UMPC (1998) have not been widely implemented and consequently, it is therefore likely that any excluded museums and collections would have produced similar results.

Of the 78 natural history museums and collections that were sent a survey, 34 survey responses were received from 36 museums and collections, giving a return rate of 46%. Responses other than a completed survey were also received and can be broken down as follows; five museums and collections do not have a curator, and thus no one to complete the survey; four collections believed the survey to be irrelevant; one response was received from a collection previously attached to a university that is now part of a non-university agency and for this reason, is not incorporated into the results; one museum refused to complete the survey, as it believed the UMPC's (1998) report had no impact upon this museum; and finally, one collection had been dispersed, so whilst acknowledgement of the survey was received, it could not be completed.

The survey requested information around a series of museum management issues and characteristics including the nature of the collections, university wide policies, objects of national and international significance, formal recognition by the host institution, strategic planning, disaster preparedness, the availability of resources, conservation and safety procedures and collection usage.

### Survey results

Despite the recommendations made by the UMPC (1998), it is apparent that museums and collections held by Australian universities have a long way to go before the professional standards desired by *Transforming Cinderella Collections* (UMPC, 1998) are reached. The only recommendation to be widely implemented is the identification of objects of national and international significance. Twenty two museums and collections identified natural history objects considered to be of national and international significance using criteria set down by the UMPC (1998).

This leaves another six recommendations made to universities by the UMPC (1998) essentially unattained. The curators, alongside university administrators have a responsibility to care for this section of Australia's distributed national collection and it is in the best interests of all to

work towards the implementation of all the original recommendations. This is challenging given that available resources are severely limited.

This research confirms what is written within the wider literature in regards to the unsuitable facilities and the inadequate numbers of staff specifically employed within Australian university museums and collections. Ten museums and collections saw a decrease in available funds over the past decade, and another six museums and collections have no funding.

University museums and collections lack the operating policies and procedures necessary for proper management. Since the UMPC (1998) made its recommendations, only four universities have implemented university wide policies, three universities have a strategic plan that engages their museums and collections and four museums and collections have been formally recognised by their host institution. This slow uptake should be of concern to both the university and the museum sector.

There have been some minor losses to the sector in the last decade with some natural history collections being transferred out of universities and others dispersed. This research indicates that this has occurred only in Queensland and South Australia to date.

Whilst the UMPC (1998) drew attention to the importance of a variety of conservation strategies, only a small number of museums and collections have ensured the protection of their section of Australia's distributed national collection by implementing these strategies. Only four collections undertake no preventative conservation strategies. While this suggests a greater awareness of the importance of preventative conservation since 1998, there is still a great need for university museums and collections to undertake conservation assessments and implement conservation priority lists. Museums and collections must work with their host institution to ensure all harmful substances are removed from the vicinity of their collection material.

Only six museums and collections have implemented a disaster preparedness plan,

protecting their material from possible disaster scenarios. The implementation of disaster preparedness plans should be an institutional priority, particularly for recognised museums and collections and those with objects of national and international significance.

University museums and collections are greatly under resourced. Over two thirds of all respondents saw their facilities and levels of staffing as inadequate considering the current use or size of their museum or collection. While this is admittedly a subjective assessment, the consistency of the responses may indicate an underlying truth.

There are a variety of funding models available to university museums and collections, with support solely by internal university funds being the most common. Only further research will demonstrate the extent of inadequate funding evident within the wider literature on other types of university museums and collections and those outside Australia.

Many museums and collections are assisting their host institutions achieve their educational objectives with a primary focus on the support of teaching programs. University museums and collections should be utilised for teaching in order to provide an enriching educational experience for the students. Museums and collections need to be seen by senior managers as fulfilling this role, otherwise they will be all too readily, judged as financial liabilities. In summary, university museums and collections of natural history, in Australia or elsewhere, as with any other type of museum and collection must be fully integrated elements of their host institutions and must actively contribute to their host universities' objectives to retain relevance.

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