

Preface

Significance 2.0 is published by the Collections Council of Australia Ltd.¹ Some objectives of the Collections Council² are to:

- advance the stability and sustainability of the collections sector, through communication, consultation and resolution of common issues;
- sponsor such programs deemed necessary and desirable to further industry development;
- promote benchmarks and standards for the care and management of collections;
- promote access to and participation in Australian cultural heritage collections.

Significance 2.0 helps the Collections Council to achieve a number of its objectives—in particular to promote a successful standard for industry-wide development by enhancing its relevance for archives and libraries, in addition to museums and galleries.

The Council recognises a wide range of approaches to collections that derive from the training of their custodians—whether as archivists, librarians, records managers, historians, art historians, curators, scientists, conservators, managers or traditional owners. The Council often refers to the four major collecting ‘domains’ that represent and include this range of custodial approaches—archives, galleries, libraries and museums.³ You will see references to this short-hand terminology throughout the book.

After discussions with the authors during 2006–2007 about their experience with significance since the release of the first edition, the Collections Council set about verifying the usefulness of the ‘significance method’ presented in the first edition through a number of consultations.

To begin, a survey was conducted in April 2007. Together with a literature search, Collections Council Board and funding partner advice, analysis of these survey results provided direction for the authors about the Collections Council’s aims for the second edition.⁴ In early 2008 a Sector Advocate was appointed to ensure that the diverse voices of the collections sector were heard at every phase in the project. Ian Cook provided astute advice at various points in the process, and contributed generously and thoughtfully to the project well beyond his brief.

In April 2008, a workshop enabled the authors to hear about participants’ experience with determining significance in a wide range of collections settings. A number of workshop presentations were uploaded to a forum webpage from July 2008 and these attracted considered online comment throughout the year.

Finally, in February 2009 a draft of the proposed *Significance 2.0* text was released for review to approximately 100 people and organisations involved with cultural heritage, mainly in Australia.

The Collections Council was impressed with the high quality of responses to the review, and indeed to each round of consultation, and sincerely thanks all contributors for their efforts. The *Significance 2.0* Project Team (pictured) considered every contribution in detail, and incorporated salient ideas into this revised text.

A number of points raised by reviewers of the February 2009 draft were regarded by the Project Team to be beyond the scope of this document, which aims to explore the common ground between various established practices in the different collecting domains. While stressing that the significance method is adaptable to a range of circumstances, the Team readily acknowledges that other methods run parallel to this approach. For example, we understand it is unlikely that detailed statements of significance would be developed in archives for individual items, series or record groups, or in libraries, for loan collections.

In the case of such ‘operational’ collections we also understand that in archives and libraries the assessment of significance or value usually begins with a study of context and provenance rather than with an analysis of actual records. This contextual study may identify functions, activities, individuals, events, relationships and organisational units or entities (all of which can be regarded as falling under the broad heading of ‘provenance’), that are potentially of significance. An archive or library will then endeavour to identify the valuable records that need to be created and preserved as evidence of those significant events, activities or entities. This can be viewed as a different method to that articulated in Parts 3 and 4 of *Significance 2.0*.



The *Significance 2.0* Project Team, from left to right: Sue Natrass (Chair), Veronica Bullock (Project Manager & Editor), Roslyn Russell (Author), Kylie Winkworth (Author) and Ian Cook (Sector Advocate)
 Portrait of Ian Cook at the National Library of Australia, Sept 18 2001
 Photo: Loui Seselja nla.pic-an23323456
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At the April 2008 workshop, four guiding statements⁵ were expressed as representing the ‘common ground’ between the four major collecting domains in regard to significance:

- We cannot keep everything forever. Therefore significance assessment is vital to make the best use of our scarce resources for collecting, conserving, documenting and digitising our collection materials.
- Significance is not an absolute state—rather, it is relative, contingent and dynamic. Views on significance depend upon perspective and can change over time.
- In assessing significance, power is wielded in constructing societal memory and identity. Collection custodians therefore have a responsibility to consult affected communities and to be hospitable to alternative views in recognition of the fact that significance decisions inevitably privilege some memories and marginalise or exclude others.
- When assessing significance, it is vital to understand, respect and document the context of collection materials—the events, activities, phenomena, places, relationships, people, organisations and functions that shape collection materials.

These guiding statements underpin much of the authors’ fresh work in *Significance 2.0*, and have also informed the development of new features that focus on Provenance, Context and Principles.

In this second edition, you will find that the core of the significance method remains unchanged. It still hinges on the preparation of a well-researched ‘statement of significance’, which references a set of primary and comparative criteria. This consistent method should aid all those conducting or receiving significance assessments to ‘speak a common language’. Greater prominence is given to the assessment method as the key process for expressing significance, and the significance assessment steps have been refined.⁶

We responded to the concern that it often isn’t possible to conduct significance assessments item-by-item, by including more ‘whole / part collection’ and ‘cross-collection’ examples and guidance. There is also a greater diversity of case studies and this is illustrated in the introductory feature titled ‘Distributed collections and significance’. Its focus on cultural and scientific collections through the cases of the popular outlaw Ned Kelly and the extinct native Australian dog the thylacine, highlights a range of item and collection types held across archives, galleries, libraries and museums. These examples underscore the value of a common language and method for communicating the meaning and importance of all collections.

The features on Context and Provenance show how it is crucial to consider these factors both before and after determining which primary criteria are most relevant to an item or collection under significance assessment, and the ‘Principles for good practice with significance’ feature is a useful complement to the significance applications presented in the following Part 6.

Part 6 applications are summarised in this volume, and appear in full in *Significance 2.0* online at <http://significance.collectionscouncil.com.au>

Also included in this edition are new criteria for the assessment of items of national significance, to better support the Community Heritage Grant Program and the Commonwealth *Protection of Movable Cultural Heritage Act 1986*, as well as helpful diagrams, an index, and an extensive glossary.

Significance 2.0 has already been a fruitful journey, and I would like to thank Roslyn and Kylie for their continuing development of the concept and practice of significance. I would also like to thank the Collections Council Board, especially former Chair Sue Natrass, for their wise counsel throughout the development of the *Significance 2.0* print publication, and for embracing the vision for significance online.

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