

Internal audience: A key to success

MIRNA HERUC

Abstract

The University of Adelaide (founded 1874) is a third oldest university in Australia. It has 23 collections that represent the wide range of its academic research across the arts and the sciences. A central challenge in utilizing these collections is the absence of a comprehensively representative museum.

We have developed awareness of the university's collections through strategic public programs of focused exhibitions, discussion forums and partnership events in a variety of locations. From 2004, the first year of Art & Heritage Collections operations, this program has enhanced key university activities while proving to be of significant interest to the general public.

Our core audience at the outset was principally staff with an interest in culture. Students have been harder to entice, but we now attract a growing number – mostly higher degree candidates. The university community has thus provided an engaged audience for events. Further, university staff have come forward as volunteers within Art & Heritage Collections programs, their knowledge of the university proving to be a particular asset. The cycle of staff / audience member / volunteer has proved to be a particularly productive if unexpected aspect of our activities, significantly complementing our wider community outreach.

Introduction

Founded in 1874 – the third oldest university in Australia – the University of Adelaide has a significant reputation to uphold. The colony of South Australia was founded according to Enlightenment principles and in consonance with this the university has tended to pursue a socially progressive agenda, including for example, the awarding of degrees to women (from 1880) and more latterly reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. An important thread of concern throughout the university's history has been the fostering of connections between the university and the wider community.

This legacy underpins the establishment of the Art & Heritage Collections branch at the university. Established in 2004, with approximately 25 years gap since the previous collection manager was (briefly) employed, yawning gaps were obvious in terms of both collection management practice and public profile.

A key challenge is that the university holds some 23 specialized collections but has no central museum, and that even those few collections housed in a museum-like space, are not resourced to present themselves to the broader public as a museum. Leaving 23 collections out on the limb is a significant deficit in marketing to any community.

The beginnings

The University of Adelaide had no profile to speak of on the collections front in 2004. This was a dilemma for our area as it meant there had been no audience for art and cultural events from within the university, and without a focus of a museum style space, cultural/collection activities had no regularly identifiable location.

Art & Heritage Collections devised a cultural program which initially was principally supported only by internal audience – the staff. This internal audience was gathered through personal networks as

well as through the complementary nature of their academic and professional interest to our program.

Cultural program

The cultural program we offer comprises a series of art and cultural interventions consisting of discussion panels, focused exhibitions and special events.

Given the high level of staff interest, events are timed to fit within or around the working day, with events being generally short, to the point and informal enough to allow people to come and go. Exhibitions for example are launched at 4.30pm, a good time for a social drink and conversation before heading home. Discussion panels are generally between 1–2pm so that people attending can get back to work. We always offer refreshments to help those who skipped lunch to concentrate, but people are also welcome to bring their own lunch.

Choosing venues for our events also has been an important element in the success of the program. The Barr Smith Library, at the centre of the main campus – on North Terrace, Adelaide's cultural boulevard – has been our principal location. It was from the Library that we gathered most of our support at the beginning. Now the spread of supporters is wider and includes members of both academic and professional staff from many areas.

Once the program was established on the main campus it allowed us to collaborate with other three campuses and curate events suited to their particular teaching and research foci. In this way our cultural outreach stretches out to all four campuses.

Cultural celebrations

As part of the cultural program we organize cultural celebrations which mark significant points during the year – Open Day, Reconciliation Week, end of year gatherings and the like.

One of the most successful projects we undertook was a Reconciliation Handshake ceremony which formed part of the process to erect, in 2007, a reconciliation sculpture in the prominent position on North Terrace streetscape. The project was directed by especially commissioned artists Karen Casey and Darryl Cowie who worked in collaboration with Wilto Yerlo Centre for Indigenous Studies and Research at the university. The university in 2003 signed a reconciliation statement with the local Indigenous community and the public sculpture was a physical manifestation of this commitment. 1,500 people attended the handshake ceremony and over 600 attended the unveiling of the sculpture – staff were prominent among participants. This celebration brought the internal community together around a significant commitment on reconciliation and partnership with Indigenous communities.

For the celebration of National Aboriginal Day Observation Committee Week we invited Indigenous artists originally from Pitjantjara lands in central Australia now resident in Adelaide, to perform an inma – traditional dance and story telling – along with painting demonstrations. This was a successful lunchtime event, with non-Indigenous staff thanking us for giving them an opportunity to meet Aboriginal people.

Volunteering

We are a very small branch with only 2 full time staff. We are faced with a backlog of cataloguing and researching so we looked to volunteers for assistance. This in itself is a significant program within the university. We have 20 people registered 2 of whom are university staff. They are keen to work on the hospitality aspects of our program, including tours, and to contribute within their areas of expertise.

Student participation

Unfortunately students are much harder to entice. We endeavored to set up activities that involved student interests such as an exhibition celebrating 75 years of *On Dit*, the university student newspaper and one of the few remaining in the light of funding reductions for student unions. The interest was only on that topic with little evidence of repeat visits on the part of participants. The same was found with discussion forums about sport, visual arts and the future of the student union. It is hard to disseminate information effectively to students. The changing nature of the student life, with most of them working, negatively affects the time they are able to spend on campus and explore cultural offerings.

Conclusion

In our situation attracting university staff members was a key to creating a critical mass of audience support on which we could build a significant public profile and establish a viable organizational unit. The loyalty shown by the staff to the program and its content was a total surprise – especially the transition of audience to volunteers. Now we are setting our sights on students. In the meantime we are using the close relationship that we now enjoy with the internal professional and academic staff as the foundation of our strategic push for a university museum.

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