

PARBICA Recordkeeping for Good Governance Toolkit New Guideline on Assessing Significance – Roslyn Russell

With the assistance of the Programme Commission of the International Council on Archives, five new guidelines in PARBICA's Recordkeeping for Good Governance Toolkit are being developed. The guidelines will cover topics of disaster management, identifying vital business records and assessing significant records in collections. These guidelines will be published in late 2018.

As part of the project to develop the guidelines, PARBICA has been privileged to have many specialists volunteer their time on this project. One of them is Roslyn Russell, who kindly agreed to PARBICA reproducing the methodology on significance assessment that she co-authored. Roslyn also subsequently peer reviewed the guideline on assessing significant records in collections.

Roslyn Russell's interest in the Pacific region dates back to her undergraduate history honours thesis on the topic, 'The Methodist Mission in New Britain 1914-1945, with emphasis on the development of indigenous leadership'. Since that time she has made a career in history and heritage, as a teacher, author, exhibition developer and assessor of heritage collections.

She collaborated with fellow museum consultant Kylie Winkworth in preparing two editions of a manual produced by the Commonwealth government for assessing significance in heritage collections; and has conducted significance assessments and training in this methodology in Australia and New Zealand and for students in Heritage Studies at the University of the West Indies.

In 1994 she was one of the four compilers of the first Guidelines to Safeguard Documentary Heritage for the UNESCO Memory of the World Programme, and in 2000 became a foundation member of the UNESCO Australian Memory of the World Committee, and chair of its Assessment Sub-committee. In 2005 she was elected to the International Advisory Committee of Memory of the World, becoming its rapporteur and chair of its Register Sub-committee that year. In 2009 she was elected Chair of the International Advisory Committee, a position she held until 2013. Roslyn has helped to conduct Memory of the World workshops in Saint Lucia, Barbados, Republic of Korea, Islamic Republic of Iran, Ethiopia, China, Jamaica, Macau SAR, Taiwan, Timor-Leste and Namibia. She has been chair of the Australian Memory of the World Committee since 2013.

*Roslyn is the author and co-author and editor of a number of books and book chapters, including *One Destiny! The Federation Story: How Australia Became a Nation*, *The Business of Nature: John Gould and Australia*, *High Seas and High Teas: Voyaging to Australia*, *Plantation to Nation: Caribbean Museums and National Identity*, and *Not Without a Fight: the story of the Friends of the National Museum of Australia*. She has written one novel, *Maria Returns: Barbados to Mansfield Park*. Her most recent publication is chapters in *Victory on Gallipoli and Other What-ifs of Australian History*, edited by Peter Stanley.*

Her doctoral thesis, 'Travel Writers, Museums and Reflections of Empire 1770-1901' deals with accounts of museums and collections in Australia and New Zealand in the colonial period.

In the interview below, we spoke to Roslyn about her extensive career in cultural heritage and her work with UNESCO's Memory of the World Programme.

How did you become involved with documentary and cultural heritage?

I was always very interested in museums, libraries, books and art. When I was young I was always heading into Sydney for the day to visit the museums, galleries and libraries. But it never occurred to me that there were careers in the museum sector. There were no museum studies courses then, so when I left school I studied English and History on a Teachers' College Scholarship at the University of Sydney.

After working as an Art, English and History teacher and after my daughter was born, I became aware that there were opportunities to work in museums. After working as a research assistant to Professor Manning Clark and in the History Department at the Australian Defence Force Academy, I worked with a Canberra-based consultancy called Australian Heritage Projects which staged exhibitions and recorded oral histories, and studied for a graduate diploma in cultural heritage management at the University of Canberra. I worked in partnership with Dr Susan Marsden (well-respected historian and heritage consultant from South Australia), and then finally set up my own business, Roslyn Russell Museum Services, in 2005.

While my initial work was primarily in the museum sector, I became increasingly exposed to libraries and archives through my work with Australian Heritage Projects. One of our projects was working with the National Library on the Community Heritage Grants scheme and I acted as assessor of the grant applications for some years. This was a great introduction to the libraries and archives around Australia.

Through my work with Australian Heritage Projects and Roslyn Russell Museum Services I have staged many exhibitions, including work with the National Archives of Australia (NAA). One of these exhibitions was *Belonging: a century celebrated* for Australia's Centenary of Federation. This project was a collaboration between cultural organisations such as the NAA, National Library and State Libraries of NSW and Victoria.

Another project that Australian Heritage Projects worked on was the first set of guidelines for the UNESCO's Memory of the World Committee.

You've been so heavily involved in the Memory of the World internationally, regionally and nationally. Memory of the World is such a great initiative for protecting heritage worldwide, how did it start? Was it a global movement?

The Memory of the World Programme was established by the Director-General of UNESCO who was passionate about documentary heritage. There's a misconception that it was born out of the bombing of the National Library of Bosnia, but there had been earlier discussions between the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) and the International Council on Archives (ICA). But the destruction of the library in Sarajevo did make people think about options for protecting documentary heritage.

IFLA commissioned the first set of guidelines for Memory of the World, and Australia was chosen to draft these guidelines. This was mostly due to Jan Lyall, then-head of the National Preservation Office at the National Library. Jan was a conservator and committed to the protection of documentary heritage. She was a key player in the establishment of the Memory of the World programme.

So in 2000, I became a foundation member of the UNESCO Australian Memory of the World Committee. In 2005, I was elected to the International Advisory Committee of the Memory of the World Programme and then went on to Chair the International Advisory Committee for four years until 2013. Since then, I've been Chair of the UNESCO Australian Memory of the World Committee.

All of my work with the Memory of the World Programme would never have happened without the hard work of the Australian Memory of the World Committee and the passion and dedication of Jan Lyall.

The new PARBICA Toolkit guideline on Assessing Significant Records in Archival Collections is based on the methodology in Significance 2.0, which you developed in conjunction with Kylie Winkworth. Can you tell us a little about the development of this methodology?

We were approached by the then Heritage Collections Council to develop a methodology to assist museums in assessing significance of their items and collections. I'd been doing a few significance assessments in my work with the Community Heritage Grants. Kylie and I started working on the significance methodology in the late 1990s; we took it on the road to test and refine the methodology through workshops with small

museums around Australia. This took about 2 years to develop and publish, in 2001, as *Significance: a guide to assessing the significance of cultural heritage objects and collections*.

Once published, we were then approached several years later by the Collections Council of Australia to expand the *Significance* methodology to incorporate libraries and archives. We held a large workshop where we tested the methodology with staff from archives and libraries and adapted *Significance* accordingly.

One of my areas of interest in the *Significance 2.0* methodology was the idea of developing 'thresholds' of significance on national, regional and international levels. This work aligned with my interest in Memory of the World and the ability for cultural organisations to understand the comparative significance of their items and collections.

What have been some of your greatest moments working internationally in cultural heritage?

My work with the Memory of the World Programme has taken me to some amazing places and given me insights into other societies that I would not have otherwise had. One particular highlight was visiting Iran and being privileged to see the *Shahnameh*, the Persian Book of Kings, which is rarely seen or on display.

I've had some experiences that I never would have dreamed of, and most of it is about the wonderful people that I come in contact with. I met the Director of the Barbados Museum who invited me to work with them on an exhibition, and I've been working with them to this day. Working so closely with them has provided me with such an insight into their culture and society. It is profoundly inspiring to be exposed to the history and cultures of other countries.

What do you think are some of the challenges faced by Pacific cultural heritage organisations?

I think Pacific cultural heritage organisations face the challenges you would expect – climate change, lack of resources. But I think lack of confidence can sometimes be an issue in some organisations. Staff are often highly-skilled and trained, the knowledge is there. It's your history, your heritage, and you know what is important and what works for you. Be prepared to trust your own cultural instincts.

What are you most proud of in your work with cultural heritage?

I think that I'm most proud of my work with the Memory of the World Programme. That has been life-changing. It has made me so proud to represent my country in Memory of the World, and Australia is still considered a leader in this programme. There have been so many wonderful, dedicated people involved in the Memory of the World Programme, such as Jan Lyall and Ray Edmondson, and it has made me proud to work alongside them.