

# **POLICY, PRACTICE AND PARTNERSHIPS: MUSEUMS, INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES AND EVALUATION**

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Evaluation has a long history of practice in museums globally, evolving from practical, exhibition-specific studies to a strategic tool used in management planning, capital developments and accountability. Evaluation in museums also has to take account of increased use of new technologies, a broader interest in complex social issues such as sustainability, Indigenous rights and social justice, and collaboration with a range of partners.

More recently, evaluation in museums and other cultural institutions has needed to respond to Indigenous issues, contributing at both the policy level and in practice. In Australia, museums have worked closely with Indigenous communities for many years to assist them in achieving their own cultural objectives through policy, public programs, outreach and support to small museums established by communities (called Keeping Places). These developments have provided opportunities for museum evaluation to move into new areas.

This paper outlines issues faced by museums in their relationships with Indigenous communities, focussing on the role evaluation can play in informing practice at both the strategic level in policy development, and at a practical level through providing specific feedback and information. This is illustrated through case studies of two projects undertaken in partnership with the Museum's Aboriginal Heritage Unit: the evaluation of National policy for museums in Australia and Indigenous people, and a pilot oral history project about Keeping Places. These demonstrate how evaluation can make a contribution to policy and practice in relation to Indigenous issues in cultural heritage management and museums.

Keywords: Indigenous, museums, culture, policy, partnerships

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

Museums are a strong industry in Australia, with currently over 2,000 establishments attracting around twenty seven million visitors annually (Australia Bureau of Statistics, 2001). Museums have changed rapidly in the twentieth century from 'cabinets of curiosities' with thousands of objects displayed in didactic ways to institutions that are about ideas, actively encouraging debate, critical thought and action. Museums are increasingly becoming involved in political issues, with many more being willing to engage in discourses that are confronting and controversial and to work with their communities to provide rich learning experiences for a variety of users (Falk and Dierking, 2000; Griffin, 1998b; Kelly and Gordon, in press; Weil, 1997).

However, there are many challenges facing museums in Australia. Statistics show that in 1996, 28% of Australians aged over fifteen had visited a museum in the previous twelve months, yet in the most recent survey this figure had dropped to 20% (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 1999). Funding restrictions and increased competition from many sectors in the leisure, educational and tourism industries for a finite number of people means that museums in Australia must become more responsive to a range of audiences that use their services, both physically and via the Internet. The demands of globalisation, accessing new technologies, responding to rural and regional constituents and increasingly informed communities demanding rights to their cultural heritage are issues that museums must face (Kelly and Gordon, in press).

## **2. EVALUATION AND VISITOR RESEARCH IN MUSEUMS**

Evaluation has a long history in museum practice, from early practical exhibition-specific studies, to a greater focus on the visitor experience and learning (Falk and Dierking, 2000; Hein, 1998; Loomis, 1987). In Australia the number and types of museums that are actually engaged in this work and the degree to which they are using it for other purposes, such as in strategic management and collaboration, varies.

Research has found that consumers will increasingly use and support companies with values that match their own, which are concerned for the environment, humanity and with issues such as social justice, reconciliation and sustainability (Nelson, 1999). These issues present opportunities for museums because these are what they are about. Museums have collections, engage in research and provide learning opportunities for a broad range of people accessing information about critical issues of global concern, taking on leadership roles through adding value to these debates.

In order to do this museums need to monitor and understand trends, future consumers and the market to ensure their continued survival and relevance. This is the role of evaluation in museums, now and in the future. In this new century evaluation is uniquely placed to add value to organisations, not only through understanding and responding to those who use their services, but to provide a meaningful and strategic role in organisational learning, change and sustainability.

## **3. AUSTRALIAN MUSEUMS AND INDIGENOUS PEOPLE**

Museums in Australia have been actively involved in working with Indigenous people for over twenty years. In 1978 the UNESCO regional seminar, *Preserving Indigenous Cultures: A New Role for Museums*, was the first time museums and Indigenous people sat

down together as equals to talk about obligations and processes: the obligations of museums to respect Indigenous rights to their cultural heritage and addressing this within the practices of museums at the time. Since then there have been immense changes in the ways that museums relate to and engage with Indigenous peoples, responding to both internal and external political and cultural forces. There has been a huge shift in expectations from both parties with an increased willingness to talk about ways Indigenous people can achieve their own cultural objectives in partnership with museums through open discussion and constant re-evaluation of internal processes and practices.

In the 1993 International Year for the World's Indigenous People, Museums Australia, the body representing museums and museum professionals in Australia, released a national policy following two years of development, including extensive consultations with museum staff, Indigenous communities and agencies and governments. *Previous Possessions, New Obligations: Policies for Museums in Australia and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People* was an important milestone that provided a framework for museums to engage in new ways with their Indigenous constituents, as well as placing an obligation on them to do so. The policy was designed to establish a national framework to provide consistency in guiding the development of partnerships between museums and Indigenous people and assist practice within museums. The principles inherent in the policy promote the primary rights of Indigenous people in their cultural material held in museums, self determination in cultural heritage matters and consultation in management of collections (Gordon, 1998; Griffin, 1996, 1998a; Kelly and Gordon, in press; Kelly, *et al.*, 2000).

#### **4. INFLUENCING PRACTICE: EVALUATING INDIGENOUS POLICY**

An evaluation of *Previous Possessions, New Obligations* was undertaken in 2000 to review the effectiveness of the implementation of the policy and how it has influenced or changed practice in museums. The evaluation involved a quantitative survey of major museums and workshops with staff from larger institutions across Australia. Overall, the study found that the policy had achieved its goals in relation to the major collecting and research museums and galleries in Australia by providing a framework in which to establish the primary rights of Indigenous people in the management and interpretation of cultural material held in museum collections (Kelly, *et al.*, 2000).

Four major findings emerged. Firstly, although awareness of the policy was generally low across organisations, the principles inherent in it had been incorporated into everyday practice and institutional policies. Participants in the workshops spoke passionately about their commitment to involving Indigenous people in programs and respecting their rights and points of view, a positive and strongly articulated reaction to the policy's principles. Secondly, a lack of resources meant a varied level of response to the policy across institutions, with museums acting in isolation of each other and often in competition for resources. The third finding showed a concentration of resources within organisations, rather than outreach and regional funding. Finally, there was universal recognition that the policy needed to be more inclusive of a broad range of contemporary issues that will impact on the next stage of policy development and funding, such as Native Title, intellectual property rights, digitisation, new technologies and Pacific Islander collections (Kelly and Gordon, in press).

*Previous Possessions, New Obligations* can be viewed as an instrument for organisational change and learning: museums in Australia have had to change in response to the demands and expectations placed on them by Indigenous people and governments within a broad social and political context. One major outcome found from discussions with museum staff in the workshops was that institutions that have worked closely with Indigenous communities in developing public programs, conducting research programs or in policy development reported positive changes in organisational practice and in understandings on both sides. This came primarily through recognising that the dialogue is about 'relationships, not just objects'. The employment of Indigenous staff was a particularly strong factor in assisting this process, something that more museums would like to increase. Overall, there was acknowledgment that these issues present opportunities for an integrated national strategy and closer working relationships across institutions and within Indigenous communities (Kelly and Gordon, in press).

Through its recommendations and presentations made at various professional forums and meetings, coupled with further evaluation projects, the Green Paper will help shape future museum practice in Australia.

## **5. SELF DETERMINATION: THE ROLE OF KEEPING PLACES**

As Indigenous communities in Australia are widely distributed with many diverse people and viewpoints usual evaluation methods, such as surveys, interviews and focus groups, need to be combined with more flexible ways of collecting information through extensive consultation and liaison with Indigenous communities. In this context, consultation is the process of personally involving people in decision making through face to face discussions, community meetings, workshops and forums with Indigenous people in their own communities (Kelly, 1997; Kelly and Gordon, in press).

In Australia Keeping Places are an important way that museums and Indigenous people work together. These community museums are established by Indigenous people in their local areas to house repatriated artefacts, host exhibitions, conduct education and research programs whilst providing employment and a meeting place. In an initial evaluation of Keeping Places a series of workshops were conducted with Indigenous community representatives to discuss the reasons they were established and lessons learned. The analysis found that Keeping Places were being set up for two reasons: to meet the needs of Indigenous communities and to promote reconciliation through understanding (Kelly, 1999).

Currently increasing numbers of communities are now thinking about establishing a Keeping Place in their local area. A pilot oral history project with staff from a small sample of Keeping Places was undertaken during 2000 as part of a broad plan to document the history of these in New South Wales and identify future needs.

The main theme that emerged related to self-determination. It was felt that Keeping Places contribute to the achievement of Indigenous peoples' cultural objectives in ways that are managed by them, especially in education, instilling pride and gaining respect from the broader community. Another role for Keeping Places identified was in research and preservation of significant sites within the local area, as well as a dedication to those who have suffered injustice. In summary it was felt that Keeping Places contributed to the maintenance of culture as a path to reconciliation and understanding. This research led to a

number of other projects. Firstly, the development of a CD-ROM, *Keeping Culture*, that provides communities with information and experiences of others when considering establishing a Keeping Place. Secondly, some initial work in planning a comprehensive policy for the future development of Keeping Places has been undertaken.

## 6. CONCLUSION

Through their role in public learning and working with communities museums have the opportunity to take on a leadership role and model sets of practices that can be followed and adapted by other organisations in their dealings with Indigenous people. Museums will continually need to find new models to deal with evolving requirements of contemporary society, responding to an ever-changing political climate and audience needs by recognising and reacting to opportunities as they present themselves. They will need flexible management structures that are able to change in response to the demands of the many communities they serve, whilst taking a long-term view.

To contribute to organisational sustainability evaluation needs to be strategic through monitoring trends and finding new methods and ways of working, as well as collaboratively solving practical problems at all levels of the organisation. Through working with Indigenous staff and communities new evaluation tools that will be applicable to other areas of practice in the future have been learned, including oral history and consultation. Although a well-established process in historical and social research, oral history has been little used to date as an evaluation method, and possibilities for further use are currently being explored. As well, the consultation processes that have been undertaken with communities to date are being extended to other Museum stakeholders. This demonstrates how working across the organisation in partnership with other staff and external stakeholders can result in improved services and an increased understanding of how evaluation can contribute to process and practice. This also means interesting and challenging times ahead!

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