

National Cultural Policy Submission

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Public and anonymous

Individual



Short submission (text box 500 words or less)

I have worked in the museum sector for 25 years as a Registrar in Collection Care and Access, including the past 20 years at a university museum in New South Wales. Our collections include art, natural science, historical photography, scientific instruments, antiquities, and cultural material from Australia, PNG, and the Pacific.

As a university museum, we also hold material reflecting the legacy of colonial collecting practices. This includes Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ancestral remains, Pacific peoples' ancestors, and ancient Mediterranean remains, as well as restricted cultural material requiring culturally safe stewardship and ongoing consultation with communities.

Museums are changing, and there is growing willingness within the sector to address the legacy of colonial collecting practices and create more ethical and inclusive institutions. This requires community-led decision making, genuine partnerships with First Nations and diaspora communities, and support for repatriation processes involving both ancestral remains and secret or sacred cultural material.

Museums are also rethinking how collections are physically cared for and accessed. In our institution, there has been discussion about reimagining Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander collection storage spaces in consultation with community, so that they are culturally safe, welcoming, and support community access and engagement. Traditional museum storage environments can feel sterile, opaque, and disconnected from the communities whose heritage they hold. There is an opportunity for cultural policy to support new models of collections care that prioritise collaboration, transparency, and community-led approaches to stewardship and access. This work requires sustained funding, specialist staffing, and institutional support, not only project-based initiatives.

University museums are uniquely placed to model ethical stewardship through research, teaching, and community collaboration. However, museums are increasingly driven by external-facing programming and temporary exhibitions, often at the expense of investment in collection care, research, stewardship, and meaningful access to existing collections. In many institutions, exhibition budgets and audience-facing outcomes are prioritised over specialist staffing and long-term collections management responsibilities.

The essential work of collections care remains largely invisible despite its importance in preserving cultural heritage and building trust with communities whose histories and belongings institutions hold. The loss of experienced collections staff, combined with decision-making structures that do not always include specialist collections expertise, can place significant pressure on museums' ability to meet their ethical and cultural responsibilities. Leadership and governance structures should include professionals with direct museum and collections management expertise.

I would like to see a National Cultural Policy that recognises collections care, culturally safe stewardship, repatriation, and community collaboration as core cultural responsibilities rather than secondary museum functions. Long-term investment in specialist staffing, collections management, and community-led practice is essential to building ethical, transparent, and inclusive cultural institutions for the future.