

International Committee for University Museums and Collections (UMAC)

Adapting to Change

Successful organisations adapt to change. Reorganisation within universities may place university museums and collections in jeopardy unless advocacy and use highlight their significance. The check list below is designed to assist managers and curators to formulate their plans and help to ensure that basic essentials are considered. The various points need to be considered in conjunction and not necessarily in the sequence below. Some universities may find themselves already part way through the process.

Any reorganisation process should occur with the knowledge and full support of the highest levels of university administration.

1. The Acceptance of 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 collections and museums are not the property of a single individual, department or unit. The university is responsible for the tangible and intangible heritage inherent in each of its collections. They are part of the nationally and globally distributed collection that is mankind's heritage.

Further reading:

University Museums in Scotland, 2004. *Opening doors to learning. University museums for 21st century Scotland*. Download at HYPERLINK "<http://www.dundee.ac.uk/umis/>"

<http://www.dundee.ac.uk/umis/>

University Museums Group, 2004. *University museums in the United Kingdom. A national resource for the 21st century*. Download at HYPERLINK

"<http://www.umg.org.uk/pages/advocacy.html>" <http://www.umg.org.uk/pages/advocacy.html>

2. Recognise the unique nature of university collections

University collections hold the material evidence about how knowledge has been created and transmitted from generation to generation. Therein lies their uniqueness and distinct nature. University collections are not *only* about the history of science, the history of medicine or biology, or art, but more importantly about the story of mankind's long quest to know more and to formulate new ideas.

3. Create a strong team welded by mutual interest

Reorganisation of museums and collections requires an interdisciplinary team - managers, researchers, current and past users of collections, curators, historians of higher education, historians of science, conservators and most importantly, committed university management. The direct involvement of museum professionals from outside the university is important. UMAC is always willing to assist.

4. Survey and record information

The steps suggested below may not all be relevant but each of the evaluations they represent is important.

List the museums and collections (up to sub-collection level at first; later in more detail), facilities, major equipment, buildings, indeed everything including staff.

Calculate the current cost of the space the collection occupies, the facilities, the staff and their annual budgets.

List the items in the collections. Write down the significance of each holding and its condition.

Estimate the immediate needs of preventive conservation for the next three years.

Check that the university owns (has clear title, or has had an object in its possession for fifty years or more) the objects in its collections. If title is unclear or undetermined further research is necessary until a clear and precise statement can be written.

The International Council of Museums (ICOM) has published a relevant document, Code of Ethics for Museums (<http://icom.museum/ethics.html>). It has much useful information and should be read by all concerned with museums.

5. Evaluate the existing collections for their long term and continuing function within the university or elsewhere

From the information gathered in 4 each collection must now be evaluated. Evaluation – which includes recommendations for retention, transfer or disposal – must be in accordance with the university's long term strategy and international museum standards. Legal responsibilities to donors or the original collectors and the interests of other museums must also be considered before a recommendation is made.

Establishing evaluation criteria must not only take into account future public display, but more importantly use for teaching and research, including a wide range of innovative and inter-disciplinary uses. A collection once dispersed is lost forever.

Collections or museum buildings should never be sold, dispersed, exchanged 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 sustained and serious consultations. Arbitrary disposal is irresponsible and wrong.

Further reading:

University Museums and Collections: Importance, Responsibility, Maintenance, Disposal and Closure (<http://umac.icom.museum>)

6. Draft the collection policies for the future use of the museums and collections

The main points of a Collection Policy (or a revision of the existing policy) will gradually emerge as survey and evaluation is developed.

The Policy should then be drafted (or redrafted), circulated as widely as possible and then reviewed and revised so that it includes clear statements defining and explaining legal title, responsibility, recognition of museums and collections, management and forward planning, periodic reviews (to ensure strategic aims are met), rules for collecting and de-accessioning and ethical matters. The policy should be put before the university's highest committee /body for consideration and, when appropriate, approval.

Some museum policies for further reading:

Macquarie University, Australia (<http://www.lib.mq.edu.au/mcm/>)

University of St Andrews, Scotland (<http://www.st-andrews.ac.uk/services/muscoll/policies.html>)

Royal College of Surgeons of Edinburgh Museums Collecting and Disposal Policy

(<http://www.rcsed.ac.uk/content/faciliti/museums/299200313392.aspx>)

7. Review organisation, staffing and management

The provision of funding, staffing and career paths should be considered in the long-term: the management model created must take into account the permanent nature of collections and museums and the interests of the staff. In many, if not most, instances wisdom will dictate the permanent appointment, at high level, of a person in charge of museums and collections. It is necessary that the museum staff have a voice that can be heard in a senior decision-making board (such as senate, council, professorial assembly or the executive) in keeping with the significant long term asset value that the collections represent.

Concluding Remarks

1. Universities hold collections in trust for future generations
2. University museums make a unique contribution to the scholarly world and the broadcasting of knowledge.
3. Successful change takes time.
4. Advice is freely available through ICOM, UMAC and other professional museum bodies