

University museums at the crossroads

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Resumo

O ensino superior australiano está a atravessar um período de intensa avaliação e debate. Os relatórios oficiais já publicados suscitam questões interessantes e novas oportunidades para o reposicionamento dos museus universitários no ambiente académico contemporâneo. Tendo esses relatórios como base, este artigo discute os 'novos' papéis a desempenhar pelos museus universitários, com particular ênfase para as questões de pedagogia, património e identidade.

Abstract

Higher education is under intense review in Australia. It is 'at the crossroads'. As the findings of the review are published, new opportunities are emerging for university museums to re-position themselves in the contemporary academic environment. This paper addresses issues of pedagogy, heritage and identity and opportunities for university museums in these fields.

University museums generally benchmark their operations against the museum sector. In this note, I propose that the university museum sector, while not ignoring the museum sector, should address the university environment, and university benchmarks, as its greatest priority.

University museums and their identity within universities

This paper focuses on universities rather than museums because this is the environment in which university museums are located. The purpose of these comments is to put forward some ideas about university museums to be taken up in the following round table discussion¹. While it is noted that specific collections in university museums – whether natural history collections, medical collections, herbaria or art collections – have different capacities to develop specific roles within their universities and maintain certain relationships with particular faculties, in this paper I will refer to university museums as though

all are the same with similar opportunities for their operations and development.

In Australia, universities are under review and higher education, to borrow the terminology of Australia's COMMONWEALTH DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION, SCIENCE AND TRAINING (2000a, 2000b) is 'at the crossroads'. If the core function of universities, in Australia at least, is at the crossroads, so too is the core role of museums within universities. I will consider three aspects of the review of higher education in Australia and explore their relevance to university museums.

Higher education at the crossroads

New learning opportunities

One of the issues that government in Australia is examining is the understanding that "the critical role of universities in preparing a workforce capable of meeting the demands of the knowledge economy is now becoming more widely understood."² The

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¹ UMAC's conference round table 'A Role for University Museums in Pedagogy, Heritage and Identity' (Australian National University, 2 October 2002).

² McINNES, C., R. HARTLEY & M. ANDERSON 2001. *What did you do with your Science degree? A national study of employment outcomes for Science degree holders 1990 – 2000*, Australian Council of Deans of Science, Melbourne, cited in: COMMONWEALTH DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION, SCIENCE AND TRAINING (2002a: 5).

Australian report *Striving for Quality, Learning, Teaching and Scholarship* (COMMONWEALTH DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION, SCIENCE AND TRAINING 2002a) posits that the international demand for new skills and knowledge (much of the research being based on UK research and reviews) is expected to stimulate a surge in demand for adult education and that university education – that is traditional higher education leading to a degree – no longer has a monopoly over “knowledge-production [...] [and] [...] certification of knowledge acquisition” (COMMONWEALTH DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION, SCIENCE AND TRAINING 2002a: 5).

Are university museums poised to “re-equip”³ – at least in part – the adult population by offering new learning opportunities to meet this new demand?

Pedagogy and learning experiences and environments

A second concern of the higher education review is “effective and efficient learning experiences and environments” (COMMONWEALTH DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION, SCIENCE AND TRAINING 2002a: 34).

In the letters page in *The Australian Higher Education Supplement* 25 September 2002, a banner announced ‘Pedagogy has a place in the reformed university’. The author, Bruce Williams from the Department of theatre and drama, La Trobe University (Melbourne), raises the contentious issue of whether academics should “learn to teach”. The territory this canvasses was also reviewed in the federal government’s higher education review. The report notes the “shift in pedagogical theory and practice from a focus on improving teaching to a focus on improving learning” (COMMONWEALTH DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION, SCIENCE AND TRAINING 2002a: 34-35). Where this is relevant to university museums is the consequent adoption by universities of different learning methodologies, so-called “student-centred learning [...] problem-based learning, collaborative learning, experiential learning, adventure learning, reflective practice, learning circles and self-directed learning” (COMMONWEALTH DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION, SCIENCE AND TRAINING 2002a: 34-35).

These styles of learning are what museums excel at, whether community-based public museums or university museums. It could be construed that to signal the role of university museums in the academic environment, the flexible learning/delivery strategies museums employ may need to be re-configured and better promoted across the campus. This could enhance the value of learning methodologies in university museums in fields of particular knowledge that relate to their collections – such as the medical sciences, biological sciences, natural history, creative arts or social sciences.

The cultural and heritage agenda

The third contemporary issue for higher education is the opportunity for universities and university museums to develop partnerships in community service that will “contribute to a broader national and regional, social and cultural agenda” (COMMONWEALTH DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION, SCIENCE AND TRAINING 2002b: 59).

The Australian report discusses the notion of ‘academic citizenship’, that is service to both the university and the wider community ‘through one’s discipline’. This is applied scholarship that “involves practices of professional and community work, and social relationships which connect members of the scholarly community of the university with a wide variety of individuals, organisations and enterprises in the professions, business and industry, and government” (COMMONWEALTH DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION, SCIENCE AND TRAINING 2002b: 59).

University collections have been built with great intellectual rigour and community support over time. GLASSICK *et al.* have argued that serving the community “is serious demanding work, requiring the rigour – and the accountability – traditionally associated with research work”.⁴ The knowledge attached to the objects in university collections and the research associated individually and collectively with them is an excellent, if inadequately recognized, example of applied scholarship and research.

³ The Dearing Committee, National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education (UK), 1997, section 1.12, cited in: COMMONWEALTH DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION, SCIENCE AND TRAINING (2002a: 5).

⁴ GLASSICK, C., TAYLOR, M. & MAEROFF, G. 1997, *Scholarship Assessed: Evaluation of the Professionate*, Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, Jossey Bass, San Francisco, cited in: COMMONWEALTH DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION, SCIENCE AND TRAINING (2002b: 59).



Fig. 1 – Learning experiences for young audiences working with educators from the School of Early Childhood and QUT Cultural Precinct in the University Art Collection, Queensland University of Technology Art Museum, Brisbane, Australia (Photo © QUT).

Re-defining the role for university museums

Within the museum sector – the so-called quadruple bottom line – the economic, social (including intellectual), cultural and environmental benefits of museums are key performance targets, driving museums forward in serving their communities.

That universities are identifying community service as a core role and responsibility should only enhance the value of university museums to universities, if this is effectively promoted as a benefit to the university. Yet there is a risk that community service may become dislocated from the university environment and dominate the activity of the museum. If this were to happen, university museums would risk projecting their purpose as more closely

aligned with that of the external community than the university environment.

The Australian higher education review suggests “there is considerable scope for expanding productive partnerships with the community through student involvement in what is termed ‘service learning’ [...] [that is] [...] experiential and active learning [...] [that] [...] links community service with the curriculum” (COMMONWEALTH DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION, SCIENCE AND TRAINING 2002b: 60). It is suggested that to be successful – and significant – to the university, such “real-life community-based projects” should be for credit in university courses, rather than isolated project-based events.⁵ This is tricky territory – negotiating an enhanced community role while at the same time securing the value of university museums in higher

⁵ ASSOCIATION OF COMMONWEALTH UNIVERSITIES 2001. *Engagement as a Core Value for the University*, The Association of Commonwealth Universities, iv, cited in: COMMONWEALTH DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION, SCIENCE AND TRAINING (2002b: 60).

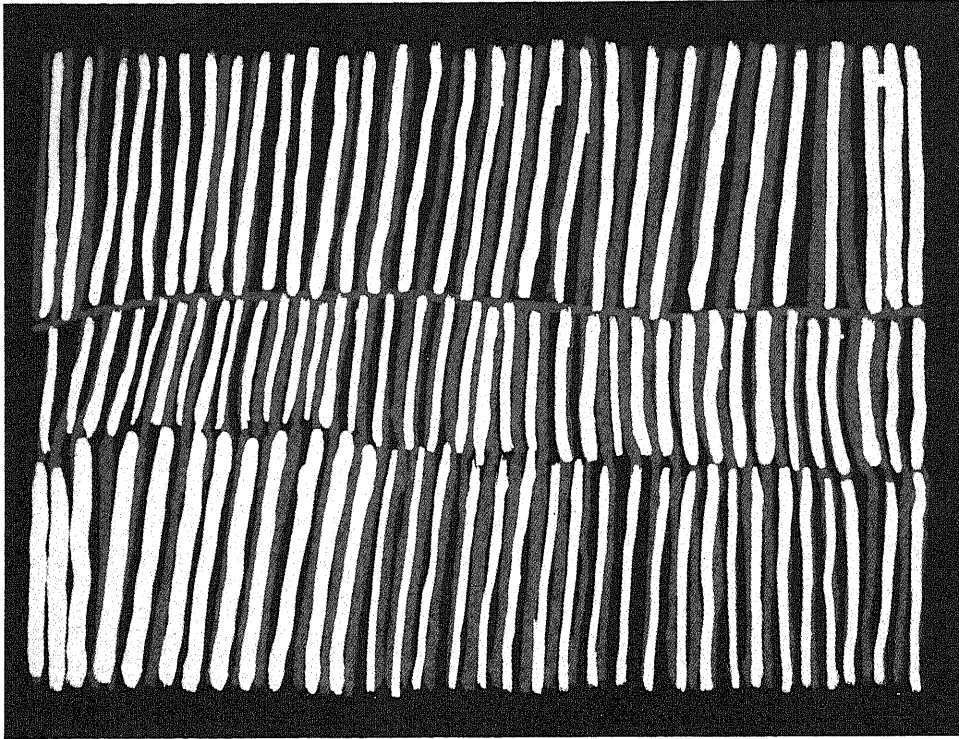


Fig. 2 – Freda Warlapinni, born c. 1928, *Tiwi motif XI* 1998. Colour screenprint on black paper (second state) Edition: 57/75. Sheet 56 x 77cm. Purchased 1998 with the assistance of the Visual Arts/Craft Fund of the Australia Council QUT Art Collection, Queensland University of Technology, Brisbane, Australia (© Freda Warlapinni).

education, specifically the fields of teaching and research.

Further discussion

Universities are changing and university museums must change with them if they are to have authority – and funding – to support their value in the field of higher

education. Three issues are raised here for further discussion:

- a) How can university museums better respond to society's need for lifelong learning?
- b) How can university museums improve learning environments in universities?
- c) And what is their role in contributing to universities' research, 'academic citizenship' and community service?

References

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