

# Macquarie University's undergraduate degree in Museum Studies

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## Resumo

A Universidade de Macquarie (Nova Gales do Sul, Austrália) iniciou em 2002 um curso de quatro anos de duração conducente a um diploma 'B.Sc./B.A.' em 'História Natural, Cultura e Museologia'. O respectivo *curriculum* engloba áreas de interesse para museus nacionais, estatais e regionais, junto dos quais a Universidade de Macquarie goza de excelente reputação. O curso, de natureza interdisciplinar, envolve directamente a maioria dos museus da Universidade, suscitando nos estudantes naturais e interessantes oportunidades de desenvolvimento de projectos de prática museológica e simultaneamente permitindo à Universidade envolver de uma forma mais directa os seus museus na sua missão académica global. Finalmente, o curso tem a clara vantagem de estimular nos profissionais dos museus da Universidade de Macquarie uma constante reciclagem e aprofundamento profissional.

## Abstract

In 2002, Macquarie University introduced a 4-year programme of study leading to a B.Sc./B.A. in Natural History, Culture and Museum Studies. The double degree programme covers speciality areas of particular interest to national, state and regional museums and for which Macquarie has a high reputation. This interdisciplinary degree is designed to: a) provide students with a modern background for the field of Museum Studies, b) allow students to qualify with coherencies (majors) in at least three segments of study, and c) allow students to develop strong generic skills in information management. Most of the University's museums are involved in the delivery of the degree programme. This creates opportunities for students to experience practical museum-based projects. The development of this undergraduate degree programme also enables the University to more effectively engage its museums with its academic mission and to encourage its museum staff to strive for appropriate standards of professionalism.

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## Introduction

In 2002, Macquarie University introduced a 4-year programme of study leading to a BSc with BA in Natural History, Culture and Museum Studies. The double degree programme covers speciality areas of particular interest to most national, state and regional museums and for which Macquarie has a high reputation, viz. Australian history, ancient history, archaeology, palaeontology, biology, geology, early childhood studies, heritage and indigenous studies. This interdisciplinary degree is

designed to: i) provide students with a modern background for the field of Museum Studies, ii) allow students to qualify with coherencies (majors) in at least three segments of study, and iii) allow students to develop strong generic skills in information management.

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the University 'to more effectively engage its museums with its academic mission and to encourage its museum staff to strive for appropriate standards of professionalism.

In this paper we outline some of the reasons for introducing the new undergraduate programme, explain the structure and some of the core content, report on how the programme integrates with existing University museums benefiting the University community and offer an initial assessment of the programme from students.

## **Background**

Museums traditionally recruit staff from certain discipline areas commensurate with the museums collection subject areas and philosophy. The start of a museum career will often stem from either an Arts or Science Bachelors Degree. However, as they unfold, museum careers may take staff a great distance from this initial degree.

Macquarie University therefore saw an opportunity to use existing academic strengths and structure a double degree programme utilising a blend of Arts and Science study coherencies (major areas of study) with a core component of museology. The core units (subjects) also contain a strong component of information management. This is an important generic skill for the knowledge economy and combined with the liberal education mix of arts and science, equips students well for a range of future work place scenarios.

Macquarie University is the first university in Australia to offer such an undergraduate programme. With the introduction of up-front fees for coursework Master of Science programmes and Diplomas, the few programmes of study in Museum Studies available throughout Australia are thus constrained. This BSc with BA programme may well be contemplated as an alternative to a portion of the postgraduate programmes already available elsewhere in Australia.

Most of the programme's coherencies (majors) are offered externally. The whole degree, therefore, can be attempted by interested people from any part of Australia. Of course, some units (subjects) require on-campus sessions, especially those requiring hands on experience. This mode of flexible delivery makes the programme attractive to many who are already working or volunteering in the museums sector, particularly in rural and regional Australia.

It is also possible to enrol in single units within the programme. Of particular interest to people already involved in museum work (as volunteer or as full- or part-time employee) are the two compulsory units for the degree. These units introduce students to information technology management issues in the twenty-first century. These issues are applied through a focus on the knowledge of the science and technology utilised by museums. The units also explore ethical, legal, aesthetic and economic issues of relevance to museum collection management and associated museum programmes and provide practical museum experience.

For those who have already successfully completed a degree in a museums-oriented field of study (e.g. those noted in Table 1) and who would normally qualify to undertake an Honours programme, an Honours programme in Museums Studies is also offered.

## **Structure of degree programme**

The structure of the degree programme involves a compulsory component consisting of the core units noted above and a coherent study pattern in Palaeontology. The remainder of the degree programme is elective and students have the opportunity to select either two Arts coherencies or one Arts coherency and another Science coherency.

A linkage between the Arts and Sciences is particularly attractive to a large number of mature age clientele who are keen to advance their knowledge and skills in the natural histories and cultural studies.

A mixture of a range of coherencies give an 'edge' to a large number of students seeking employment in an ever-shrinking job market. Many students are not sure even when they begin university if they should pursue an arts or science-based career. By offering a combined degree, they will have the opportunity of combining both and will leave university with knowledge in three areas of study.

Arts coherencies	Science coherencies
Ancient Mediterranean Cultures	Palaeontology
Australian History	Biology
Indigenous Studies	Geology
Environmental and Cultural Geography	
Early Childhood Education	

Table 1 -List of Arts and Science study coherencies currently offered in Macquarie University's BSc/BA in Natural History, Culture and Museum Studies.

Other coherencies for the programme are presently under negotiation. As students will graduate with a BSc with BA, the University Admission Index (a formula that helps regulate university entrance in Australia) required should be the same as for an Arts or Science degree (whichever is the higher). Students need not have studied specific units at school prior to enrolment. Basic computer literacy can be achieved in the first year of study. When choosing a coherency in Biology for example, students are required to take general first-year subjects in Biology and it is recommended that basic Chemistry be completed at first-year level (this unit assumes no Chemistry at Higher School Certificate (HSC) level). Students who have not sat the HSC may apply to Macquarie's Jubilee Scheme for special entry<sup>1</sup>.

Potential student clientele are informed that the degree is not just for those who are interested only in museum studies. It is explained that the programme provides a broad-based degree enabling students to seek employment in a number of fields. Likewise, a student with such a qualification would indicate to potential employers that they are more broadly educated than students with either a BSc or a BA. Possible avenues of employment include public relations, national parks, conservation management, education, scientific research organisations, libraries, journalism, broadcasting, aboriginal agencies, tourism and recreation planning, and environmental activities.

Many museums at a national, state and regional level use palaeontology as one of their principal draw-cards. Palaeontology has ties to the arts via archaeology. It therefore is appropriate that the palaeontology/palaeobiology strand is compulsory and the programme is co-ordinated by scientific staff in conjunction with a Committee made up of a representative from each of the strands offered. It is thus differentiated from most other Museum Studies programmes as these are commonly aligned with Arts Faculties. Curators and Museums Officers from the University's own Museums play a fundamental part in the delivery of the programme and associated quality control of the learning experiences.

It has been evident in recent years that the number of museums has been increasing. Even in 1998, 276 Australian university museums and collections were in existence (AUSTRALIAN VICE-CHANCELLORS COMMITTEE 1998). Regional museums have been springing up in many areas and, as a consequence of regional centres feeling economic hardships, are being used as a resource as the country areas attempt to 're-invent' themselves. With this in mind, some of the strands will be available in the external mode. The programme will also be marketed to developing

<sup>1</sup> The Jubilee Scheme was established in 1992 to mark the Silver Jubilee of Macquarie University. The Scheme provides entrance to the University for selected students aged over 25 years who wish to enrol. Students may also enrol in a single unit (termed a non-award unit). Those who already have a museum background or some museum experience without a Higher School Certificate can make a special case to apply.

nations, especially those who are trying to preserve the record of ever-changing cultures.

## **Integration with University facilities**

One of the corner-stones of the programme is to prepare students for employment in the museum sector. Students are introduced to the use of information technology to store images of museum specimens, whether they be fossil, extant biologic materials, aboriginal artefacts, pottery or art. This is done by using the University's recently acquired AdLib system, a museum information management system covering all collections on campus. This is augmented by use of technology developed at Macquarie in the Centre of Biodiversity and Bioresources (BioTrack) a specialised system for compiling extensive biodiversity data. Students are introduced to both systems in the core second year unit ELS 202 Information Management and Museums Practice.

Specimens, often millions of them, in museums worldwide are generally kept as collections of 'real' specimens that are costly to maintain, curate and make accessible and hence the use of the irreplaceable wealth of knowledge they contain for research, teaching and keeping of cultural records is declining dramatically. This is especially so in Third World countries and countries of the former Soviet Union. An important aspect of the Macquarie degree is to initiate a revolution in these specimen-based disciplines by creating 'virtual' collections that have many pedagogical advantages, not the least of which is the integration of information technology with the particular discipline in question.

The compulsory second year unit ELS202 aims to broaden student understanding of the roles, responsibilities and function of museums. The unit also introduces students to museology, the way information is managed in a museum context and various aspects of modern museum practice. The unit is also designed to heighten appreciation of these facilities. Core subject areas covered in an introductory form are: i) preventative conservation,

ii) exhibition design, iii) database manipulation, iv) curatorial practice, v) public programmes, vi) the digital museum world, and vii) copyright issues.

The delivery of the unit is strongly reliant on campus museums. The unit components including lectures, tutorials, workshops, site visits and specific project work is coordinated by a team of staff and involves the staff of many campus museums in delivering aspects of the unit. This effectively integrates Macquarie University's campus museums into the academic mission of the institution. Staff working in these facilities are therefore given the opportunity to share their combined knowledge and experience with the student body. Some examples are:

- The University's Museums and Heritage Officer is involved in the delivery of introductory lectures.
- The Biological Sciences Museum and the Museum of Ancient Cultures, two excellent on campus museums, are visited to compare and contrast the way information is presented in exhibitions.
- The Museum of Ancient Cultures runs a practical session on the correct method of handling artefacts.
- The University's part-time conservator runs a practical session on preventative conservation.
- The Biological Sciences Museum, Earth Sciences Museum, Australian History Museum and Museum of Ancient Cultures education programmes are analysed.
- The University Library delivers a practical session on generic research skills.
- The University's Copyright Officer delivers the component on copyright issues in museums and lectures on information management.
- Students complete a major assignment involving the accessioning of collection data into the University's Museum Information Management System.
- The Curator of the Lachlan Macquarie Room delivers a lecture and practical session on digital exhibition spaces.

The Museums at Macquarie are active participants in the cultural life of the campus. During the delivery

of the unit there are plenty of informal learning opportunities for internal students through Macquarie's Museums. These consist of opening functions, seminars, guest lecturers and off-campus excursions. Students are welcome to participate in these on a voluntary basis and students are encouraged to engage with the campus museums in various voluntary capacities.

Students are also encouraged to become actively engaged in many off-campus museum activities. Those seriously considering a museum career are urged to consider membership of a range of professional groups such as the International Council of Museums (ICOM) and Museums Australia. When the ELS 202 unit was offered for the first time in 2002 the following voluntary activities, both on and off campus, were offered. There was a sustained interest in these by enrolled students.

- Floor talks on the 'Palaeographia' exhibition<sup>2</sup> – Macquarie University Art Gallery
- Opening of the 'Yumi Yet' exhibition – Macquarie University Art Gallery.
- Opening of the 'Errol Davis Retrospective' – Macquarie University Art Gallery.
- Behind the scenes tour – Australian Museum, Sydney.
- Behind the scenes tour – Sydney Aquarium.
- Discussion on the links between Art and Science – Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney.
- Opening of the 'Art on the run' photographic exhibition, Macquarie University.
- Archaeological dig, call for volunteers on the site of a colonial era dwelling – Liverpool.
- 'Why Learning seminar' – Australian Museum, Sydney.
- 'Exposing Access Expo and Seminar' – Powerhouse Museum, Sydney.
- Opening of student exhibition 'Galipolli: Then and Now' – Macquarie University Library (exhibition by enrolled ELS202 student).

There were a number of interesting but unexpected outcomes of utilising local museums as part of the

unit for the tutorial/practical sessions. The following unintended learning experiences were provided for students.

- A visit to one museum on campus coincided with an evacuation drill.
- A visit to one museum on campus coincided with a school visit where 28 students were anticipated but 61 arrived.
- A visit to an Art Gallery coincided with the arrival of documentation concerning an ongoing collaborative project. The Education Officer who received the documentation launched into an impromptu but illuminating lecture on the unsatisfactory nature of the documentation and the pitfalls of collaborative enterprises between different organisations with different agendas.
- Students completing an exercise on the presentation of information in shop windows in a public space were questioned by some shop managers. Most were helpful and welcomed the student interest. One shop manager however claimed the content of their shop window was 'copyright' and the students were not permitted by law to take notes, thus illustrating a public misconception about the nature of copyright.

### **Evaluation: some remarks**

An evaluation of students undertaking the new unit in 2002 was done. Of the 21 respondents (enrolment of 27), four reported they were seriously considering changing their career aspirations as a result of the unit. The multi-disciplinary perspective of the unit also received favourable comment from three students. Another three students noted that they would recommend the unit to other students, while one of these noted that the unit would be extremely beneficial to students enrolled in the Diploma of Education programme. The subject convenor's contention that the unit has broad appeal across a range of disciplines beyond those enrolled in the double degree programme is therefore supported. The remainder of positive comments noted that the

<sup>2</sup> For more details of the 'Palaeographia' exhibition, see SIMPSON *et al.* (this issue).

unit had deepened interest in the subject matter and increased appreciation of the museum experience.

The compulsory 300 level unit HIST 309 History, Culture & Museum Studies: Sources and Skills is a modification of a pre-existing unit prior to the commencement of the degree programme. This unit examines the evolution of the museum in society and encourages a critical understanding of its role in defining and shaping national and local perceptions of history and culture, with particular reference to Australia. The unit also offers a skills-based component that considers the use of alternative sources, especially the material evidence of the past.

Students proceeding to an Honours year are required to complete two projects, a research topic conducted in the Department of their choice, either History, Human Geography, Biology, Early Childhood Studies, or Earth and Planetary Sciences, and one other in conjunction with a museum (on campus or externally). This provides practical experience in researching and setting up of an exhibit on a chosen topic, or undertaking another museum specific project entailing considerable research and implementation. Students who have completed an appropriate BA or BSc undergraduate programme of studies either at Macquarie or another university may enrol in the Honours year. One student, with a Bachelor of Arts, has completed the Honours year to

date. Her project involved curating an exhibition entitled 'Gallipoli then and now. The changing image of Anzac'.

## Conclusions

Inviting students to participate in the cultural life of the University through museums-based coursework and project work as a result of the introduction of the new double degree programme in Natural History, Culture and Museum Studies enlivens campus museums. In many universities, campus museums are only perceived as relevant to the institution's outreach and recruitment strategies by acting as a shop-front for the campus and spaces for public interaction between the university and the community.

The development of the Museum Studies programme enables much greater engagement by more effectively utilising the teaching and learning potential of museums and thus integrating them into other aspects of the University's 'core business'. This makes them directly relevant to teaching programmes and allows them to play a more focused role in student recruitment. Project work in the campus museums associated with components of the degree programme also provides ample new opportunities for the development of museum based research work. This further enhances the relevance of the campus museum to its host institution.

## Acknowledgements

The development of this initiative has been greatly helped by the assistance of the Vice-Chancellor's Development Fund at Macquarie University, administered through the University's Centre for Flexible Learning in the form of two grants to assist with the promotion of the programme and to help with the development of the new unit ELS202. We also thank Peter Stanbury from the Vice-Chancellor's Office who has assisted the programme in many ways and encouraged us to submit this poster and paper to the UMAC Conference.

## Reference

AUSTRALIAN VICE-CHANCELLOR'S COMMITTEE 1998. *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, Sydney.