



Chau Chak Wing Museum, University of Sydney

National Cultural Policy submission

The Chau Chak Wing Museum (CCWM) is the University of Sydney's flagship museum, open to the public 7 days a week. We care for more than 400,000 objects, artworks, and specimens spanning Australian First Nations and Pacific cultures, ancient civilisations, the natural world, scientific enquiry, and historical and contemporary art.

As a public-facing university museum on par with Sydney's other major museums and galleries, CCWM occupies a unique position within Australia's cultural landscape, combining research, teaching, public engagement, and long-term collection stewardship. University museums play a significant public cultural role, providing free or accessible exhibitions, education programs, research opportunities, and the preservation of nationally significant collections that extend well beyond the university community.

However, the 2023 Revive policy does not explicitly acknowledge the important contribution university museums and cultural collections make to Australia's cultural life, public education, and research capacity. While universities may be perceived as well-resourced institutions, funding allocated to core university operations rarely meets the needs of the collections' ongoing management and care, including conservation, collection stores, digitisation, exhibition development, and specialised staffing required to sustain museum activities to national standards.

As a result, key challenges remain around equitable access to cultural funding, sector visibility, sustainable infrastructure, collection care, and long-term public access. Greater recognition of university museums within national cultural policy would help ensure these important collections and programs remain accessible to the broader Australian community and continue contributing to national cultural life.

This response to the Government's renewed National Cultural Policy argues for:

- the essential inclusion of university museums in national policy settings; and
- a more equitable distribution model of cultural investment – one which supports a holistic approach to the long-term care of collections, including ancestral remains, through culturally specific and appropriate cultural infrastructure

Challenges and opportunities

Pillar 1: First Nations First

Challenges

CCWM requires sustained funding and national support for the repatriation and culturally appropriate, long-term care of Australian First Nations Ancestors and Pacific Ancestors. CCWM cares for 46 Australian



First Nations Ancestral Remains (21 Aboriginal Ancestors and 25 Torres Strait Islander Ancestors) and 66 Pacific Islander Ancestors.

Opportunities

These ancestors require storage, access, and care practices that are culturally appropriate, ethically informed, and co-designed with descent communities and stakeholders. Current facilities are increasingly inadequate to meet these responsibilities at the standard expected of a major collecting institution.

There is a clear opportunity for dedicated, purpose-built facilities that ensure respectful and culturally specific care, while also providing safe and appropriately managed environments for staff, students, researchers, and broader University communities who work with or encounter these ancestors. National investment in such infrastructure, such as *Ngurra* (a National Resting Place managed by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders), would significantly advance ethical museum practice in Australia.

Pillar 4: Strong Cultural Infrastructure

Challenges

Collections across Australia are growing in scale, significance, and complexity, yet the infrastructure that supports them remains largely invisible, underfunded, and often disconnected from public life. Storage is still too frequently treated as “back of house,” reinforcing outdated distinctions between preservation and public access. University collections are particularly affected by inadequate and out-of-sight storage facilities, compounded by other competing factors (i.e. issues of space and funding distribution) affecting the Higher Education sector. Some of these challenges were identified in the “Cinderella Collections” reports, and while public access and collections management has improved significantly across institutions, storage has lagged.

At CCWM, new purpose-built storage has improved conditions but only for a small part of the collection (30%). The rest of the Museum’s nationally and internationally significant historical collections remain housed in aged, energy inefficient facilities that are difficult to access and cannot be readily opened to community or researchers. These systems rely on outdated climate control infrastructure that requires continuous energy use, creating financial pressure and contributing to environmental impact – leaving the collections at risk.

Opportunities

There is a major opportunity to reconceptualise collection storage as active cultural infrastructure rather than hidden support space. Successful international models for ‘open’ stores (e.g. V&A East Storehouse, Depot Boijmans Van Beuningen), and national models for publicly accessible multi-collection storage precincts (e.g. Museums Discovery Centre at Castle Hill) demonstrate how collections can be made more visible, accessible, and community-focused. These models increase public visitation and support new avenues for research, learning, activation and engagement.



These approaches reposition storage as part of the cultural experience, integrating preservation with engagement, education, and civic value. They also demonstrate how new infrastructure can improve environmental performance through more efficient and sustainable design. A national agenda supporting accessible and fit-for-purpose collection facilities in collaboration with the Higher Education sector would greatly improve the nation's cultural infrastructure for public benefit and align with climate action goals.

What you would like to see reflected in the next National Cultural Policy?

First and foremost, it is essential that the new National Cultural Policy recognises the crucial significance of Australian university museum collections and their vital role in shaping social cohesion, public discourse, education, research and public engagement, and their ongoing contributions to the current *Revive* strategy.

The policy also needs to prioritise long-term structural change across the museums sector rather than relying primarily on short-term initiatives or project-based funding. This is particularly relevant when it comes to storage infrastructure and embedding First Nations knowledge and care.

Please note CCWM has collaborated with, and supports the submissions (and associated recommendations) from:

- The Council of Australasian Museum Directors (CAMD)
- Vice Chancellor's Committee
- Museums and Galleries NSW (MGNSW)