

# Engage, invigorate and educate

## Cultural collections student projects

Helen Arnoldi

*Imagine* cataloguing rare musical instruments donated to the University by Dame Nellie Melba; *imagine* planning the preservation of fragile early 20th century photographic negatives; *imagine* labelling and mounting botanical specimens to ensure their survival ... creating an exhibition trail to help visitors navigate their way through an archaeology display ... assessing the significance of historic engineering drawings and models ... cataloguing and flattening an impressive collection of international poster art ... exploring the curious histories of plaster and wax anatomical models ... arranging the personal papers of an eminent Melburnian ... researching etchings and engravings by master European printmakers of which examples are found in the world's finest museums and libraries. Now stop *imagining*, because these projects exist and are just some of the assignments completed by students as part of the Student Projects Program (Cultural Collections).

Over the past three years, some 65 students have taken advantage of the opportunity to work behind-the-scenes with the University's cultural collections. They have enjoyed an immediate and worthwhile engagement which has extended their professional skills and broadened

their education, while greatly benefitting the collections themselves.

At the start of each year, a range of projects is developed by the Student Projects Coordinator in consultation with the various collection managers. These projects are offered to students primarily through the Student Projects website and via course coordinators. The projects are usually a semester long and involve a student commitment of approximately one day per week. After an initial application process, a student meets with the collection manager and explains why they are interested in a particular project, the skills they would bring to that project and what they hope to achieve through the placement. If the right student is matched to the right project, the outcomes are positive for everybody. Once a student is placed in a suitable project, they receive training in the collection management skills they need in order to complete it successfully. The emphasis is on matching the student's interests in a particular area first, rather than on identifying an existing proficiency. After all, students are applying for these projects in order to learn and develop new skills.

For example, in 2006 a significance assessment of the A.G.M. Michell Engineering



Collection (which documents the work of an eminent engineer-inventor who worked at the University), was completed by two engineering students. While they had never before worked with collections, they did possess an understanding of and interest in mechanical engineering and Michell's innovative thrust-bearing and crankless engine. They were keen to learn the cultural heritage sector's accepted significance assessment methodology so that they could apply their engineering knowledge to this historical material. Even though the two students originally lacked the necessary museum skills, their educational background and interest in

mechanical engineering made them ideal candidates, and they completed a very comprehensive report which has been of use not only to the University, but to two major Australian museums that also hold material relating to Michell.

The projects are diverse and range from cataloguing and significance assessment through to research, conservation and exhibition curating. Hence, the skills developed by the students (and the existing skills they bring to the projects) will vary. An individual training program is tailored to suit each student's abilities and experience. The students also receive ongoing mentoring and supervision. By the end of the placement, while having acquired and extended their knowledge of a specific area, they will have also encountered some of the thorny issues facing cultural collections managers today.

The Student Projects Program occupies a unique position within the University and provides an important link between the student body and the collections. Through engagement with the collections, their managers and other collections staff such as librarians, conservators, cataloguers, technicians, curators and archivists, the students develop vocational skills applicable in their future professions. Or they can 'dip their toe in' and

sample what it might be like to work in a particular field. For example, Master of Art Curatorship students have worked on conservation projects to test whether they are interested in pursuing further study in this specialised discipline. During a placement, a student may also be exposed to other related work areas, encountering potential career paths previously not considered.

While some students need to satisfy course requirements and internship subjects, others are seeking an extra-curricular activity or a way of improving their prospects in an increasingly competitive job market. In the present educational environment, where there is an emphasis on the 'digital' and 'virtual', these projects let students work with the 'real' and 'actual'—an element that may be absent from the theoretical nature of many disciplines.

The projects expose students to concepts relevant to their area of study. For curatorship students this might mean setting up an exhibition, cataloguing objects or writing a significance assessment. Through these projects they are placed in a real situation which will complement and illustrate the theory they have been learning in the classroom. For other students, the project provides an outlet for them to apply their recently

**Opposite:** Jasmine Targett identifying and cataloguing instruments in the Henry Forman Atkinson Dental Museum.

**Below:** Jacqueline Eager, who created extended labels for historic apparatus in the Physics Museum, which are now used in the display panels and on the Museum's website.

**Bottom:** Miriam Riverlea researching the Classics and Archaeology Library collection.



acquired skills. This is particularly valuable for history students who are keen to hone their research and writing talents on meaningful research projects that have genuine value to an organisation. Throughout the 33 collections there are numerous opportunities for students to explore the histories both of individual objects within the collections and the formation of the collections themselves. In the last couple of years for example, history students have investigated 19th century plaster and wax anatomical models in the Harry Brookes Allen Museum; created content for an exhibition utilising the Law Heritage collections; conserved, transcribed and researched a 100-year-old orchestral ledger from the Louise Hanson-Dyer Music Library; and explored botanical models in the Herbarium.

It is not only the students who benefit. The impact of their work on the collections should not be underestimated. Students have uncovered and published new information about the origins, meaning, provenance and use of objects; they have inventoried, catalogued, photographed and conserved items so that others can use them; created web pages and exhibitions; arranged and described archival collections; transcribed

historic documents; and prepared a plan for the safe housing of volatile photographic formats. Some of these very useful and beneficial tasks could not be completed without the students' input, and the collection managers greatly appreciate their contributions.

Because the Student Projects Program at the University of Melbourne is a unique program locally, it has also attracted students from other universities. The University is in the fortunate position of having been in operation for more than 150 years, over which time it has accumulated irreplaceable collections that have significance well beyond the campus. The involvement of students from other universities enables 'knowledge transfer', one of the strands of the 'triple helix' proposed in *Growing esteem*, the University's strategic plan (the other strands being research, and learning and teaching). Knowledge transfer involves the two-way exchange of knowledge and expertise between the University and the wider community, creating partnerships of mutual benefit.<sup>1</sup>

Furthermore, by ensuring that students (and indirectly through them, academic staff) continue to engage with the cultural collections it invigorates their relevance as a unique and important resource to

the University and beyond.

In 2008 the Student Projects Program will continue to build on and expand the links we have made across the University. We hope to welcome students from an even broader range of courses, and to stimulate an interest that will connect them to collections across the campus. We must also maintain the high quality of placements offered, an essential element if we are to continue to capture the imagination of students and offer long-term benefits to them and to the collections.

For more on the Student Projects Program visit our website at <http://www.unimelb.edu.au/culturalcollections/projects>

**Helen Arnoldi** has been the Students Projects Coordinator, Cultural Collections, in Information Services since 2005. She has over ten years' professional experience in collection and heritage management, including roles with the Baillieu Library Print Collection, the Ian Potter Museum of Art and the National Trust of Australia (Victoria). She has a Postgraduate Diploma in Art Curatorship (Melbourne), a Master of Arts-Museum Studies (Monash) and an Honours degree in Art History (Monash).

---

#### Note

- 1 See Glyn Davis, *Growing esteem*, University of Melbourne, December 2005, p. 14, available from <http://www.unimelb.edu.au/publications/archives.html>