

University museums: problems, policy and progress

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There are some 400 university museums and collections in the United Kingdom. During the 1990s their often neglected state came under close scrutiny and as a result their future role is now being re-assessed. A member of the Institute's staff has recently been appointed to the new position of Curator of UCL Museums and Collections, and he comments here on the national situation and describes some of the initiatives under way at UCL.

In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, collections of objects and specimens were a fundamental requirement of teaching and research in most universities. In 1904, in his book *Museums, their history and their use*, David Murray wrote:

"Every Professor of a branch of science requires a museum and a laboratory for his department; and accordingly in all our great universities we have independent museums of botany, palaeontology, geology, mineralogy, and zoology, of anatomy, physiology, pathology and materia medica, of archaeology – prehistoric and historic, classical and Christian – each subject taught having its own appropriate collection".¹

Object- and specimen-based teaching – and hence the importance of university collections – continued well into the second half of the twentieth century. However, in the 1970s, problems began to emerge in the UK when universities had their funding cut by the government. This coincided with changes in teaching methods in many subjects, which shifted away from collections-based learning. Some university museums closed, other teaching collections were dispersed, many were neglected and suffered as a result. In 1986, in response to a perceived crisis, the Museums and Galleries Commission, which was then the government's adviser on museums, called on the Area Museum Councils (regional support bodies for museums) to survey the collections held by universities in their regions, in order to determine their condition and level of use.

Outcome of the national assessment

The first survey, published in 1989, dealt with the collections of the University of London, since when surveys have been completed for the whole of the UK.² As a result, we now have for the first time a national picture of the state of higher-education museums, galleries and collections (HEMGCS). Overall, it is rather a depressing picture, but, although many problems remain, there are some areas in which a great deal of progress is being made, and UCL has led the way in some of these developments.

The surveys have produced some inter-

esting results. They show that there are over 400 HEMGCs in the UK, but that only 90 are registered as museums by Resource (the national Council for Museums, Archives and Libraries, which succeeded the Museums and Galleries Commission in 2000). In England, 15 are formally "designated" as holding collections of national and international importance, and they receive governmental project-funding in recognition of this.³ In addition, 32 HEMGCs in England, including most of the designated collections, receive special funding from the Arts and Humanities Research Board, which recently took over the special funding scheme for university museums and galleries from the Higher Education Funding Council for England.⁴

The HEMGC sector is extremely diverse, with some 75 per cent of it consisting of collections that are not sufficiently accessible or well managed to meet the minimum official criteria for a museum. At one end of the spectrum, there are the large public museums such as the Manchester Museum, the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford and the Fitzwilliam Museum in Cambridge, which have large staffs, budgets of several million pounds, their own dedicated buildings, and most of the services that would be expected of a great public museum. At the other end of the spectrum there is, for example, the University of Nottingham's Mining Engineering Collection in the Department of Chemical, Environmental and Mining Engineering which consists of 33 nineteenth- and twentieth-century miners' safety lamps housed in the staff common room. This diversity makes generalization difficult, and because the majority of collections are small departmental ones, the contribution of the larger museums tends to be under-emphasized when general statements are made.

All the surveys found that, in many subjects, changes in teaching methods have had a severe impact on collections. In the biological and medical sciences, for example, many departments have moved away from whole-organism teaching to genetics, or switched to computer-based teaching methods, which have resulted in the neglect or even the disposal of their teaching specimens. In most universities, col-

lections seem to be used much less than they were in the past, which can have dire consequences for their long-term survival.

One of the most fundamental problems affecting HEMGCs is that many universities are unsure why they actually have collections or what they should now do with them. Without a clear vision of their purpose in the university's structure, many collections can become extremely vulnerable in times of scarce resources, particularly if they do not have strong advocates within the university community. Reporting lines to the university authorities can be unclear or non-existent, and management strategies in the form of forward plans, or policies for the development of collections, can be alien concepts.

Many of the problems besetting HEMGCs in the UK flow from this general uncertainty of purpose. The surveys found that the great majority of collections do not have a dedicated budget, which severely limits the prospects of undertaking any improvements. This in turn leads to one of the most consistent problems revealed in the surveys: the low standards of management of collections. Inadequate storage, poor security, minimal or non-existent documentation, and large backlogs of conservation work (even straightforward tasks such as the "topping up" of specimens stored in spirit, Fig. 1) have all led to losses and general deterioration over the years.

Another consequence of under-resourcing is an acute shortage of specialists. Most collections have no trained member of staff to look after them, and in many cases no-one at all has responsibility for them. In



Figure 1 A sea cucumber (*Holothuria sp.*) preserved in spirit, from the Grant Museum of Zoology, UCL; the fluid has evaporated over time so that part of the specimen is exposed and the jar needs to be topped up with fresh spirit. Many university collections have a backlog of such straightforward tasks.

Wales, for example, there were found to be 22 university collections, but only two of them had full-time professional staff.

A further problem that complicates the situation is a lack of clarity about the ownership of many university collections. This not only raises ethical problems in relation to spoliation,⁵ looting and illicit trade; it can also make lending and remedial conservation difficult to carry out and collections vulnerable to being reclaimed or transferred.

Positive developments

As already noted, most HEMGCs consist of relatively small collections, and it is their problems that tend to dominate the surveys. However, this dominance masks considerable progress in many areas. Some universities regard their collections as assets rather than liabilities, and many of the newest universities, founded originally as polytechnics, have actively sought to establish new collections, whether for teaching, research or the public.

One of the reasons that some universities see their collections as assets is because they can play a role as shop windows, or gateways, for the university. Some university museum directors have argued in the past that they have little remit to serve the wider public because their main aim is to serve the staff and students of their university and other users of tertiary education. However, this view is gradually changing as universities become more conscious of the need to play a role in the wider community. HEMGCs are increasingly being used in this way by some universities. For example, the Hunterian Museum and Art Gallery in Glasgow has been acclaimed for its successful development of a higher-profile role as a showcase for the University of Glasgow.

There is also pressure on some universities to widen participation in tertiary education by recruiting a balanced proportion of students from state schools. This means getting out into the community to encourage able pupils to apply for university entrance, and outreach work based on museum collections is one user-friendly way of doing this. Four Cambridge University museums have come together to appoint an outreach officer to work with local schools and communities, and the Barber Institute at Birmingham University, and the Rural History Centre at Reading University, have also appointed schools liaison or outreach officers.

Smaller collections in particular are developing access through the use of digitization. If there is one area in which universities have an advantage over other kinds of museums, it is that of information and communication technology, and some university museum websites are the best of their kind. At the website of the Museum of Antiquities of the University of Newcastle, for example, it is possible to see a virtual exhibition of Late Stone Age

hunter-gatherers, to enter the Hadrian's Wall education website, to explore in three dimensions the museum's recreated Roman temple of Mithras, and to see the results of a community project with a local school.

Other museums have focused on what is distinctive to them as university museums. For some, this means the freedom to experiment, take risks and be challenging. The Courtauld Art Gallery in London, for example, attempts to do this with its temporary exhibition programme, which has included a display, "Valuing art", that invited visitors to guess the prices of paintings and other works of art and then explained how the art market worked. At the Whitworth Art Gallery in Manchester, a programme of temporary re-labelling involved the replacement of traditional labels with ones that asked (and tried to answer) questions such as "Why can't I understand what is going on in this picture?"

Developments at UCL

University College London has recently invested considerable time and resources

in developing its collections, following a lead from staff of the Institute of Archaeology. In 1998 a Centre for Museum, Heritage and Conservation Studies was created. Its aims are to manage the college's collections in a unified way, to develop their use in teaching and research, and to provide a forum for the hundred or so people in UCL who undertake research on heritage themes at PhD level or above.⁶ The Centre was given substantial central funding, which has allowed several additional staff to be appointed and has provided guaranteed budgets for some of the collections.⁷ The curators of these college's museums and collections now meet regularly to plan collaborative work. A regularly updated three-year forward plan for the collections has been produced, a college-wide collections management database developed, and a collections website launched.⁸ Also, individual museums are developing greater access to their collections. For example, the Petrie Museum of Egyptian Archaeology has developed a full on-line illustrated database of all 80,000 objects in its collection,⁹ and it plans to create a virtual museum linking



Figure 2 A loan box of ancient Greek material from the collections of the Institute of Archaeology, one of a series of boxes produced by UCL which are lent to local schools, together with teachers' notes. The objects are all authentic artefacts and can be handled by school classes.



Figure 3 A computer-generated illustration of the front of the proposed Panopticon building at UCL; the building will provide state-of-the-art accommodation for the Petrie Museum of Egyptian Archaeology and UCL's collection of rare books and manuscripts, as well as a large space for temporary exhibitions from UCL's other collections.

all the other Egyptian material excavated by Sir Flinders Petrie that is scattered around the world, starting with a link-up with the Manchester Museum for the finds from the Egyptian site of Lahun that are held in both museums.

Museum studies and conservation students at the Institute of Archaeology now use the collections each year for practical work, including mounting displays of professional quality. A series of boxes of material suitable for handling (loan boxes) have also been produced for the use of local primary schools (Fig. 2). Building on this, funding has also been received from UCL as part of its widening participation strategy, to appoint an education officer to undertake outreach work with schools, in order to introduce pupils to university life.

The most ambitious potential development at the college is the Panopticon (Fig. 3), a new building next to the Bloomsbury Theatre on Gordon Street, which is intended to house, among other things, the Petrie Museum and the Library's Special Collections, together with a space for temporary cross-disciplinary exhibitions that will draw on all UCL's collections. The overall aim of the Panopticon is to open up UCL, its work and its collections, to a wider audience, the keynotes being education and lifelong learning. The building will also provide a new entrance to the

college as a whole, and will be the springboard for outreach work with the local community. Although still at the design and fundraising stage, the project has the potential to put collections at the heart of a new outward-looking approach by UCL.

Conclusion

The surveys of HEMGCs in the UK carried out over the past decade have revealed widespread low standards, with most collections struggling to survive, in contrast to some excellent initiatives to improve standards and widen access. It is clear that there is a huge gulf between the museums, which are open to the public and have the resources and momentum to move forwards, and the collections, which have difficulty surviving. UCL has shown how a corporate approach to managing collections can bring benefits all round. It is evident, however, that the HEMGC sector is grossly under-resourced and that this under-funding must be tackled at the highest levels, by government departments responsible both for higher education and for heritage in general.

Notes

1. Page 275 in D. Murray, *Museums, their history and their use* (Glasgow: James MacLehose, 1904).
2. Many of the reports were written individ-

ually or jointly by Kate Arnold-Forster and Jane Weeks. They deserve great credit for raising awareness of the plight of university museums and collections across the country, and for highlighting progress made and ways forwards. The individual reports are as follows:

K. Arnold-Forster, *The collections of the University of London* (London: London Museums Service, 1989); K. Arnold-Forster, *Held in trust: museums and collections of universities in northern England* (London: Museums and Galleries Commission, 1993); K. Arnold-Forster, *Beyond the ark: museums and collections of higher-education institutions in southern England, scholarship, learning and access*. (Winchester: South Eastern Museums Service (Western Region), 1999); K. Arnold-Forster & J. Weeks, *Totems and trifles: museums and collections of higher education institutions in the Midlands* (Bromsgrove: West Midlands Regional Museums Council, 2000); K. Arnold-Forster & J. Weeks, *A review of museums and collections of higher education institutions in the eastern region and the south-east region of the South Eastern Museums Service* (Bury St Edmunds: South Eastern Museums Service, 2001); Council of Museums in Wales, *Dining amongst the bones: the university collections of Wales*, unpublished draft report (Cardiff: Council of Museums in Wales, 2000); L. Drysdale, *A world of learning: university collections in Scotland* (London: HMSO, 1990); Northern Ireland Museums Council, *University collections survey: executive summary*, unpublished draft report (Belfast: Northern Ireland Museums Council, 2001); South West Museums Council, *Minerals and magic lanterns: the university and college collections of the South West* (Taunton: South West Museums Council, 1999).

3. The designation scheme does not operate in Scotland, Wales or Northern Ireland.
 4. No similar funding scheme exists for Scotland, Wales or Northern Ireland.
 5. The Oxford English Dictionary defines spoliation as plunder or destruction or alteration of a document, but in museum terminology it is used in a technical sense to refer to objects illicitly or unfairly obtained during the Nazi period, especially items relating to the Jewish community.
 6. The Director of the Institute of Archaeology, Peter Ucko, was the Centre's first director. I succeeded him in 2000 and was also appointed overall Curator of UCL Museums and Collections, reporting to a new UCL Museums and Heritage Committee.
 7. UCL has four registered museums: the Petrie Museum of Egyptian Archaeology, the College Art Collections, the Grant Museum of Zoology, and the Geological Collections. There are also ten departmental collections, the largest of which is that of the Institute of Archaeology.
 8. The website can be accessed at: <http://collections.ucl.ac.uk>
 9. The database can be accessed at: <http://www.petrie.ucl.ac.uk>
- For an account of developments at the museum, see S. MacDonald, R. McKeown, S. Quirke, *AI 2000/2001*, 57–59, 2001.