

Postera crescām laude

Taking care of the cultural collections at the University of Melbourne

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Early days: The development of the University of Melbourne's cultural collections

The University of Melbourne is a remarkable demonstration of the intellectual and cultural development of the City of Melbourne and the State of Victoria. The complexity, contribution and reach of the University are notable. With a budget of over \$1 billion (to put this in context the State of Victoria's budget for 2007–2008 is around \$33 billion) and its own postcode, the University is not only a key player in the intellectual life and development of this city and this state, it is also a major economic driver and an important cultural resource.

In 1856 however the future of the University of Melbourne was less than secure. *The Age* ridiculed the University as being a costly toy, claiming 'it would be twice as cheap ... to close the university and send all the students to Oxford or Cambridge'.¹ On opening day, 13 April 1855, only 16 students enrolled; one disappeared after the first day and four others dropped out by the end of the year.² The University's annual report of 1856 noted somewhat wryly that, although Council had expected a larger number of candidates, it was not surprised that Europe was the

preferred destination for education and that for those who remained in the colonies the 'temptations of lucrative employment were ... irresistible'.³ The University Chancellor wrote of 'the great necessity that the Professor of classics should be of hopeful persevering, and constant mind; not to be discouraged at his outset by deficiencies in his pupils'.⁴

Despite this shaky start the University was, from the beginning, an important cultural provider in the emerging colony. The National Museum of Victoria, known to Melburnians as the McCoy Museum, although funded by the Victorian Government, was housed on campus until 1901 and its mix of natural science specimens and examples of Victoria's technological development drew 22,520 visitors in 1858 and 37,000 in 1861. Historian Geoffrey Blainey noted, 'The university was far more popular as a pleasure resort than as an institution of learning; for the students studying for a degree did not exceed thirty in any one year until the 1860s'.⁵

The University was conceived and developed in a climate of rapid change and expansion, and a growing sense of the value and potential of the role of the Colony of Victoria within the British Empire. A little over a

decade before the University was opened, the 1841 census of Melbourne recorded a settler population of 4,479.⁶ When the *Australian Colonies Government Act* of 1850 heralded the development of Victoria as a self-governing colony, planning began in earnest for a university and public library. On 3 July 1854 the Governor Sir Charles Hotham laid the foundation stones for both institutions. A year later the population of Victoria had reached more than 240,000.⁷ The University was perceived as a critical development, necessary for the education of those who would contribute to the social, political and economic development of the colony.

Each of the four initial subjects: 'Greek and Latin Classics with Ancient History'; 'Mathematics Pure and Mixed'; 'Natural Science'; and 'Modern History, Modern Literature, Political Economy and Logic', was supported by collections of library material and of material culture.⁸ These early collections can be characterised as those with a primary objective of supporting the teaching streams with a focus on their use by students, such as the Pathology Collection, and those that had a public profile and serviced a more general and more public cultural need, such as the Museum and Library

collections. The professor of natural science Frederick McCoy's teaching collection doubled as the National Museum of Victoria collection. So popular was the public role of the University's collections that the 1857 annual report of Council noted 'The Museum and Library are both open to the public every day.'⁹ British institutions were keen to support the fledgling University of Melbourne. The University of Edinburgh and the University of Cambridge, for example, sent out natural history specimens. Similarly library materials were sourced from institutions in other colonies and the United Kingdom. Soon these collections were supplemented with Australian material and they began to represent dual teaching and research platforms, highlighting the opportunity to build new knowledge based on proximity to the 'new world', and demonstrating the need to inculcate the knowledge and cultural competencies of Mother England. For the University of Melbourne, the acquisition of cultural material was part of the acquisition of cultural capital, and by extension, social legitimacy and international recognition. The University needed to build competencies in those disciplines which were core to a European academic ideal, as well as showcase its strengths as a key

colonial institution (and later as a contributor to nation-building). The University's cultural collections reflected and contributed to both agendas.

The cultural collections of the University are exceptional. Immense in scale but, until recently, relatively hidden from the community beyond the University (with the exception of the collections of the University Library, the University of Melbourne Archives, and the Ian Potter Museum of Art, each of which has a defined public role), they reflect the material culture of the various disciplines that engaged the minds of scholars in the University. The collections also reflect the support from the community of donors and benefactors who saw (and continue to see) the University as a repository, as well as a generator, of knowledge. Objects such as the specimen of *Epaltes cunninghamii* collected during Captain James Cook's first voyage to the east coast of Australia (in the Herbarium); the Moniac, a mechanical and hydraulic model of the interrelationship between macroeconomic principles used to demonstrate economic principles at the London School of Economics (in the Faculty of Economics and Commerce); the Nimrud ivories (in the Classics and Archaeology Collection), and George

Fryett's groundbreaking 1902 X-ray or skiagram prints which show blood vessels in the vascular system (in the Medical History Museum), are examples of the thousands of items of international significance held at the University. That donors, who have the choice of a range of destinations for their gifts, favour the University of Melbourne as the repository for their objects indicates the esteem in which the University is held, and the very real import of its motto *Postera crescam laude*.¹⁰ Nevertheless it is true that many of the cultural riches of the University are known by relatively few outside their own departments and, while available, are not always easily found.

A relatively invisible asset

The reasons for the relative invisibility of some of the University's cultural material are numerous but in general relate to two main issues: cataloguing and condition. As a whole the University's cultural collections are on a par with state collections across the country. When the Australian Vice-Chancellors' Committee published its first report on Australia's university collections in 1996, the University of Melbourne claimed 16 collections. By 2007, and with a systematic focus on collection



identification and needs (and the addition of the Victorian College of the Arts Collection), another 17 had been added to this list. Many of the 33 collections include sub-collections that are highly significant in their own right, such as the Bright Family Papers and the Malcolm Fraser Collection in the University Archives, or the Grimwade Art Collection and

the Leonhard Adam Collection in the Museum of Art.

The care of these collections has been various. Many collections reflected the somewhat serendipitous collecting aspirations of a single academic, who without a university-wide collection management framework was able to provide dedicated, but often unsystematic

and even irregular, care. The responsibilities of others such as the University of Melbourne Art Collection and the University of Melbourne Archives are enshrined in the University statutes, and are managed and profiled as important national resources. It is Information Services (previously known as the Information Division) however that

has responsibility for the majority of the University's 'cultural' collections. As part of Information Services the University Library (referred to as 'the Library' in this paper) manages the University library collections, the University of Melbourne Archives and the Grainger Museum.

By the 1990s, the Library, in common with other major university libraries, had well-developed cataloguing standards and established approaches to the preservation of its collections. What it lacked were the resources and focus to ensure they were implemented collection-wide. While this paper examines issues relating to the general care and conservation of the University collections more broadly, it was the focus provided by the Library's desire to understand the conservation needs of its special research collections, and the methodological framework provided by the University Conservation Service, that provided the impetus for a 'whole of university' approach to the care and management of the University's cultural assets.

In 2000 the Information Division sought an assessment of the conservation requirements of its culturally significant research collections.¹¹ The results, although perhaps not unexpected, did indicate the extent to which passive

management over 150 years had created problems of immense proportion. That this survey indicated a more extensive issue was highlighted when further surveys of the Grainger Museum and the Archives were undertaken, and when the program of significance assessment and identification of conservation needs indicated the requirement for remedial action as a whole of university strategy.

The history of the library collections reflects the histories of other collections across campus. In the University's early years lack of space meant that the professors' private libraries, which held many of the University's important books and periodicals, also served as lecture rooms.¹² Between 1853 and 1857 the Library collection had increased from 1,284 to 2,971 volumes, developing from both purchase and gift, with libraries in the United Kingdom supporting the fledgling University of Melbourne with gifts of books and other material. The Council Minutes of 30 May 1859 note that 100 volumes were presented from the University of Dublin ('obtained by the intervention of Mr. Foster'), with a similar donation from the University of Cambridge ('by the good offices of Mr. Childers'). The Minutes also note the casts of fossil

remains presented by the East India Company and the Miocene tertiary fossils presented by the Imperial Mineralogical Institute of Vienna.¹³ The exercise book used to log the University's developing collection of biological specimens records some of the earliest natural history accessions and indicates similar collection development. Until Baldwin Spencer's arrival in 1887 the collection consisted of material donated by institutions such as the University of Edinburgh or Cambridge University. After Baldwin Spencer's arrival local field trips provided material from Port Phillip Bay, Westernport Bay and Wilson's Promontory.¹⁴

Although the University provided central space for library material, the care of books was not a high priority, particularly in times of financial pressure. Geoffrey Blainey notes that '[a]t times the library was chaotic, for the university could not always afford to pay a librarian'.¹⁵ As a result of the parlous state of the University's finances in the decade 1891 to 1902 '[t]he library ... housed books on ledges and window sills and unopened crates through lack of shelving,' and in the year 1893-1894 purchased only 85 books.¹⁶ The Library also served as a social venue, attracting students to its large log fires.

As the central Library developed,

so did discipline-based departmental collections. In the mid-1920s the University consolidated the Library with a move to the north wing of the Old Quadrangle. There was little further development until 1959 when the first sections of a major new University Library were built. This new building was named the Baillieu Library after W.L. Baillieu (1859–1936), in whose memory his brother E.L.M. Baillieu (1867–1939) had established a trust fund that contributed generously towards construction costs. A decade later the north wing was added. This extension provided dedicated space for rare books and prints with separate airconditioning and dust filtration, with the idea that these old materials had special needs, although the inadequacies of these environmental controls were highlighted in the 2000 survey. The numerous branch and departmental libraries continued to expand, and their administrative responsibility, particularly cataloguing and lending, gradually passed to the Library. The advent of computers in the late 1970s and early 1980s made centralisation even more effective.

The growth of the collections of rare books, Australasian publications, maps and prints was piecemeal, although many treasures were acquired through the interest of

individual academic staff and by bequest. The opening of the Baillieu Library saw a growth in the Library's special collections in the late 1950s, particularly with material from British sources. From the 1950s until his death in 2001, Dr John Orde Poynton, an English-born doctor, made major donations of early printed books and prints. Similarly in 1954 Mr Frederick Morgan presented a major collection of children's books with the idea that these items were already represented in British collections and this collection would be more useful at Melbourne.

The 1960s and particularly the 1970s saw even more accelerated growth with the arrival of federal government funding for universities and an increased emphasis on research and measurements of University output. In the 1970s the Library signalled its intention to develop and expand its collections with the appointment of staff to manage its special research collections (including a curator of rare books). Large collections of old and rare material were purchased, and bequests of all sorts and quality encouraged.

Across the University other departments also experienced extraordinary growth in collection development. In the History Department Dr Leonhard Adam, a

German-Jewish refugee who commenced work as a research scholar on his release from the Tatura Internment Camp in 1942, built a major ethnographic collection that by 1960 included some 2,500 objects. In 1967 the Faculty of Medicine established its Medical History Museum with support from the London-based Wellcome Institute. In 1973 Sir Russell and Lady (Mab) Grimwade bequeathed their extraordinary collection of Australian art, archival and bibliographic material to the University, a year after the establishment of the University Gallery in the John Medley Building. Even in the 21st century new museums were being established and new collections acquired. The most recent museum development at the University, the Henry Forman Atkinson Dental Museum in the School of Dental Science, was relocated to purpose-built premises in 2006.

Preserving the past in the plan for the future

The creation of the position of university conservator in 1988, with funds provided by the Sir Russell and Lady (Mab) Grimwade Miegunyah Bequest, marked the establishment of the University of Melbourne

Conservation Service (now the Centre for Cultural Materials Conservation) and with it the beginning of a university-wide approach to the care of its cultural material. Nevertheless the Conservation Service was the only part of the University to have staff with position descriptions that reflected a whole of university approach to collections management. This remained the case until 2004, when Information Services created the role of cultural collections coordinator to provide support and coordination for the cultural material owned and managed by the University.

By the late 1990s, questions about the housing of the existing library and archival collections and especially the rare and valuable collections were being addressed across campus. The emphasis was on ensuring preservation and accessibility. A new art gallery, the Ian Potter Museum of Art, was opened in 1998, and the University of Melbourne Archives opened new premises in Brunswick in 1999. This activity brought a focus to a number of collection management issues as collections were prepared for relocation. Library planning now raised questions of how to deal with unprocessed material and set priorities between items and

collections. At least a decade of paradigm shift in the library sector had resulted in information and access being seen as critical to the future of libraries, while books, prints and realia were perceived as less useful for delivering information. Nevertheless the Library's research collections collectively represented the most valuable cultural asset of the University, and it was important to understand what areas were vulnerable in order to manage resources, prioritise treatment, and inform infrastructure planning and enable access.

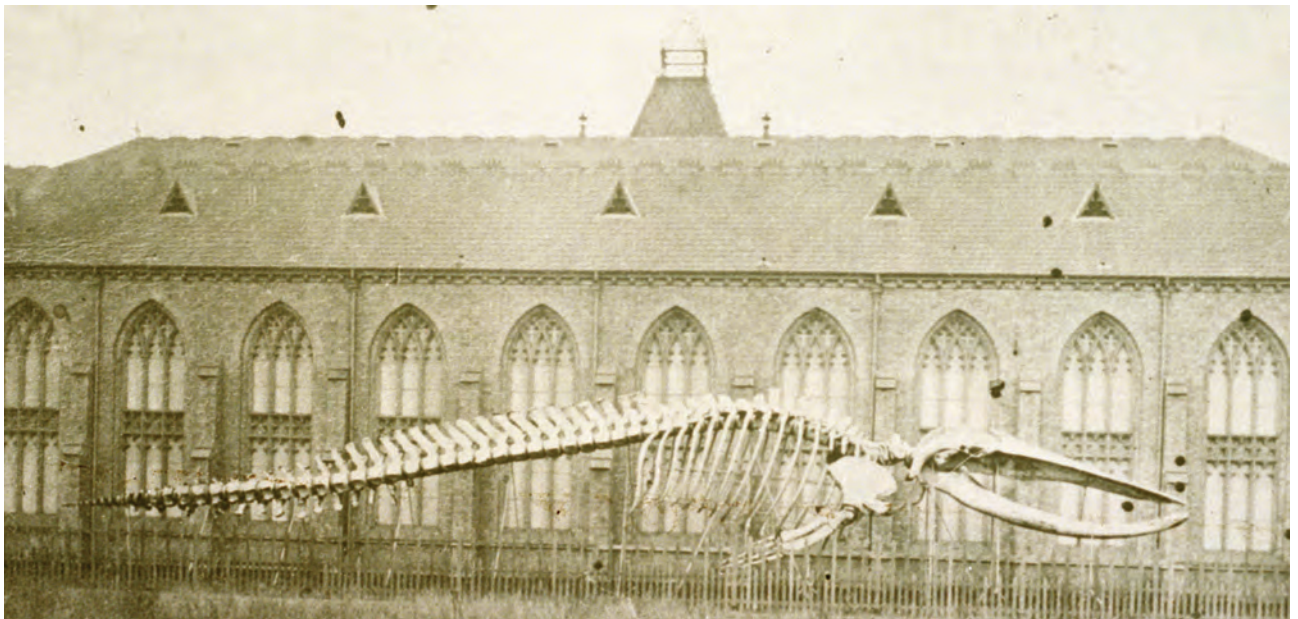
It was in this climate that the Library contracted the University of Melbourne Conservation Service to undertake a 'Conservation survey of the University of Melbourne Library Research Collections'.¹⁷ In all, 24 of the Library's culturally significant research collections, comprising over 260,000 items, were surveyed.

These collections included material of high cultural significance not only for the University but also for Australia and internationally. While the survey found that the majority were in good and stable condition (68.5 per cent or 178,411 items), approximately 7,293 items (2.8 per cent) were extremely fragile or highly unstable, including those affecting adjacent items or requiring

immediate work. Conservation costs were estimated at between \$3.5 million and \$8.75 million, depending on level of treatment. A further 26,566 items (10.2 per cent) were identified as poor/unstable, i.e. deteriorating or needing conservation treatment, at a cost of \$8 million. Finally 48,184 items (18.5 per cent) were fair/stable, including those that were stable but disfigured. The Library's response was not surprising—with needs of this scale how would it be possible to make a sensible start?

The survey had also made recommendations addressing the ways in which building infrastructure, acquisition processes, active deterioration, and handling and storage were affecting the collections. Overall the survey found that these were interrelated issues that could not be satisfactorily addressed with single-issue solutions.

While Library management could take some comfort in the findings that the majority of the special collections were in a stable condition, the \$11.5 million–\$16.75 million required for immediate or remedial conservation came as a shock. The Library concluded that approaching the University for funding of this magnitude without providing options and priorities would be neither



responsible nor successful. As a result a working group from the Library and the Conservation Service was formed to develop strategies and action plans to progress the report. The fact that the survey had canvassed only some of the Library's cultural collections, excluding for example the Archives and the Grainger Museum, only compounded the sense of frustration and underlined the potential magnitude of the issue.

Fortunately, in view of the scope (and scale) of the issues identified in the survey, the report also included a

recommendation that collections be assessed using the emerging significance assessment methodology, before being proposed for conservation treatment.¹⁸ This proved to be an important tool in a university-wide approach.

A whole of university approach

Clearly, if such was the extent of the problem in the Library, and if the Library was developing management tools to address this problem, then a

university-wide approach would be appropriate. In 2002 the Conservation Centre, the Library and Corporate Services (now Financial Operations) provided \$20,000 to employ a significance assessment officer. Collection management staff, department managers and volunteers who had taken on responsibility for the management of collections came together for the first time as a group, to consider the content, value and needs of their collections. This work resulted in the publication, 'Strategic approaches to resourcing the cultural

collections of the University of Melbourne'.¹⁹

During 2002 and 2003 the Library funded a conservator to treat some of the items identified in the survey and in the significance assessments. The Friends of the Baillieu Library also supported the conservation of individual items, in particular the 'Cambridge manuscript' (see p. 12). The Morgan Collection of Children's Books and the Bright Family Papers were rehoused into purpose-built folders and boxes and damaged and deteriorated material treated. *Holinshed's chronicles of England, Scotland and Ireland* was disbound, cleaned, deacidified, resized, mended and rebound. Other material treated included an 1859 map of Corio Harbour; a bound volume of engravings *Vues des plus beaux edifices publics et particuliers de la ville de Paris* (c.1810); a photograph of the 1935 Federal Cabinet meeting; the Myrtleford court register 1908–1932; the 1679 pamphlet *A true narrative of the late design of the Papists to charge their horrid plot upon the Protestants*, the 1491 herbal, *Hortus sanitatis* (see p. 13) and many other important items. Research publications showcased new knowledge produced by this collaboration between library and conservation staff.²⁰

Following the survey of the special research collections, surveys were also completed for the Grainger Museum, the University of Melbourne Archives and the University of Melbourne Art Collection.

In January 2004 the Information Division appointed a cultural collections coordinator, followed in 2005 by a manager, cultural collections group and student projects coordinator and in 2006 by a coordinator, conservation projects. These positions, in conjunction with the Centre for Cultural Materials Conservation and the Cultural Collections Committee with its three sub-committees (Exhibitions and Public Programs; Conservation and Storage; and Web Presence and Digitisation) support all departments in the care and conservation of the University's cultural collections.

On 5 June 2006 University Council endorsed the 'Policy and minimum requirements for the management of cultural collections'.²¹ For the first time in its history the University had a policy that enunciated those standards it considered critical to the proper care and management of its cultural material. In 2006 Property and Campus Services joined the Cultural Collections Committee to support the university-wide approach.

Where to now?

With a renewed sense of possibility, the University is enthusiastically embracing its cultural collections in the new Melbourne Model. Conservation students work on collection items as part of their training. The Cultural Collections Student Projects Program provides opportunities for students in diverse disciplines to gain experience with a range of collection management projects (see article by Helen Arnoldi on pp. 30–32). A new University Breadth Subject 'Learning Cultures' is being developed for delivery in 2009. This subject explores how knowledge is developed from specific disciplinary bases, using examples from the cultural collections as a point of departure for investigations such as the role of light in seeing, for example in physics, art history, and conservation.

When the Australian Vice-Chancellors' Committee coined the term 'Cinderella collections' the implication was that the cultural collections were hardworking contributors, but hidden and unacknowledged.²² This is no longer the case at the University of Melbourne. While there is still much to be done to ensure the preservation of important material, today our

cultural collections are recognised and supported by a university-wide approach. By securing their preservation the University of Melbourne is ensuring that its history and identity will indeed be available to earn esteem into the future.

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Associate Professor Robyn Sloggett is Director of the Centre for Cultural Materials Conservation at the University of Melbourne. The Centre provides conservation services to the cultural collections of the University and to the public, manages an internationally renowned research program and delivers the only comprehensive postgraduate conservation training program in the Australasian-Pacific region. In 2004 Robyn was awarded the AICCM Conservator of the Year Award for her contribution to the profession.

Notes

- 1 Quoted in Geoffrey Blainey and Norman H. Olver, *The University of Melbourne: A centenary portrait*, Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1956, p. 2.
- 2 Blainey and Olver, *The University of Melbourne*, p. 2.
- 3 The University of Melbourne, 'Report of the proceedings of the Council of the University of Melbourne during the year commencing on the 1st of May, 1855, and terminating on the 30th April, 1867', in 'Minutes of the proceedings of the Council of the University of Melbourne', meeting no. 55, 30 June 1856, University of Melbourne Archives (UMA), p. 3.
- 4 Redmond Barry, letter to Sir John W.F. Herschel, 27 January 1854, contained in 'Minutes of the proceedings of the Council of the University of Melbourne', meeting no. 17, 10 April 1854, UMA, p. 3.
- 5 Blainey and Olver, *The University of Melbourne*, p. 4.
- 6 Terence Lane and Jessie Serle, *Australians at home: A documentary history of Australian domestic interiors from 1788 to 1914*, Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1990, p. 15. The 1841 census recorded 769 houses in Melbourne, with tents providing accommodation for many of the 4,479 people recorded on the census.
- 7 The population figures are cited in Barry, letter to Herschel, 27 January 1854.
- 8 'Minutes of the proceedings of the Council of the University of Melbourne', meeting no. 5, 4 July 1853, UMA, n.p.
- 9 The University of Melbourne, 'Report of the proceedings of the Council of the University of Melbourne during the year commencing on the 1st of May, 1856, and terminating on the 30th April, 1857', in 'Minutes of the proceedings of the Council of the University of Melbourne', meeting no. 78, 25 May 1857, UMA, p. 3.
- 10 *Postera crescam laude* has been translated as 'I shall grow in the esteem of future generations'. The University Council adopted this Latin motto on 28 August, 1854. It is taken from Horace's *Odes* III, Carmen XXX (an ode to the poet's immortal fame): '... usque ego postera crescam laude recens dum Capitolium scandet cum tacta virgine pontifex ...'
- 11 Robyn Sloggett and Rosie Freemantle, 'Lindendery project, conservation survey of the University of Melbourne Library research collections', unpublished report, University of Melbourne Conservation Service, Ian Potter Art Conservation Centre, University of Melbourne, May 2000.
- 12 Blainey and Olver, *The University of Melbourne*, p. 4.
- 13 'Minutes of the proceedings of the Council of the University of Melbourne', meeting no. 123, 30 May 1859, UMA, p. 4.
- 14 Logbook of biological accessions from the School of Biology, now held in the Department of Zoology, the University of Melbourne.
- 15 Geoffrey Blainey, *A centenary history of the University of Melbourne*, Carlton: Melbourne University Press, 1957, p. 50.
- 16 Blainey, *A centenary history*, pp. 111–112.
- 17 The Library's vision statement, 1999, sought 'To advance excellence in teaching and learning through access to, organisation and management of knowledge, regardless of time, place or format'. A strategy for the management of the Library's special research collections was an important part of delivering this vision.
- 18 Roslyn Russell and Kylie Winkworth, *Significance: A guide to assessing the significance of cultural heritage objects and collections*, Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia on behalf of the Heritage Collections Council, 2001.
- 19 Tony Arthur, Stephanie Jaehrling and Robyn Sloggett, 'Strategic approaches to resourcing the cultural collections of the University of Melbourne', unpublished report, University of Melbourne, 2003.
- 20 For information on research undertaken on the University's cultural collections see <http://www.unimelb.edu.au/culturalcollections/research>
- 21 The University of Melbourne, 'Policy and minimum requirements for management of cultural collections', April 2006, available from <http://www.unimelb.edu.au/culturalcollections/links/university.html>
- 22 Australian Vice-Chancellors' Committee, University Museums Review Committee, *Cinderella collections: University museums and collections in Australia*, Canberra: Australian Vice-Chancellors' Committee, 1996. A later report was titled *Transforming Cinderella collections: The management and conservation of Australian university museums, collections and herbaria, the report of the DCA/AV-CC University Museums Project Committee*, Canberra: Australian Vice-Chancellors' Committee, 1998.