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REVIEW OF UNIVERSITY COLLECTIONS, UNIVERSITY OF ADELAIDE

Museums Galleries Australia welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission on the Review of University Collections which will help shape the future direction and strategy of the University Collections unit.

Before addressing some of the issues in the Terms of Reference, we will outline who we are and what we do, and stress the importance of collections to Australia and the ways in which they contribute to social and economic wellbeing.

Who we are

Museums Galleries Australia is the national membership association and peak advocacy body representing museums and galleries. We encompass a wide and diverse range of national, state, regional and community museums, art galleries, historic sites, botanic and zoological gardens, research centres, Indigenous cultural centres, and Keeping Places across Australia.

All of our members are, however, linked by a shared dedication to culture and the communities they serve. They understand that Australian cultural life is a dynamic ecosystem that generates creativity and innovation and contributes to the social and economic wellbeing of the country. Attachment A provides a short profile of the organisation and a snapshot of the diverse range of member institutions.

MGA is an advocacy, research, service and professional development organisation. We seek to enhance the value of Australia's collections, public programs and stories by sharing knowledge, developing skills, inspiring innovation and providing leadership and the authoritative voice in protecting and promoting our arts, science and cultural heritage.

We build on a history of museum professional association activity that extends back to the 1930s, have branches in every state and territory, and support professional national networks of expertise. This submission draws both on the lived experience of our museums and galleries, and state, national and international research, expertise and standards.

Collections and the cultural sector

Collections are fundamental sources of information, learning and engagement for people of all ages. Collecting institutions encourage curiosity, creativity and critical thinking, offer rich aesthetic and emotional experiences through art, science, history and story-telling, and enable people to access objects and collections in ways that enrich lives and society. Furthermore, they help foster the creative industries which are one of the engine houses of the economy. (Darren Henley, *The Arts Dividend: Why investment in culture pays*, 2016)

Vital statistics

- 98% of Australians engage with the arts. (Australia Council National Participation Survey Report 2017)
- In 2016-17 over 10 million people visited the national collecting institutions (on + off site)
- Over 50,000 Australians volunteer in museums and galleries

Collecting organisations are hugely trusted institutions in civil society. Research by the American Alliance of Museums (Washington) finds that:

Museums are considered the most trustworthy source of information in America, rated higher than local papers, non-profits researchers, the U.S. government, or academic researchers.

In Australia, research carried out by independent market research company IPSOS for the Museum of Australian Democracy at Old Parliament House, Canberra, reveals that museums are very high on the list of institutions that are trusted by Australians.

In the spheres of health and education, extensive research shows that “long term arts engagement supports positive health outcomes”, and “arts in education ... contributes in important ways to the factors that underpin learning, such as cognitive abilities, confidence, motivation, problem-solving and communication skills”, (*Crossick & Kaszynska, Understanding the Value of Arts & Culture, AHRC, UK 2016*)

Terms of Reference

The Review is seeking information on the University Collections Unit’s scope of responsibility, opportunities for innovation and contribution to teaching and learning, and strategic alignment.

We would make the following observations:

1. Importance of University Collections

The collections held by Australia’s universities are of profound significance. The University of Adelaide’s varied collections include, for example:

- Its own records and objects, and through amalgamations, the rich records and collections of other institutions such as Roseworthy and the Waite Research Institute
- The histories of training dating back to the nineteenth century, such as the whole history of agricultural training, as well as thematic records and the records of subjects no longer taught
- Art collections, including significant portraits
- Numerous specialised reference collections of artefacts, objects and specimens, eg botany, music and classical archaeology
- The documented histories of modern professions such as medicine and architecture
- Research papers from its own academies

The university’s collections are both a private and a public archive. They are crucial resources for external use as well as internal. The University is a key custodian of South Australia’s heritage.

2. Teaching and Learning

Collections have always provided universities with exceptional and unique learning experiences. However, there is a resurgence of focus on the relationships they can foster and the opportunities for “interdisciplinary collisions that open up new ways of thinking”. I have attached for your reference a recent article on universities charting new uses of their collections as central to their mission, *The Future of the Object*, which we commissioned for our national magazine in 2017. **(Attachment B)**

Object-based learning now has new applications across a range of discipline areas, and is an important element in new learning and research pedagogies. Furthermore, on-line learning is underpinned by documentary records.

3. Strategic Alignment and Professional Standards

The University Collections Unit has an exceptional leader in Mirna Heruc. She was, until recently, the President of the South Australian Branch of Museums Galleries Australia, and, as a member of National Council, a prime mover in creating and advising on the landmark 10-year Indigenous Roadmap for change in museums and galleries.

(see <https://www.mgindigenouroadmap.com.au/>)

She has also been a board member of the International Council of Museums, Australia, and has recently taken on the role of Convenor of the Council of Australian University Museums and Collections. Her University of Adelaide position and experience has strongly shaped her input at the national and international levels, which, in turn, have enriched the work of the Unit and the broader landscape of South Australian arts, heritage and collection management.

Mirna heads a specialist staff of professional collection managers who understand and carry out their work in accordance with the national standards set for museums and galleries.

Stakeholder engagement both within the University and with South Australia's and Australia's broader cultural and educational sector has been a critical part of Mirna's success to date. A commitment of resources to support expanded communications and stakeholder interactions will maximise the impact of the University's Collections Unit and help realise the full potential of Adelaide University's collections and related programs.



Alexandra Marsden
National Director