

# Recent recommendations by the German Council of Science and Humanities on scientific collections as research infrastructures. A report

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## Abstract

*The German Council of Science and Humanities provides advice to the German government and states on the structure and development of higher education and research. In January 2011, the Council presented recommendations on scientific collections as research infrastructures. This article summarizes the results of the proposal and their implications on university museums and collections.*

## Introduction

In January 2011, the German Council of Science and Humanities, which provides advice to the German government and states on the structure and development of higher education and research, presented recommendations on scientific collections as research infrastructures.<sup>1</sup>

In this article, I will summarize the recommendations and their implications on university museums and collections. I will begin by providing a brief overview of the situation and recent developments of university collections in Germany, which have undoubtedly contributed to the recent accomplished evaluation.

## The situation of university collections in Germany

In 2001, after detailed inquiries on the collections of Humboldt University of Berlin leading to the exhibition "Theatre of Nature and Art. Treasure-Trove of Knowledge",<sup>2</sup> I realized that an overview of collections existing in German universities had not been done before. This observation led to a research project on the holdings and history of university collections in Germany. In 2004, the German Research Foundation (DFG) accepted the application and awarded the project five-year funding. Simultaneously, I tried to increase the visibility of university museums through presentations, publications, and advocacy (e.g. WEBER 2009, 2010).

In 2009, when the working group on research infrastructures for scientific collections set up by the German Council of Science and Humanities started to look at scientific collections, it could rely on a database for university collections with more than 1,000 entries, whereof more than one-third were already dissolved, no longer existing at the original university, of unknown destiny, or orphaned.<sup>3</sup>

In 2010, the Helmholtz Center for the Kulturtechniken organized for the first time a conference in Germany addressing people working in and with university collections.<sup>4</sup>

The symposium, called *University Museums and Collections in Academic Practice. Tasks – Concepts – Perspectives*, aimed at:

- identifying new tasks for university museums and collections, and developing strategies to guarantee their continued existence. The meeting also set itself the task of framing future-oriented concepts to allow for a fuller integration of traditional university collections into

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<sup>1</sup> Wissenschaftsrat: Recommendations on Scientific Collections as Research Infrastructures. [Empfehlungen zu wissenschaftlichen Sammlungen als Forschungsinfrastruktur.]. Drs. 10464-11. Berlin 28 January 2011. [www.wissenschaftsrat.de/download/archiv/10464-11-11\\_engl.pdf](http://www.wissenschaftsrat.de/download/archiv/10464-11-11_engl.pdf), [www.wissenschaftsrat.de/download/archiv/10464-11\\_11\\_engl.pdf](http://www.wissenschaftsrat.de/download/archiv/10464-11_11_engl.pdf) (accessed September 5, 2011).

<sup>2</sup> [www2.hu-berlin.de/hzk/theatrum/englisch/index.html](http://www2.hu-berlin.de/hzk/theatrum/englisch/index.html) (accessed September 5, 2011).

<sup>3</sup> [www.universitaetssammlungen.de/](http://www.universitaetssammlungen.de/) (accessed September 5, 2011).

<sup>4</sup> [universitaetsmuseen.hu-berlin.de/](http://universitaetsmuseen.hu-berlin.de/) (accessed September 5, 2011).

established academic practice while taking into account the current requirements of teaching, research and science communication;

- establishing a network for university museums and collections in German-speaking countries in order to provide a platform for the urgently needed exchange of experience and knowledge. Such an initiative allows the critical formulation, reflection, and realization of joint strategies, partnerships, and collective activities.

The academic response to the symposium was overwhelmingly positive. For the first time in Germany, 150 academics and decision-makers from various fields talked on university museums and collections from an interdisciplinary perspective, among them members of the working group set up by the German Council of Science and Humanities. Discussion topics addressed as many aspects of collection management and development as possible. They included reflections on the position of academic museums and collections, collections handling, the role of collections in teaching, research and science communication, and the discussion of future-oriented strategies. The proceedings are freely available on the web.<sup>5</sup>

One of the symposium's most important results was the consensus to continue the work initiated in Berlin and to establish a network not only to develop supra-regional concepts and strategies, but also to play a more active part in shaping academic and cultural policies.

### Recommendations

In the past, the Council's attention focused mainly on collections outside of universities. This time, the working group included also the many academic scientific collections. Especially at universities, collections play an important role as infrastructure for research and teaching. As a result of the evaluation the Council saw a need for action particularly with regard to university collections.

The Council's conclusion that "scientific collections and objects form an essential basis for research in numerous scientific disciplines" and that "the potential of scientific collections for research should be utilized more effectively in the interests of the scientific system, and also in search for answers to current questions with urgent relevance for society as a whole"<sup>6</sup> has resulted in the following recommendations:<sup>7</sup>

- "It is fundamentally important to determine the status of the scientific collections."
- "Universities should assign responsibility for the collections to persons who will adopt a comprehensive perspective."
- "The status determination should be used as a starting point for the further systematic conceptual development of the collections."
- The "decentralized structure requires a certain degree of interdisciplinary, self-organized networking and coordination between the collections. The Council therefore recommends that the German federal government should fund, for the medium term, a body that performs corresponding advisory and coordination activities."
- "Guidelines and standards are required for the documentation, (digital) indexing, management, upkeep and conservation of collections."
- "The Council recommends the (further) development of appropriate financing options and funding instruments for scientific collections."

<sup>5</sup> [edoc-hu-berlin.de/conferences/ums2010](http://edoc.hu-berlin.de/conferences/ums2010) (accessed September 5, 2011).

<sup>6</sup> Recommendations p. 7.

<sup>7</sup> Recommendations p. 7-8.

## Outcomes

As one can imagine, the university museums and collections' community is significantly encouraged by these recommendations. At the second nationwide conference in Jena in April 2011,<sup>8</sup> the discussion of the Council's proposals, people generated enormous enthusiasm.

Apart from the fact that people responsible for collections are expected to demonstrate a high degree of personal initiative and self-organization, in principle the recommendations address four different agents:

1. Collections
2. Universities
3. Government
4. External capital providers

1. Collections: As a starting point, the current state of collections needs to be clearly determined, in other words they should be documented and classified in terms of quality. Only this information can provide a realistic assessment of their worth for the further systematic conceptual development and the possibility of being a part of a given network. Proper assessment criteria are urgently needed. Learning to recognize and rate the value of collections as scientific infrastructure before developing adequate future concepts and strategies is of utmost importance.

2. Universities: Every university holding collections has to establish working committees which meet regularly. Furthermore, the appointment of a collections officer to develop a comprehensive inventory of the university's collection, build a network between individual collections, support the links between research, teaching and exhibition, and initiate external relationships, is essential.

This person should have a close connection to the rector's or president's office. Together with the working committee the collections officer should develop a guidance framework for a university-wide policy in order to improve the status of individual collections, which in turn should be integrated into a university-wide collection policy. In the last months, several German universities already initiated specific initiatives in this direction.<sup>9</sup>

3. Government: To support collections and universities and to facilitate a nationwide network, a national coordination body funded by the government is needed. This office will – in the long term – include also non-university scientific collections.

4. External capital providers: Without additional financial support from external sources such as the German Research Foundation and the VolkswagenFoundation, among others, it will be difficult for most collections to achieve any remarkable improvements. Therefore, particular funding agencies are asked to develop appropriate project funding instruments.

## Tasks of the coordination body

One of the most interesting and challenging tasks is to create the coordination body mentioned above. It seems that this undertaking is unique in the world of university collections. There is no model that can be adopted and the German community needs to start from scratch. Among some of the objectives such a structure should have, I would underline the following:

<sup>8</sup> Selbstorganisation und Förderung von wissenschaftlichen Sammlungen. Die Empfehlung des Wissenschaftsrates [*Self-organization and promotion of scientific collections. The recommendations of the Council of Science and Humanities*], [www.conventus.de/index.php?id=4466](http://www.conventus.de/index.php?id=4466) (accessed September 5, 2011).

<sup>9</sup> For example, the University of Nuremberg-Erlangen and the Humboldt University of Berlin appointed a collections officer; the University of Hamburg and the University of Kiel established special working committees.

1. To set up a platform for communication (website, blog, forum, wiki) in order to make available relevant data and allow the exchange of information for the community to increase the network.
2. To develop a nationwide meta-database portal with regard to the interdisciplinary nature of collections, different shareholder institutions and their relevance for research today.
3. To support the development of criteria for the assessment of collections.
4. To develop guidelines and standards for the use of collections as research infrastructures (indexing, management, upkeep and conservation, accessibility, digitization).
5. To offer advisory service to the collections and universities.
6. To promote consultation between collections, coordinate and organize activities nationwide.

### Final remarks

Since the first published report on *Cinderella Collections* in Australia in 1996<sup>10</sup> some relevant reports and recommendations followed, e.g., the *Recommendation on the governance and management of university heritage* of the Council of Europe in 2005<sup>11</sup> or the report of the University Museums Group UK *University Museums in the United Kingdom: a national resource for the 21st century* in 2004<sup>12</sup>. But all these statements never went so far as to propose such specific actions as the recommendations of the German Council. Therefore, the suggestions are not only relevant for German scientific university collections. On the contrary, other countries can incorporate the main proposal and profit from the advice and experience. However, first it is absolutely necessary to compile basic information on collections in order to raise awareness to this kind of research infrastructure and get activities started.

Some of the proposals mentioned before should not be realized only at national level. It is also possible to do it at international level. Therefore, I advise the International Committee of University Museums and Collections to seize this window of opportunity and to promote the procedure. UMAC could for instance develop criteria for the assessment of collections or elaborate certain standards on one of the next conferences. There are already basic approaches one can use, for example from non-university research collections. To support this initiative would be a rewarding and challenging task for UMAC.

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<sup>10</sup> University Museums Review Committee of the AV-CC: *Cinderella collections. University museums and collections in Australia. The report of the University Museums Review Committee.* Canberra: Australian Vice-Chancellor's Committee 1996.

<sup>11</sup> Council of Europe 2005: *Recommendation Rec(2005)13 of the Committee of Ministers to member states on the governance and management of university heritage.* [www.universeum.it/docs/RecommendationRec%282005%2913\\_EN.pdf](http://www.universeum.it/docs/RecommendationRec%282005%2913_EN.pdf) (accessed January 4, 2012).

<sup>12</sup> [umg.web.its.manchester.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2010/03/UMG\\_Advocacy.pdf](http://umg.web.its.manchester.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2010/03/UMG_Advocacy.pdf) (accessed January 4, 2012).

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