

SHARING THE DREAM: LIBRARIES AS COMMUNITY HUBS

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ABSTRACT

Cultural institutions (such as libraries, archives, galleries, and museums) hold the historical, cultural and scientific evidence that communities and individuals use to build their understanding of Australian identity and values.

Australia's collections are diverse, and widely dispersed. Every town or locality, no matter how remote, has its own collections of local, regional or national significance. Collecting organisations serve as vital 'third place' settings for social interaction. On display, and discoverable online, collections engage the imaginations of students, tourists and the wider community, enabling them to expand and deepen their knowledge, and to solve problems.

The Collections Council of Australia is the peak body for Australia's collections sector – the collections held by organisations such as archives, galleries, libraries and museums, and the people who work with and for these collections. The Council has scoped several major proposals that have the potential to transform the ways in which Australians understand and engage with collections. Our proposals draw on the expertise of collecting, heritage and education specialists, and use innovative approaches and technologies.

This paper introduces our projects within the framework scoped by ALIA's 2008 conference theme, the acrostic 'DREAM'.

Particular attention is given to *CollectionsCare*, our proposal for 'regional hubs' that would enhance community access to regional collections and offer benefits for service delivery; for capacity building and skills development; and for social inclusion and community identity. We envisage libraries in many regions becoming directly involved in the implementation of *CollectionsCare* which offers exciting new roles for professionals in the collections sector who wish to engage collaboratively with others to make collections accessible to communities of users.

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Introduction

The origins of the Collections Council of Australia lie in a decision taken by the Cultural Ministers Council in 2004. The Cultural Ministers Council (CMC) is the intergovernmental forum for ministers of arts and culture across Australia and New Zealand. Since the late 1980s, the CMC's Australian members have supported initiatives relating to Australia's movable heritage collections.

The CMC's programs have helped build awareness of what can be called the 'distributed national collection' – the items held in archives, galleries, libraries and museums that help us to understand this land: its environments, histories and peoples.

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When the CMC decided to initiate the Collections Council and to fund our core operations, it asked us to advance the stability and sustainability of the collections sector, through communication, consultation and resolution of common issues.

We are a limited liability company that works independently from governments. We speak with one voice for collections in Australia, on matters of shared interest. We advocate for the whole collections sector, nationwide. Our purpose is to assist Australian collecting organisations to achieve their potential, and to sustainably connect collections with their current and future communities.

This paper aims to introduce our projects and proposals using the framework offered by the acrostic 'DREAM' that has structured this biennial conference of ALIA - **D**reaming the future, **R**esearch, **E**ntrepreneurship, **A**ccess and **M**eeting Places – and to alert the library domain to the potential for involvement with our work.

The author wishes to acknowledge that this paper draws on a number of previous texts prepared by and for the Collections Council, and thus on ideas developed by the Council's Directors and Secretariat. Particular thanks are due to the Council's Chair, Ms Sue Natrass AO, and Development Officer, Ms Veronica Bullock.

Dreaming the future for the collections sector in Australia

Communities and individuals are searching for their stories – the popularity of TV programs like 'Who do you think you are' and 'Australian Story' are showing us this need. Collecting organisations are the source of a vast amount of primary material that connects people with the stories of heroes, villains and country, to gain inspiration and pride from acts of heroism, loss and courage.

The Collections Council's dream is not for ourselves, but for the collections sector. Our vision is for collections in Australia to be a source of knowledge, ideas, understanding, inspiration and creativity. We aim to work with our partners and the community to see that collections are widely accessible, clearly defined, actively connected to the communities they represent, recognised for their significance, used collaboratively, and managed for sustainability (*The Collections Plan, 2007-2010*).

Working towards this vision, we've undertaken a range of projects and participated cooperatively with our stakeholders and with relevant peak bodies in other sectors.

Our research suggests that significant transformation is needed in many parts of the collections sector if our vision is to be achieved. We have therefore developed several major proposals that require substantial support for nation-wide implementation. These proposals draw on the expertise of collecting, heritage and education specialists, and use innovative programs and technologies, to transform the ways in which Australians understand and engage with their collections.

Our proposals include:

- The establishment of a Register of Australian Collections, and new ways of recognising the distributed national collection.
- The development of a national strategy for Digital Heritage Collections.
- A 'Future Fund' (or endowment fund) for the collections sector.
- *What's Inside?* - an educational program to broaden, deepen and diversify the audiences for Australia's collecting institutions.
- *CollectionsCare* - a system of professional, strategic and collaborative support for collections in regional Australia.

The remainder of this paper provides some further information about these ambitious but much-needed approaches for the sector.

Researching the collections sector in Australia

To bring about change in the sector, the Collections Council needs to understand the current status of collections and the organisations that care for them. Our research achievements include the contribution of a chapter about Australia's collections sector for an international benchmarking study (AEA Consulting 2006), our own investigation of conservation and preservation employment, education and training in Australia between 2003 and 2008 (Bullock, Birtley and Jenkins 2006), and an invited piece for the *Australia State of the Environment 2006* report (Beeton, Buckley, Jones et al 2006).

We have communicated with the Cultural Ministers Council, Statistics Working Group and the Australian Bureau of Statistics on several projects to help inform the gathering of official statistics about Australian collections.

The ABS data is gathered in relation to separate domains of the collections sector. We would like to have better data about the sector as a whole, so as to advocate for improvements where required. We have consequently proposed the development of an Register of Australian Collections (including the classification of every collecting organisation in the country) and a National Survey of Collections and Facilities that would be a landmark survey of all Australian public collections and collections infrastructure.

In addition to our interests in research *about* the sector, we are contributing to research that will provide useful tools *for* the sector. Listed here are some of our major projects in this arena:

- An online 'showcase' for case studies of projects that exemplify collaboration between members of the collections sector (*Collaborative Projects Showcase* 2008)
- A showcase for conservation and preservation careers and projects (*Conservation / Preservation Showcase* 2007).
- A set of *Principles for the Development and Maintenance of Digital Heritage Collections* (2007) that arose from our Summit on digital collections in 2006; we hope that these will inform good decision-making by collecting organisations and also by funding agencies.

- A bibliography of standards relating to digital collections, also deriving from our 2006 Summit (Part D of the *Summit on Digital Collections: Working Papers 2006*). We are now preparing an online Guide to standards for the sector – including an update of the digital bibliography.

With a grant from the Commonwealth of Australia (through the Department of Environment, Water, Heritage and the Arts), we are supporting two publications designed to assist the collections sector:

- *Collecting Institutions Law*, written by lawyer Shane Simpson, will be a web-based reference guide for archives, galleries, libraries and museums on the business and law of public collecting organisations in Australia.
- *Significance 2.0* will be a revised second edition of an acclaimed 2001 methodology for assessing the significance of movable cultural heritage, and is being developed to include archive and library collections.

Whenever appropriate opportunities arise, the Collections Council draws on its research into the collections sector to make submissions to enquiries and consultative processes. Where possible, we publish these submissions on our website (*Submissions 2008*). We have advocated the collections sector, its strengths and its needs to the Productivity Commission (on Historic Heritage Places), the ABS (on their collections sector Service Industry Surveys, and also on the recent cuts to the Libraries survey), the Australian Research Council (on the Excellence in Research for Australia initiative, and also on the Future Fellowships), the National Association for the Visual Arts (Best Practice for Artists and Publicly Funded Galleries), and the Australian Parliament's Joint Committee of Public Accounts and Audit (on the effects of the Commonwealth's ongoing efficiency dividend on smaller public sector agencies – which include the National Library of Australia.)

A number of submissions have been made to departments of the Australian Government, including Education (on the Australian Standard Research Classification, and also the Review of the Road Map for the National Collaborative Research Infrastructure Strategy); Innovation, Industry, Science and Research (on the Review of the National Innovation System); and also the Prime Minister's department (on all ten topics for the *Australia 2020* Summit).

Entrepreneurship – on behalf of the collections sector in Australia

We have participated as a member of an entrepreneurial Taskforce that has developed the inaugural *National standards for Australian museums and galleries*. The Taskforce expects to publish these standards in September 2008. The Collections Council anticipates that the collaborative 'Taskforce' model may be adapted for future projects relating to standards in the collections sector.

We have had some success in gaining philanthropic funds to support our projects, but believe that the sorts of transformations we envisage for the collections sector need a major shift of emphasis. The treadmill of short-term funding opportunities exhausts even the professionals in the sector, while the volunteers are ageing and not finding it easy to replace their numbers on committees and working groups. We are therefore starting to scope the potential for a major endowment for the collections sector – a

‘Future Fund’ for collections. Such a fund could help to support our major proposals that envisage a new and sustainable future for Australia’s past.

The collections sector has never had access to an equivalent policy and grant-making framework such as has been enjoyed since 1975 by the creative arts (through the Australia Council) and by heritage places (through the former Australian Heritage Commission, and, since 2004, by the Australian Heritage Council). The collections sector urgently needs major new resources so as to meet the expectations of 21st century users. A ‘Future Fund for Collections’ would help to future-proof Australia’s distributed collections, nationwide.

Access to collections in Australia

Excellent access to collections is encouraged by the web portals, Libraries Australia (<http://librariesaustralia.nla.gov.au>) and Collections Australia Network (<http://www.collectionsaustralia.net>). These portals work well for those who know about collections! But they are limited by the availability of digital content, and by the lack of awareness of these portals amongst many potential users, both within and beyond the collections sector.

To create a digital future for Australia’s collections (past and emerging), we are therefore proposing a national strategy to stimulate creative engagement by all users of Australia’s digital heritage collections. A national framework for digital heritage collections will:

- promote integrated access (internationally, nationally and regionally) to Australia’s digital heritage collections; and
- enable the use of heritage materials by new and innovative audiences, including Australia’s vibrant creative industries.

Within a social inclusion context, we want to promote a democratised notion of access to collections. We seek to retain and deepen the relationship with existing users, reconnect the disconnected, and convert potential audiences into lifelong users of collecting organisations. We believe there is an important role for the sector to play in generating the education revolution. We see the value and importance of collecting organisations in promoting literacy and learning at all levels – across linguistic, cultural and social dimensions.

Our proposal for new educational resource materials (with the working title: *What’s Inside?* has been developed in consultation with the Australian Primary Principals Association and also with Curriculum Corporation. *What’s Inside?* aims to introduce learners to Australia’s collections, and to the sources of knowledge contained in archives, galleries, libraries and museums, by:

- producing print and online materials through a well designed and comprehensive educational program;
- enabling learners to connect with the wealth of materials held in collecting institutions; and

- generating broad public understanding of the value, purpose and use of our collections.

Meeting Places for people working with collections in Australia

During our first few years of operation, we have created new meeting places for people working with collections in Australia. For example, we convened a landmark Summit on Digital Collections in 2006), and a Round Table meeting of peak non-government groups in the collections sector in 2008. We use our website for communicating with people in the sector: we have established online forums for discussion of particular topics, we distribute an occasional e-Bulletin to subscribers, and have enabled an RSS feed from our News page.

We helped inaugurate the Australian branch of the International Committee of the Blue Shield that promotes counter-disaster preparedness in cultural heritage institutions, and we serve as its Secretariat (*Blue Shield Australia* 2008). With generous permission from the Society of American Archivists, Blue Shield Australia has adapted the Society's MayDay campaign to raise awareness of the importance of disaster preparedness. On the 1st May each year – and during the month – we encourage archives, galleries, libraries, museums, and cultural heritage sites across Australia to participate in MayDay by taking at least one step to prepare for disaster response. A flier to advise of special MayDay events and to stimulate involvement is prepared in advance of May each year. We advertise the flier widely via list-servs and e-bulletins in the collections sector.

In 2006 we commissioned a study of ways to advance the sustainability of collections in regional Australia – an area of great need. Our consultant, Anne Dunn, met with more than 130 people, including representatives of government departments, local government, collecting organisations, peak bodies, membership associations, and service providers. In addition, she received 59 written submissions. We published the analysis as *The Dunn Report* in June 2007.

The Dunn Report told us that the current structures supporting collections will not sustain the proper and vital collection and preservation of our history, and that there are enormous gaps and weaknesses in the current system. It advised us that bringing together the collecting organisations, to learn from and support each other through a 'regional hub', will create a powerful and focused local and regional environment for collections, and will enhance the impact of outreach services delivered by state/territory and national institutions. It proposed that regional 'collections coordinators', working from recognised 'hubs', would be an effective method for delivering targeted support to regional collecting organisations, and thus for contributing to the sustainability of collections. It suggested that the 'regional hubs' concept represents an exciting way for communities and governments to work in partnership so as to develop and protect the nation's heritage.

The Dunn Report scoped the launch of fifty regional hubs over ten years, and foreshadowed the eventual introduction of the project to suburban regions of the major capital cities.

CollectionsCare is our response to *The Dunn Report* and proposes a national network of *CollectionsCare* Coordinators, working in a system of professional, strategic and collaborative support that will transform collections in regional Australia.

CollectionsCare offers the potential to sustain regional heritage and identity by:

- making significant and vulnerable collections discoverable: online, and on-the-ground;
- unlocking the potential of collections to create new educational, cultural and economic opportunities for regional and remote communities;
- adding value to existing collections and cultural infrastructure in regional communities;
- supporting the valuable work of volunteers;
- developing local capacity; and
- strengthening social and cultural capital for regional communities.

There are several ways in which *CollectionsCare* might be implemented. Importantly, we want the program to advocate sharing resources, and to complement the excellent work that is already being undertaken in many areas.

We are working on a *CollectionsCare* ‘tool kit’ that will help people in a *CollectionsCare* region to map, develop, coordinate and conserve their collections. The tool kit will also encourage techniques for making more collections visible in the online environment.

Our proposal has the potential to attract support via a whole-of-government approach at all levels, to include not only the arts and cultural fields, but also regional services and development, education and training, indigenous affairs, digital content, and social inclusion. *CollectionsCare* will be developed incrementally, starting with a small number of regions.

We are very pleased that the Western Australian government has made a budgetary commitment to contribute a share of the costs for a regional hub for three years, subject to certain conditions. We are inviting all other jurisdictions to offer appropriate support to help us set up a demonstration hub in each state and territory.

We are also encouraged by the fact that the Myer Foundation has recognised the importance of *CollectionsCare* and has offered us a grant of \$120,000.

In many communities, the local library already serves as a physical, social and professional hub for many purposes. American sociologist Ray Oldenburg has identified three ‘places’ that are essential for individual wellbeing: The third place – after home and work – are the ‘great good places’ (Oldenburg 2002) where people ‘hang out’ on a regular basis, relax in good company, and construct the infrastructure of human relationships. Libraries and other collecting organisations, particularly those with a café, are well-positioned to be acknowledged as ‘third place’ exemplars.

If *CollectionsCare* can be implemented, then libraries will be identified as part of the collections mapping that we’ll encourage in each region. In some cases, the local library

may host the *CollectionsCare* Coordinator's office. It is also likely that the *CollectionsCare* Coordinators will have professional qualifications in librarianship, archiving, museum studies, information systems or conservation / preservation.

We continue to advocate for sustainable regional collections across Australia, for the stories they tell, and for the meaning and unifying power they bring to communities.

Conclusion: benefitting Australians, today and tomorrow

Collections hold the evidence from which communities build their understanding of Australian values and identity. By acquiring, conserving, researching and exhibiting contemporary and older materials, collecting organisations communicate links between past, present and the future.

Australia's collections serve a multitude of purposes. On display, and discoverable online, collections engage the imaginations of students, tourists and the wider community, enabling them to expand and deepen their knowledge, and to solve problems. Collections can bridge gaps between the generations, and contribute to community strengthening.

The Collections Council believes that its projects are in touch with other important social and political developments, and have the capacity to provide particular benefits for:

- significant collections
- the knowledge economy: education and history
- capacity building and skills development
- social inclusion and community identity
- the information economy: unique and valuable digital content

We invite questions and contact from people and organisations who 'share our dream' and would like to assist the proposals and activities of the Collections Council.

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BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF PRESENTER

Margaret Birtley is the inaugural CEO of the Collections Council of Australia and an Honorary Fellow of Deakin University. Her background includes extensive work in academia and museums. She has served on voluntary committees and boards (in Australia and overseas) for museums and professional associations, and has held appointments on government advisory bodies. She is a member of the Cultural Sector Advisory Committee for Innovation and Business Skills Australia.