

# International Student Exchange

Helen Arnoldi

'The student exchange gave me the chance to think beyond my immediate environment of the University of Melbourne and directly consider collections ... in a wider, international context.' (Emily Wubben, International Student Projects Exchange award recipient 2010–2011.)

The University of Melbourne's Cultural Collections Projects Program (formerly the Student Projects Program) has been operating for seven years and during that time has placed many students and volunteers in projects with the University's rich cultural collections. The collections have benefited from this student and volunteer interaction which has supported and extended collection management programs. At the same time, the program has provided participants with the opportunity to work closely with a collection, expand and broaden their professional skills or simply pursue an interest. While both local and national students have been involved, only last year did the program host its first international student. What had begun as a 'wouldn't it be great if ...' musing in 2007 with a colleague from the University of Birmingham, had materialised into an international cultural exchange. Through the successful pilot year two students—and several collections—

from opposite sides of the world have been greatly enriched.

The original idea goes back to 2007 when Clare Mullett, Deputy Curator (Research and Cultural Collections), at the University of Birmingham, visiting Melbourne on an Edward Clarence Dyason Fellowship, was exposed to our Cultural Collections Projects Program. Noting the similarities in the collections of the two universities and inspired by the Melbourne program, ideas were explored on how projects could be extended beyond each institution. Over the ensuing months, emails, phone discussions and visits between Melbourne and Birmingham led to an initial proposal. It was agreed that students from research-oriented Universities 21 (U21) universities could apply to take part in a one-month exchange to another U21 university, working with its museums and collections.<sup>1</sup> The placement would have set objectives to be completed and could take the form of conservation, significance assessment, documentation and cataloguing, research, interpretation or exhibition development. Students would also broaden their experience through a period of self-directed study, pursuing an aspect of the host's collections that particularly interested them, while also exploring (at an impressionable time in their



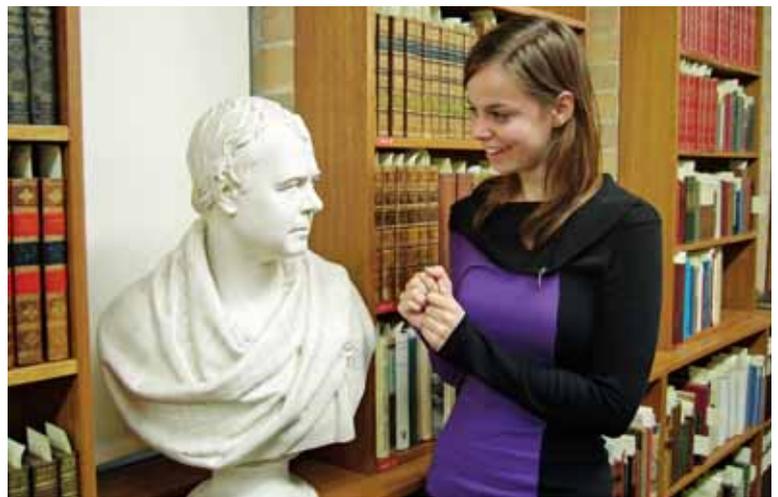
academic and personal development) the cultural resources of an unfamiliar city. We agreed the pilot program would be open to senior students of the universities of Birmingham and Melbourne, and although primarily relevant to students of art history, curatorship, history, archaeology or conservation, other students were welcome to apply if they could demonstrate how it would enrich their study experience.

By early 2010 the systems were in place to make the vision a reality. Each university had secured funding to support its student's return airfares, accommodation and board. For the Melbourne student this funding was generously provided by the University Library and the U21 network.

After a highly competitive application process, Birmingham student Katy Wade (about to commence a master's degree in heritage management) was chosen as the first recipient. In August 2010 she travelled across the world to begin her placement with our Cultural Collections Unit. During her time here, Katy worked on a selection of projects which included researching classical-themed prints in the Baillieu Library Print Collection; developing artefact information sheets for the Classics and Archaeology Collection at the Ian Potter Museum of Art; creating

**Opposite:** Emily Wubben cleaning stained-glass window designs at the Wilson Conservation Studio, University of Birmingham. Photograph by Sarah Kilroy.

**Right:** Katy Wade and the bust of Sir Walter Scott used in her display in the Baillieu Library, University of Melbourne. Photograph by Kerriane Stone.



a children's activity sheet at the Medical History Museum; curating a display from Dr J. Orde Poynton's Sir Walter Scott collection in the Baillieu Library; and contributing to a forthcoming exhibitions manual. A busy month! At the end of her placement, Katy commented:

For me it was very rewarding, as a lot of the skills I learnt will be useful when I go into my line of work. It has also broadened my interests within museums and collections, as I have worked in areas such as conservation that I have never considered a future in before ... Finally, from a personal level, I have found working with the collections rewarding. It will definitely help me in my studies and has given me a chance to develop both my professional and personal skills.

The reciprocal exchange was undertaken in January 2011, when University of Melbourne student Emily Wubben (working towards her BA honours in art history) commenced her placement with the museums and collections at the University of Birmingham.<sup>2</sup> Under Clare Mullett's mentorship, Emily worked on several collection management projects, including a cabinet display for the Lapworth

Geology Museum; development of an education workshop at the Barber Institute of Fine Art; documentation and surface cleaning of early 20th-century stained-glass window designs at the Wilson Conservation Studio; research for the Blue Plaque Project (a trail highlighting the achievements of notable individuals associated with the university); cataloguing new acquisitions for the Danford Collection of West African Art and assisting in the preparation of this material for an exhibition. Emily has noted that the exchange provided her with 'an enriching and insightful' experience. Through the project work she developed her professional skills and as an added bonus was ideally placed to commence her thesis research on the Birmingham-born Pre-Raphaelite artist Edward Burne-Jones, as the Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery holds one of the finest collections of his work.

The program enabled both students to benefit individually from tailor-made placements. For an entire month they immersed themselves in the collections, museums and cultural resources of their host institution and its city. Their projects developed their vocational skills and industry networks while providing them with the unique opportunity to engage with the rich collections that both universities manage. As a direct

result, stronger links have been forged between these two universities. It is hoped that the program will expand beyond Melbourne and Birmingham to other U21 members.

The International Student Exchange Program is perfectly placed to support our academic programs and nurture individual aspirations, while increasing the profile of the collections. Opportunities for future research, knowledge-sharing and exhibition collaborations will ultimately lead to increased public awareness and greater appreciation for the cultural collections of these and other U21 universities—a truly successful outcome.

**Author's note:** The program has been championed by (from Melbourne): Philip Kent and Jock Murphy of the University Library; Dr Belinda Nemeč; Ian Marshman, Senior Vice-Principal and U21 Manager; Nigel Cossar, Manager, Melbourne Global Mobility; and Associate Professor Alison Inglis and Professor Jaynie Anderson from the School of Culture and Communication; (from Birmingham): Clare Mullett, Deputy University Curator; Dr James Hamilton, University Curator; Professor Martin Stringer; and the International Office.

**Helen Arnoldi** has been the Cultural Collections Projects Coordinator at the University of Melbourne since 2005.

1 Universitas 21 is an international network of 23 research-intensive universities, see [www.universitas21.com](http://www.universitas21.com).

2 For information on the University of Birmingham's collections see [www.collections.bham.ac.uk](http://www.collections.bham.ac.uk).