

UNIVERSITY MUSEUMS & COLLECTIONS

Importance, Responsibility, Maintenance, Disposal & Closure

UMAC guidelines

Importance

University collections reflect the history, heritage and standing of a university and the nation. Collections are the contributions of generations of scholars and other dedicated persons. A collection made over years or a century or more that has been dispersed by a decision of the moment can never be re-assembled.

Collections within universities are built with scholarship over time and show the evolution of knowledge and scholarship. University collections often contain unique material not represented in other museums.

The objects in collections contain information of importance to future research. Interest in specific fields of knowledge waxes and wanes over time; therefore, it is not possible to predict a collection's value, or lack of it, to future scholars.

University collections and their curators are important interdisciplinary links for the community. Collections enhance teaching and research. They promote a positive image of the institution and provide welcoming access points to the campus. The collections in universities are ideally placed to connect disparate pieces of knowledge into lucid maps.

University collections stimulate intellectual development. The important role that collections play in our heritage is deepened during a student's time at the university. Commitment to preservation is fostered and influences decisions made throughout life in both work and leisure.

'Reading information' contained within an object is a significant source of new knowledge. The real objects in university collections are important research tools in an increasingly digital world and are ideally adjacent to scholars.

University collections are an appreciating research asset and often appreciate financially.

Responsibility

Any collection within a university initiated by a member of staff and subsequently maintained by university funds, whether formally authorised or not, is the responsibility of the university. The university is responsible for the tangible and intangible heritage inherent in the collection, which is part of the regional, national or global distributed collection.

Senior university management are responsible for university collections. They have, *de facto*, been entrusted with this duty. The actual ownership and relevant legal obligations may vary from place to place, but the responsibilities must be ascertained and clearly understood.

A university having one or more collections should have a policy regulating and guiding the operation of its collection/s. In general these will reflect the goals of the university as well as the aims of research, teaching and community service. In turn the role of museums and collections should be mentioned in the university's own strategic plan. Examples of exemplary university museum policies are available on the Internet (select references available free of charge from UMAC).

Professional ethical standards must guide the way in which collections are run. In addition, the policy will, in some detail, address the procedures for acquiring objects, initiating new collections or closing existing collections. UNESCO, the International Council of Museums (ICOM) and local and National museum associations publish information on professional museum standards.

Maintenance

A person should be designated as responsible for a collection or museum. This responsibility should be recognised in that person's duty statement. If the person designated does not have museum experience, training must be provided. Adequate funds, time and on-going training should be available to enable the discharge of the responsibility.

A senior officer should be delegated to supervise the person responsible for the collection or museum.

The collection should have a formal policy. At the very least this should state that the objects will be legally obtained, documented records will be kept, preventive conservation will ensure the long-term survival of the collection, and it will be regularly accessible.

The existence of the collection should be made public and the needs of visitors (in person or by virtual means) facilitated, especially in regard to research and/or publish material in the collection.

Disposal and Closure

The disposal method/s must be in conformity with professional ethical standards and legal requirements.

Professional museum ethics require funds raised by disposal to be re-utilised in the remaining collection/s.

The request to close or disperse should provide evidence of written documentation indicating that the university (or other authority) is the legal owner of the objects and is entitled to dispose of them. Reference to the terms of bequests or source/s of funding is essential.

Collections or museums should never be sold, dispersed or closed for reasons such as a sudden requirement for space, financial savings, the resignation or termination of staff or for any capricious reason without wide and sustained consultations. Dispersal or disposal of collections reduces resources available to teachers, students, scholars and the national and international community.

Publicity surrounding disposal of objects may endanger future donations and research funding.

The consultation process should be followed by a formal written request detailing the reasons by the head of the appropriate unit or Faculty to the Chief Executive Officer (such as the Rector, Principal, Vice-Chancellor, Vice-Principal or Provost).

Each and every object to be de-accessioned should be documented

The reason/s for closure or dispersal should be clearly stated. Where the reason/s is/are lack of relevance, poor condition, inadequate funds or requirement for the space, details of the consultations and the arguments for and against, should be given.

The recommended method/s of disposal (for example, transfer firstly to another university museum, secondly to any other museum) should be listed in order of priority. Each must safeguard the long-term survival of objects of scientific, artistic, social and educational value.

The aim of a closure procedure should be first and foremost to safeguard the long-term future of the objects in order to preserve the knowledge contained therein, and secondly to make adequate provision for affected staff.