



Coordination Centre
for Scientific
University Collections
in Germany



Guidelines for
collections policies and
mission statements

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This publication is based on the results of the workshop entitled 'Sammlungskonzepte und Entwicklungsstrategien' (Collections Policies and Development Strategies) conducted by the Coordination Centre for Scientific University Collections in Germany on 26 and 27 April 2013. Participants in the workshop included representatives of German collections who are currently active at the university level.

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Hermann von Helmholtz-Zentrum für Kulturtechnik | Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin
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Responsible for the content of this publication: Oliver Zauzig

Translation: James Griffin

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Introduction

The goal of a collections policy and mission statement is to give a collection a specific, individual written framework for action. They give direction to the management of and work with handling a collection, both in the present and in the future. The German Council of Science and Humanities also emphasises the importance of a collections policy for work with scientific and academic collections, as part of a larger university-wide collections regime¹.

Collections policies have a primarily inward effect (i.e. within the organisation), whereas mission statements are intended to have a primarily outward effect (i.e. outside of the organisation). They can form a single logical unit, but in the following sections they are considered separately because they differ in their scope and target groups.

Mission statements present the goals of the collection's work, whereas collections policies include guidelines for those who deal with the collection. Both are representative of the transparency of the collection's work and serve as written documentation of its development strategy. They are part of the process of an internal or external evaluation of the collection's current situation and position; serve as a basis for discussions and decisions vis-à-vis donors and the university administration; and function as helpful guides for successors, making them lasting instruments for long-term collections policies and use.

The collections policy must be harmonised with an already existing collections regime (usually a set of rules that have been approved by the university administration and that apply to the entire university). Such a collections regime also serves as the basis for individual collections policies.

The collections policy and mission statement are important steps towards the professionalisation of the work of the collection and actively support the use of the collection in research, teaching and education efforts. Furthermore, all parties involved should be included in drafting them. This increases the significance of the collection within the parent institution.

¹ Cf. Recommendations on Scientific Collections as Research Infrastructures published in 2011 by the German Council of Science and the Humanities (Wissenschaftsrat)

Mission statement

A mission statement is a written statement that describes the purpose and aims of an organisation. In the case of scientific collections, the mission statement clearly expresses what the collection is for. In addition to research, this includes, first and foremost, teaching and education. Thus, the existence of a collection is not an end in itself. The mission statement expresses the goals that use of the collection is intended to achieve and describes the collection's potential. The reason for a university collection's existence, the collection's mission, and visions for the collection should be derived from the quality criteria for scientific university collections and formulated into a mission statement.

This mission statement should be in harmony with the profiles of the collection's parent institutions, e.g. of the respective department, faculty or university. A collection's mission statement can also be part of the mission statement of such a parent institution, in order to increase the collection's standing and esteem.

The development of a mission statement should not be a top-down process, but rather should be carried out as a collaborative effort including all parties involved with the collection. This helps build the collection's identity, which has an internal as well as external effect.

A mission statement is a short text. The more specifically the mission statement is tailored to the collection in question, the stronger, more distinctive and more convincing the statement is. Phrases such as "the collection serves research purposes" or "the collection is unique, because it includes rare objects" are therefore too general and meaningless. The mission statement can be considered specific enough when the purpose and goal of a collection, as well as its individual character, are clearly articulated. Fundamental and contextual quality criteria should thus take a central role.

A mission statement can also consist of a list that, due to its scope, already effectively includes a (rudimentary) collections policy. The difference between a mission statement and a collections policy lies in its target audience and scope. Mainly, this means that the mission statement is limited to a few fundamental points.

The following text is an example of a mission statement for a fictional collection. It includes all important points and could be included on the collection's homepage:

"The crystallographic model collection serves to convey fundamental concepts taught in solid state physics. It is an integral part of the inventory of the Department of Physics. In addition, it has potential to be used in artistic studies or studies related to the history of science. Because of their state of preservation, some objects in the collection are unique in the world. The collection is an integral part of the department's teaching and research infrastructure. The collection is accessible to all interested parties and may be used for studies in accordance with appropriate binding guidelines."

Collections policy

In its recommendations, the German Council of Science and Humanities describes the functions of a collections policy as follows:

“Based on the concept, it is possible to carry out resource planning and justify demands for human, physical and financial resources with respect to university management and in internal competition for the allocation of resources; at the same time suitable priorities can be set in view of tight resources. In order to serve these purposes, the concept should outline the collection’s specific function and perspective, position it thematically in current and future research questions, and take into account the scientific quality of the collection as a whole and of the individual objects.”²

The question of a collections policy also comes up in the course of evaluations and as part of a status determination. A collections policy forms the basis of day to day work with the collection. It is documented in writing and is binding. It is not a static document, but rather must be regularly and repeatedly reviewed and adjusted to reflect changes. In larger institutions, the collections policy may consist of various sections. Thus, it may include special acquisition, usage and security concepts and administrative regulations. For a small collection, it is not necessary to create several such corresponding, consistent policies, as usually only one or two people are entrusted with dealing with the collection. Rather, it is important that the collections policy is in harmony with already existing collection regimes. Existing cross-departmental or cross-faculty security or administrative rules must also be included.

As part of creating a collections policy, one’s own work should be analysed and statements should be included that address the current and future use of the collection in research, teaching and education. A collections policy is intended to describe goal-oriented guidelines for action and plans for development. In short, a collections policy should be regarded as handbook for the collection. Statements are made about fundamental functions, organisation and content of the collection, as well as about its potentials and relevance, and thus about its developmental outlook. Updating and expanding the policy in response to all manner of changes is an ongoing, permanent responsibility.

² Recommendations on Scientific Collections as Research Infrastructures published in 2011 by the German Council of Science and the Humanities (Wissenschaftsrat), p. 49.

The structure of a collections policy: overview

In the following section, several points will be listed which can be included in a collections policy. It is not absolutely necessary to include each of these points when drafting an individual policy. Preconditions needed to create a collections policy include knowledge of the current state of the collection (gained through the status determination), an assessment of its value (quality criteria), and goals in regard to handling and using it (research infrastructure, formulation of relevance and potential, profile building).

Vague formulations or poorly defined terms should be avoided or clearly defined. The policy should be short, concise, understandable and unambiguous, so that it can be used in day-to-day work. Ideally, the policy should be written as a collective effort by everyone who is involved in work on the collection.

Collections policy for university collections

Formal framework

- Author/authors of the policy
- Publication date
- Status of the document (draft, adopted, etc.)

Preamble

- Description of the document
- Contextual position of the policy

Collection structure

- Name of the collection
- Owner/holder of the collection
- Institutional affiliation
- Contact person and responsible party/person

Purpose and goal of the collection

- Use in research, teaching and education
- Preservation
- Identity formation and representative significance

Collection description

- Holdings, focal points and scope of the collection
- Core holdings and partial holdings
- Active and currently inactive holdings

Collection profile

- Qualitative and thematic comparison with other collections
- Unique characteristics
- Thematic and subject matter orientation (“What am I collecting?”)

Perspectives for the further development of the collection

- Incremental plan
- Collection strategy
- Central holding categories
- Desiderata
- Acquisition
- Areas that should not be pursued further
- Deaccession or exchange of objects
- Collections potential

Origin and history of the collection

- Life cycle

Inventory procedures and scientific cataloguing

- Overview of holdings
- Depth of information

Digitisation

- Incremental digitisation plan
- Long term digital archiving

Preservation, management and care

- Dokumentation guidelines
- Preventative conservation
- Appropriate storage
- Active conservation and restauration
- Security and collections management (e.g. insurance, object loans, etc.)

Legal and ethical frameworks

- Protected status, historic preservation, Washington Convention on the Trade of Endangered Species
- Voluntary commitment not to engage in the art trade
- Contractual arrangements (e.g. permanent loans)
- Restitution
- Human Remains
- Personal and property rights

The structure of a collections policy: explanations

Formal framework

A formal framework forms the initial basis of the policy. It must include the names of the **authors of the policy**, the **date of publication** and the **status of the document**. Because a collections policy is primarily an internal document, it should be made clear whether the text in question is a draft or an authorised or approved document (including the name of the approving body or institution).

Preamble

In a collections policy, it is useful to present the fundamental context of the collection and to **position the policy within this context**. This context can be briefly described in a **preamble**. Examples would include recommendations of the German Council of Science and Humanities, status determinations that have been conducted, reorientation of subject matter addressed in research or teaching, or planned personnel changes.

Collection structure

Beyond that, it is essential to include formal information about the collection in the policy document. The **name of the collection** is to be included, including references to any alternate or variant names. In the future, those responsible for collections may utilize ISIL codes³ for identification, which make it easier to clearly classify and attribute a collection. **Owners** and/or **custodians** of a collection must also be listed. If the ownership situation is unclear, it should be explained. In addition, the **institutional affiliation** as well as a **contact** person or **responsible party** should be listed.

Purpose and goal of the collection

Use, usability and **potential uses** form the purpose and goal of the collection. Use in teaching, research and education are central to a scientific collection. Whether the collection is currently being used and in what way must be explained. Potential uses of the holdings in the future are also just as important. Relevance and potential form the basis of these arguments, although it is only possible to outline potential. This makes it even more important to emphasise potential just as clearly as the “current” relevance of the collection.

³ <http://biblstandard.dk/isil/> (December 2014)

Statements on existing infrastructure and on the collection's profile, which is explained in its own section below, are just as important. This can include, for example, a list of relevant contact persons (related collections etc.), or a list of scholars who have already worked with the collection and a description of the appropriate contexts.

In **research** *with* objects, the possibility of consumptive use must be considered. In contrast, consumptive use is less likely in research *about* collections or objects or when they are used in **teaching** or **education**. Nevertheless, rules should be set for the use of objects (e.g. tactile experiences as a teaching tool). Often, duplicates or large quantities of materials make a variety of different uses possible.

On the other hand, reference and typological collections necessitate a different approach to handling of the collection. In these instances, **conservation** and accessibility for research are paramount. In such situations, which are often internationally relevant, a long-term perspective and clear conditions for use are required.

Furthermore, a framework for **representative** and **identity building** purposes should be outlined.

The purpose and goal of a collection can vary over time and adapt to the life cycle of a collection. The life cycle is understood as a cycle in which a collection originally established for a particular purpose is given another application.

Collection description

The collection description includes the **central focus** of the collection and its **holding categories** as well as its **size**, **core holdings**, important **partial holdings**, and **active** and **currently inactive holdings**. Holding categories consist of objects that share similar functional, formal or materially similar characteristics. The central focus of a collection is usually oriented around the collection's original purpose, but due to the size of a collection may also be divided into several different focal points that relate to the holding categories.

The size of a collection can be expressed in a concrete number. Core holdings usually have a historic context and are related to the original ideas for the use of the collection. Relevant partial holdings describe volumes or sets related to a specific person, or unique, exemplary, or exceptional collections and objects. In the case of active holdings, their use should be briefly explained.

Collection profile

The collection profile is based on the collection description and is a specific account of the collection's holdings that focuses on their current and future use. It enables a **qualitative** and **thematic comparison** with other (similar) collections as well as their targeted use at the university. Fundamental criteria are especially prominent in the profile, such as **unique characteristics** and the **thematic and subject matter** orientation of the collection. In other words, the "what do I collect?" question should be emphasised.

Strengthening the scientific profile of a collection is an argument for the expansion and maintenance of the collection's holdings that should not be underestimated. By comparing the collection with other similar collections, and by describing the profile that is based upon such a comparison, the special quality of a given collection becomes apparent. This is exceptionally important for research collections that are not one-of-a-kind. In the case of teaching collections that are currently in use, the profile plays more of a secondary role.

Perspectives for further development of the collection

Perspectives for the further development of the collection are derived from the collection profile, the collection's potential, and its current use. An **incremental plan** explains planned development steps over time. This makes it possible to clearly describe a **collections strategy**.

The following questions, which are closely tied to the use of the collection, should be at the centre of this strategy. What are the **most important categories of holdings** and can they be used by scholars and scientists? What are **desiderata** that could lead to additional **acquisitions**? What areas of the collection **should no longer be pursued**? Could **deaccessioning** or **exchanging objects** strengthen the collection's profile? Is it possible to formulate the **collection's potential**, i.e. are the holdings currently usable in research or could they be used for future research?

Origin and history of the collection

An outline of the origin and history of the collection serves to clarify the purpose and goal of the collection. This is why a **life cycle**, i.e. the historic use of the collection, should be at the centre of this outline. A collection that was originally established for teaching purposes may be of interest for research in a completely different discipline due to the specificity of its material. Historical teaching collections can be reactivated for use as a didactic tool, as is often the case for moulage (medical casts and models) today. The historical description of the collection should be kept short and should relate to current and future use of the collection.

Inventory procedures and scientific cataloguing

The policy should provide information about matters related to inventory procedures and scientific cataloguing. In this case as well, it is recommended that an incremental plan be developed. Inventory taking is understood as the rudimentary recording of the objects in collection in order to establish a lasting **overview of holdings**. It serves as preparation for the scientific use of the holdings. In contrast to the situation in the museum field, many university collections do not have inventories or overviews of the existing holdings. Cataloguing of the collection cannot be clearly differentiated from inventory taking, but should have as its goal a **significant depth of information** as part of the object documentation effort. Orienting these guidelines around similar ones in the museum field can be helpful when drafting the collections policy.⁴

Digitisation

The digitisation of existing holdings must reflect the purpose, goal and use of the collection. Considerations regarding **long term digital archiving** should also be made.

Preservation, management and care

Preservation, management and care of the collection play an important, but not central, role for university collections. Questions of **preventative conservation, appropriate storage, active conservation** and **restoration**, as well as **collections and security management** (e.g. insurance, auditing and loans) should be answered or, at a minimum, addressed. These purely structural quality criteria are essential to the security of the holdings, but tie up enormous resources. Clear rules should contribute to keeping costs and benefits in balance. In regard to management and administrative tasks, it is recommended that documentation guidelines be set to ensure standardised and transparent treatment and use of the collection and objects. It can be helpful to orient these guidelines around similar ones in the museum field.⁵

Legal and ethical framework

Legal and ethical frameworks are often neglected in work with collections. The policy should include points such as the **protected status of the objects** (national heritage, etc.); **the Washington Convention** (CITES – Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species

⁴ Cf. Collections Trust: Spectrum 4.0. The UK Museum Collections Management Standard, 2011

⁵ Cf. *ibid.*

of Wild Fauna and Flora); **a voluntary commitment not to participate in the art trade; contracts** (e.g. permanent loans); **restitution**; questions about the handling of **human remains; personal and property rights**, and so forth.

In this way, the policy will become a comprehensive compendium for the collection.

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