

Information Futures Commission
Submission from the Archives Advisory Board

Introduction

The Archives Advisory Board is established by Academic Board to

- a. advise the Library Committee and the Archives on strategic and policy issues;
- b. assist as a strategic partner to the Archives in the pursuit of its objectives, including external funding; and
- c. represent the Archives and promotes its interests as appropriate. [Clause 8(1) of Regulation 8.1.R1]

It welcomes the opportunity to comment as part of the Commission's search for answers to the challenges outlined in its discussion paper *Scholarly information in a digital age*.

We are grateful that the discussion paper acknowledges the importance of the University's archives ('Collecting our heritage', p. 15), and that archives rate specific mention in the VC's preface ('A consultation paper', p. 1) among its 'rich collections'.

Importance of the University of Melbourne Archives

The significance and potential of the Archives' collections are indeed difficult to over estimate (though it does have a calculated value of well over \$10m). This is the fundamental point underpinning the propositions below.

The University of Melbourne Archives (UMA) is the largest non government archives collection in Australia. Because of its decades of collection specialisation, it now represents - in partnership with the ANU's Noel Butlin Archives Centre - the distributed national collection of business and trade union history. It is an indispensable resource for the University's own history and corporate memory. It hosts a national subject portal to information about trade union archives, and its database of digitized photos is regularly harvested by the national gateway Picture Australia. It is authorised by the Public Records Office Victoria to hold 'decommissioned' state archives, and boasts several collections of high profile Prime Ministers the most extensive being of Malcolm Fraser. It is not just another 'branch library' or 'special collection' collection. It is one of the very few collections which truly differentiate the University of Melbourne nationally and internationally.

Vision for next ten years

Our hope and our vision for the University Archives is that over the next ten years, the potential of its vast untapped wealth be better acknowledged and realised. This will benefit learning, scholarship and the community.

Specific propositions

Understandably, the so-called digital revolution dominates the Commission's discussion paper. It refers to the web, blogs, net generation, digitization, virtual spaces, e-research, the Internet, open access, second life, digital objects, data mining, and digital repositories.

Occasionally the paper juxtaposes digital information and data with print based information, and once or twice with larger concepts still such as 'original' and 'physical' media.

The propositions below only briefly concern technology, since we are focused on more basic matters. We are certainly not indifferent to the innumerable benefits of ICT, not least because it supports the University Archives' on line catalogues, its website and the digitized surrogates in its images catalogue. And we are equally conscious that most of the archives of the future are being created today in digital form.

Nevertheless, our submission's focus is on a *documentary form* which is neither printed nor digital, but for the most part unique and analogue, and the premier authoritative (though forever partial) evidence to those who inquire of the past. Archival material was never intended to be browsed following some library classification scheme on open shelves accessible to anyone. Being unique and authoritative, they warrant appropriate support and management.

Our nine specific propositions are:

- Stewardship preservation
The selection decision aside, preservation is the rock upon which all other collection management functions depend. To take an extreme example, an archival document illegible from mould staining or crumbling to the touch from embrittlement can neither be read by scholars nor described by archivists nor viewed as an exhibit by the public. UMA has a vast backlog of basic and intensive preservation work, including re-folding and re-boxing using acid free materials. The collection is stored in a 21st century standard facility but too many individual collections are in 19th century packaging. The ICT revolution will not help here: materials and labour are required and the funding to secure them.

We urge that any 10 year preservation strategy for cultural collections pay special attention to the Archives' needs.

- Leave a successful unit intact
The University Archives has operated as a single organisational unit for the past 48 years. It has few equivalents in Australia, the ANU Archives Program, combining the university archives and the Noel Butlin Archive Centre being the closest. Organisational structures in modern higher education are rarely stable, and more than once the UMA has been considered for review and relocation. It has not always been even part of the University Library, a fact easy to forget. We understand one current idea is that the Archives join the University's records management program.

Regardless of current ideas, we ask that it remain intact for a range of efficiency and professional reasons.

- A new building
As predicted when it was being planned in the mid 1990s, the Archives' Brunswick repository is almost full. Were it not for a moratorium on collecting in 2008, a halt to collecting (for capacity reasons) would have been inevitable in one or two years. The Archives urgently needs additional high quality storage space

simply to maintain a transfer program to existing collections, including of course from the University itself.

We suggest that the University start planning now for a new Archives building

- University museum
One of the reasons the Archives repository is practically full is that it stores there many hundreds of three dimensional objects large and small. Some have been acquired to complement collections but over the years, it has also come to be seen as the logical home for museum material considered part of the University's own history. Its 'foster parent' role however cannot and should not continue indefinitely. In addition, the Archives currently provides storage for several hundred chemistry related artefacts, pending the establishment of a properly constituted museum by the School of Chemistry.

We suggest these points be included in any larger strategy to upgrade the Library's collection storage.

- Fraser position funding
No single collection has profiled the Archives better in recent years than the Malcolm Fraser personal and family and non political papers. It has also raised its profile internally. The Chancellor and Vice-Chancellor both made public commitments to the project and its further development via digitization, website access, the MU Publishing memoirs, the Malcolm Fraser Room in the Law School, and complementary collecting. The entire project however depends on a position based on split funding and restricted to a 3 year contract.

We urge that the future of the position of Curator be guaranteed beyond 2010.

- Knowledge Transfer
Without being concerned over what it is called, the Archives has long been partnering with public and community entities to mutual benefit. It cares for historical archives of business, union and not-for-profit bodies; it works with local communities through 'virtual repatriation' of their collections; and its staff provide records and archives advice and occasionally undertake consultancies. It also helps with family history and other non academic research, and participates in archival support programs with the Australian Society of Archivists and state and federal archives authorities. The Archives generates considerable though unseen goodwill for the University.

We request that this be more fully acknowledged and supported over the next decade.

- Collection review program must continue
One of the Archives' highest priorities in 2008 is collection review. This involves a fresh assessment of the significance of accessions leading to confirmation, application of the officially endorsed schedules to University's own archives, and proposals to return low value items to their depositors or relocate it to more appropriate libraries and archives. It is labour intensive professional work requiring consultation and judgement. As the Archives' principal adviser we understand the need for, and are helping with this program.

We recommend that it be allowed to continue as a routine activity in the future.

- Digitization

The Archives has been digitizing visual items from its collection (primarily historical photos, glass plates, etc) since 2001. This has been quite a success story: it developed in house a supporting cataloguing schema; it became one of the earliest Australian universities to join Picture Australia; and it both earns some income and raises funds to employ a skilled operator (a retired La Trobe University photographer). Since then other material, primarily documents such as speeches from the Fraser collection is being targeted.

We ask that the Archives be kept in mind as digitization funding proposals are developed and that all costs (for related processes such as copyright checking, document preparation, rehousing of originals, cataloguing and digital repository storage) be taken into account.

- Cataloguing key to use

It is a deep irony and in some ways an indictment that, were the Archives to be sealed, declared a dead collection and never added to, it could continue to grow as collection items were 'discovered' through cataloguing. A fifteen kilometre archival collection, built at times of necessity in a haphazard way, cannot always keep up with processing incoming accessions. There remain collections comprising hundreds of boxes lacking even the most basic lists, without which use in any meaningful sense is impossible. Obviously poor control compromises security too: if they don't know what they've got, they don't know what they're missing. We understand that while covering other cultural collections such as rare books, receipting accessioning and cataloguing for the University Archives has never been central to Library funding for cataloguing. Thus it has never covered the University Archives, with the minor exceptions of digitized images and books added to its small professional library. Perhaps primarily because of this, there is currently no access to the Archives collection via the main Library online catalogue.

We strongly suggest that this inequity and oversight be reconsidered.

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