

**Report to the Council of the Australian Academy of Science (Abridged)**

**Basser Library and Fenner Archives Task Force**

**April**

2016

# 1.0 Executive summary

Council of the Australian Academy of Science resolved to close the Library and Archives to the public for one year and established the Basser Library and Fenner Archives Task Force to “review the holdings of the Basser Library and Fenner Archives” (excluding the governance and business archives of the Academy), “consider options for future storage and accessibility of these holdings”, and make a “recommendation for preferred option”.

In arriving at its recommendations, the Task Force applied a number of guiding principles: recognition of the significance of the Academy’s archival collection; that the Academy has been historically a leader in the preservation of the history of science; planning is in a long-term context; preservation is important for future generations; accessibility is a necessary component of any archival program; international best practices guide solutions; and solutions should consider resourcing and technological challenges and opportunities.

The Task Force was informed by expert, external members and a number of investigations: risk assessment of the Shine Dome basement storage; a ‘uniqueness survey’ of the collections; accession policies of three institutions; valuation of books and journals from two antiquarian and second-hand book dealers; and a pilot study commissioned to assess the preservation status of the manuscript collection and make recommendations on digital cataloguing and electronic transferability.

In reaching its over-arching recommendations, the Task Force separated consideration of the Basser Library from the Fenner Archives, based on their different values and significance. The Basser Library does not hold a significantly valuable collection of books, has a low usage, and a large proportion of the journals are readily available in other collections, many already digitised. The Fenner Archives are unique and significant, including more than 230 separate manuscript collections. Although not in immediate danger as currently stored, long-term the collection requires professional best-practice preservation and greater accessibility through electronic finding aids and sharable catalogues, which will support researchers and enhance public awareness.

*Recommendation 1. Basser Library*

#### That the Academy close the Basser Library and gift, return, sell or retain as artefacts its collection of books, journals and other items.

*Recommendation 2. Fenner Archives preparation*

#### That the Academy prepare the Fenner Archives to meet best-practice standards of archival preservation and digital documentation that allows easy transferability to other catalogue systems and greater discoverability and accessibility.

*Recommendation 3. Fenner Archives location*

#### That, given the estimated costs to retain and manage the Fenner Archives at the Shine Dome, Council consider the real costs and feasibility of relocating the manuscript collections to other archival repositories, preferably to the National Library of Australia.

Two options were considered for the future housing of the Fenner Archives. Retention of the Fenner Archives at the Shine Dome at best-practice standards requires a long-term commitment of the Academy as well as ongoing financial cost. The other recommended option, a managed relocation, also requires a commitment and funding to ensure orderly transfer of the collection, with all appropriate records. Both options would require implementation of Recommendation 2.

The Task Force makes eight other specific recommendations regarding procedures for the books, journals, society collections, digitisation, communication and access.

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# 2.0 Background

## Background on the Task Force

During its five-year strategic planning exercise in 2015, the Council of the Australian Academy of Science assessed and prioritised its current and future activities. It examined whether the Academy remained the most appropriate organisation to house and curate significant materials pertaining to the history of science in Australia. It determined that the Basser Library and Fenner Archives in their present form could no longer be sustained, and the Finance Committee recommended that they be closed. Council agreed on an action to re-house historically significant items with publicly focused libraries, museums or other appropriate institutions where they could be better cared for and be more readily accessible. (Council 352 P133/5 item 11.2.)

Following discussion about Council’s agreed action on the Basser Library and Fenner Archives at the May 2015 AGM, a motion was proposed and passed that “Council reconsider its prioritisation of the Basser Library in light of the strategic plan”. The Council resolved subsequently to close the Library and Archives to the public for one year and established the Basser Library and Fenner Archives Task Force to “review the holdings of the Basser Library and Fenner Archives” (excluding the governance and business archives of the Academy, which will remain housed in the basement of the Shine Dome and maintained by Academy secretariat staff), “consider options for future storage and accessibility of these holdings”, and make a “recommendation for preferred option”.

Council appointed the following members of the Task Force:

Professor Pauline Ladiges (Chair) Secretary, Education and Public Awareness, Australian

Academy of Science

Professor Srini Srinivasan Member, Council of the Australian Academy of Science Dr Hugh Tyndale-Biscoe Former Chair, Basser Library Committee

Professor Joan Leach Chair, National Committee for the History and Philosophy of

Science; President, Australian Science Communicators; Director, National Centre for the Public Awareness of Science

Professor Libby Robin\* Historian of science. Australian National University;

former Editor, *Historical Records of Australian Science* A/Professor Gavan McCarthy Professor of cultural informatics (archives, museums,

libraries, history of Australian science), University of Melbourne

Ross Coleman Former Director, University of Sydney Library’s eScholarship digital library project; Founder, Australian Cooperative Digitisation Project; member, Steering Committee of the Australian Partnership for Sustainable Repositories

Kylie Walker (ex-officio) Director, Communications and Outreach, Australian

Academy of Science

\*Professor Robin subsequently resigned due to an inability to attend any of the scheduled meetings Academy Digital and Publications Manager Robyn Diamond acted as Secretary to the Task Force.

History of the Basser Library and Fenner Archives

A comprehensive history of the Academy’s library and archives is available in chapter 11 of *The Australian Academy of Science: The First Fifty Years*’ by Frank Fenner. Following is a short summary.

The Adolph Basser Library was established in February 1960 with a £25,000 gift from Sir Adolph Basser. It was opened in April 1962 with two basic objectives:

* + - To collect materials documenting the history of science in Australia
		- To conduct and promote related historical research.

A Library Committee was established as a Committee of Council in 1960 and the original collection of books and journals was established in 1961 by Honorary Librarian Arthur McDonald. The original manuscripts collection was established in 1962 by Research Associate Ann Moyal (nee Mozley). No Research Associate has been employed since 1974.

Subsequent librarians have added to the books and journals collection in an *ad hoc* fashion, and publications and manuscript or archival collections have been donated by some Fellows of the Academy, a number of other prominent scientists, and scientific organisations. These have been donated on the initiative of the scientists and their families. No formal accession policy has been in place.

The Dome basement also houses the governance and business archives of the Academy. These archives are not within the scope of this Task Force or report.

The most recent Librarian, Lisa Conti Phillipps, was employed on a part-time basis (20 hours per week) and left the post at the end of her contract in September 2015, following closure of the library to the public at the end of June 2015. The Library Committee also ceased operations.

In 1988 the family of the late former Library Committee Chair Patrick Moran made a donation to establish an annual bursary (the Moran Award) to support historians to conduct research in the Basser Library. This Award continues today; the Moran family agreed in January 2016 to broaden the scope of the Award so that it may support research in the history of science at any archival or library collection in Australia. The wording for the Award now reads: “This award is aimed at postgraduate students and other researchers with expertise in the history of Australian science. Its purpose is to support access to archives that record the history of science in Australia, especially by younger researchers, and it can be used towards travel and accommodation costs.”

## Summary of current collections

As at May 2015, the collections were as follows:

### Fenner Archives

*Manuscripts*

Total manuscript collections: 233 (ranging in size from 1 box up to 113 boxes):

* 77 Fellows’ collections (personal papers, notes, diaries, miscellany)
* 61 scientific societies’ collections (governance records, communication to members), including nine active collections (still being added to on a regular basis)
* 52 other collections, including nine societies that no longer exist and nine collections that belong to the Academy (records of former projects, etc.).

The Academy received two new manuscript collections in 2014 and none in 2015.

*Academy archives*

These archives house the governance and business records of the Academy, comprising more than 8,000 archived files including committee meeting minutes and reports, Council and EXCOM papers, and finance papers. (This collection is not within the scope of the Task Force or this report.)

Basser Library

*Books*

Total monographs: approx. 3,650.

1. 2,069 monographs in the Collection of History of Science in Australia
2. Collection of ~50 books on indefinite loan from the Birch family
3. 1,100 items published by the Academy
4. 440 monographs in the Collection of Fellows’ published material (please see below)

*Collection of Fellows’ published materials*

The Academy holds 440 books and many printed journal articles published by Fellows.

*Journals*

The library holds incomplete runs of about 100 scientific journals, many of which are now out of print.

*Other records*

The Library holds a mixture of cultural gifts, as well as items such as pamphlets, invitations, and other ephemera.

## The bigger picture: history of science archives in Australia and internationally

External, expert members of the Task Force provided advice on the broad context of modern archival collections. This led to broad-ranging discussion and identification of a summary set of guiding principles:

* Recognition that the Academy’s archival collection is significant although relatively small;
* The Academy has historically been a leader in the preservation of the history of science in Australia;
* Planning for the future should be conducted in a long-term context;
* Preservation of knowledge is important for future generations;
* Accessibility is a necessary component of any archival program;
* International best practices should guide approaches;
* The future should consider the opportunities offered by new and expected technology;
* The future should consider resourcing, technological and legal constraints.

Preserving and Participating: Archives Supporting the History of Science

The documentation of the activities of science exists in three realms: published literature; archival records; and museum artefacts. Historians of science draw on all of these realms to analyse the science of the past and establish the continuity with science as it is practiced now. It has been widely accepted that scientific published literature is not sufficient on its own to provide an adequate representation of the work of scientists in the lab, in the field, at conferences, communicating with colleagues around the world, the role of organisations and institutions, of disciplinary groupings and of leadership bodies such as the Australian Academy of Science. Because it is recognised that only a tiny fraction of the unpublished records will ever make it into an archive, those collections that do provide a rare insight into how things were done in the past.

Archival infrastructure in Australia (and it is different in every country), like many other activities of cultural value, suffers from chronic and systemic under-funding. This is not peculiar to Australia and has been recognised as a global phenomenon that applies particularly to the archives of science. In the early 1960s the international physics community took a lead in establishing the Center for History of Physics in the USA to ensure that the truly interesting, evocative, complex and insightful stories of physics in the 20th Century could be told and re-told to ensuing generations. The establishment of the Basser Library and Fenner Archive was a significant contribution to this global effort with its focus on scientific activity in Australia and by Australian scientists and scientific organisations. The subsequent establishment of the award-winning and world-leading Australian Science Archives Project in 1985 maintained this momentum. Its work on national information infrastructure to support the archives and history of science has persisted and is now embodied in the public knowledge web resource, the *Encyclopedia of Australian Science*, which currently holds the most comprehensive register of the collections of the Fenner Archives and has contributed relevant data to the TROVE resource discovery service of the National Library of Australia.

In Australia, the archival fabric is dominated by a few large institutions (the national and state archives), a similar number of slightly smaller repositories (state libraries and a few university archives), moderate size specialist repositories (such as the Fenner Archives and some of the larger school and church archives), and a long tail of records held by families, societies, individuals etc.

However, it is only those larger and moderate size groups that have the capability to provide access to records for historical and other analytical purposes. The archival community would argue that Australia cannot afford to lose such an important contributor to national memory as the Fenner Archives and its reference services.

Public funding is used to underpin the government archival programs as necessary instruments of democratic government, and national and state libraries as critical focal points for societal memory. Other archives are supported by universities for research, some receive philanthropic funding, and some are maintained by long-lived organisations (churches and schools) aware of their deep contributions to their communities.

However, just preserving materials is not sufficient: discoverability, access and utilisation is critical. New digital technologies, especially digitisation, are creating new possibilities for how the community engages with its own memory. Archival science is actively exploring notions of participatory archival programs and the active engagement of stakeholders. What is commonly poorly understood is that utilisation of these new opportunities does not replace the need for well- established preservation activities mentioned above. Indeed, it creates the need for equally well-established digital preservation platforms, which is proving to be a major technological and scientific challenge in its own right.

There is currently a focus on supporting digital projects that gather, interpret and engage a wide audience with the archive. The examples below from the UK point in this direction. The idea is that key parts of the archive are targeted for public and scholarly exploration. They might be digitised for this purpose as part of a strategy of digitisation or an attempt at improving accessibility.

# 3.0 Investigations and reports

## Risk assessment of Dome basement as a storage area

A full risk assessment of the basement, as a suitable area for storage of archival material, was undertaken by the Academy’s Facilities Manager in October 2015. No significant risks to the safety of the material were identified. Archivist Ailie Smith also assessed the archival storage arrangements in completing her report for the Task Force (see 3.4 below). Ms Smith determined that while many of the boxes and folders used to store the manuscript collections are not acid-free, and many of the papers are compiled using metal items, the boxes are in very good condition, no rust is evident, and there is no evidence of any pest invasions in the boxes inspected.

Based on these assessments and a visual inspection of the basement area, the Task Force is satisfied that the basement is a suitable area for storage of archival material.

## Uniqueness survey

A ‘uniqueness survey’ of the collections was commissioned from the National Library of Australia (NLA) in November 2015. This survey was conducted by comparing the catalogue of the library with the Australian National Bibliographic Database, including holdings at the NLA and ANU. The survey included published and unpublished works and resources held by the Academy.

The Task Force members considered the survey listing. As a guide, the survey provided the Task Force with valuable insights to significant works in the AAS collections and has assisted with recommendations in regard to the collections.

## Possibilities for transfer of archives

The Task Force reviewed the accession policies of three national institutions that collect historically significant and archival materials and commissioned the review of a ‘pilot collection’ in a format suitable for the National Library. Ms Ailie Smith (the Academy’s 2012 Moran Awardee), Senior Archivist at the University of Melbourne’s eScholarship Research Centre, reviewed the Frank Fenner collection, one of the larger and most nationally significant collections in the Academy’s archive. and recommended that work be carried out by someone who has an understanding of and experience in working with archival collections, with a high level of computer literacy.

Digitising archival collections, if done to accepted standards and with appropriate metadata, would ensure that these collections can be discovered through services such as NLA’s Trove and global search engines, so enhancing research reach and public access. Once digitised the content may become searchable, allowing speedier and more effective research and analysis. Digitisation and discovery can raise the profiles of collections world-wide for scholars and broadens accessibility, including for people with a range of disability.

## Valuations of books for possible sale

Two independent valuations of the book collection were obtained (excluding the Birch family collection on loan, which must remain in the Academy and is currently housed in one glass cabinet). The Task Force recommends that, if to be disposed, unique books should be given to the NLA and the remainder sold. This would likely have an impact on the estimated sale price.

## Societies’ collections

Holdings include 61 scientific societies’ collections (governance records, communication to members), including nine active collections (still being added to on a regular basis). Upon publicising the Council’s decision to close the Library and Archives to the public for 12 months, 9 scientific societies proactively contacted the Academy, and either reclaimed or expressed interest in reclaiming collections.

# 4.0 Best practice treatment of archival and historically significant materials

Based on the report commissioned from Ms Ailie Smith, the Task Force has assessed the work required to achieve best practice for the archives and an approximate cost of implementation.

## Physical maintenance

While manuscript collections appear to be in good physical condition at present, metal paper fasteners found in much of the collection will cause problems for the long-term preservation of the papers. To create best practice physical maintenance of the collections the following actions would be required:

* + - Remove all metal clips, fasteners, etc
		- Replace manila and other folders with acid-free folders
		- Replace current boxes with Australian standard type 1 sized acid-free boxes.

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## Discoverability and availability

Documentation of the manuscript collections could be improved by introducing

1. A consistent policy for acquisition of materials and agreements with donors.
2. One consolidated listing for the manuscript collections, updated in a professional style
3. Deletion of entries where the whereabouts of collections is unknown.
4. A review of policy on collections of living people, and documenting where they are housed, and any conditions of use.

**After reviewing various options for the future, the Task Force made the following recommendations**:

*Recommendation 1. Basser Library*

#### That the Academy close the Basser Library and gift, return, sell or retain as artefacts its collection of books, journals and other items.

*Recommendation 2. Fenner Archives preparation*

#### That the Academy prepare the Fenner Archives to meet best-practice standards of archival preservation and digital documentation that allows easy transferability to other catalogue systems and greater discoverability and accessibility.

*Recommendation 3. Fenner Archives location*

**That, given the estimated costs to retain and manage the Fenner Archives at the Shine Dome, Council consider the real costs and feasibility of relocating the manuscript collections to other archival repositories**

*Recommendation 4. Books and Journals*

**4a. That the Academy offers unique books and journals to the National Library of Australia.**

**4b. That the Academy offers the Birch family the option to retrieve the Birch Collection of books. Should the family request so, that the Academy continues to house the Birch collection in the current glass-fronted cabinet.**

**4c. That the Academy sells or gives away the remaining books and journals, on the basis of advice received**

**4d. That the Academy consider digitising early issues of Australian science journals that are not available online, in collaboration with institutions that provide such services**

*Recommendation 5. Manuscript collections*

**5a. That the Academy employs an archival specialist for six months, with a contingency of a further three months, to list the manuscripts in a sharable electronic format to meet best-practice standards of digital cataloguing.**

**5b. That the Academy seeks conservation students and/or equivalent to assist with preparation of the Fenner Archives to meet best-practice standards of archival preservation.**

**5c. Not all collections may be of interest to an external archive, leaving some in full or part possession of the Academy. In addition there may be legal reasons for retaining part or all of some collections at the Academy.**

*Recommendation 6. Society collections*

**That the Academy offers ‘living’ scientific societies the option to retrieve their collections, and that any remaining society collections be treated in the same manner as the manuscript collections.**

*Recommendation 7. Digitisation*

**That the Academy does not embark on a program of digitisation of archival materials in the foreseeable future.**

*Recommendation 8. Heritage legacy*

**That the Academy finds a way to maintain the heritage of the Basser legacy**

*Recommendation 9. Recording history*

**That the Academy undertakes to maintain for future historians a record of the collections it has held, the reasons for their acquisition and the reasons for the change in policy.**

*Recommendation 10. Ongoing access to the archives in transition*

**That Council consider the best affordable way to provide ongoing access to the Fenner Archives.**

*Recommendation 11. Communication*

**That Council communicates its decisions about the Library and Archives to the broader history-of- science community, as well as the Fellows of the Academy.**