

Working with Collections: A Guide for Researchers

Introduction

This guide is intended to support academic staff who are developing funding bids or project proposals which include elements of activity relating to archives, museums or other heritage collections in the care of the University of Edinburgh. It outlines some of the issues to consider, but we encourage anyone considering such a project to make contact with Centre for Research Collections curatorial staff at an early stage: <http://www.ed.ac.uk/is/crc>. CRC tries to follow best practice but please be aware that there may be different protocols in place at other collections institutions.

Opportunities

The UoE has some 60km of heritage material spread across 45 separate sites, but all connected through the hub of the Centre for Research Collections in the Main Library. These collections include primary source material, unique and rare collections, relevant to a wide range of research areas. The main online portal describing the collections is <http://collections.ed.ac.uk/>.

These collections are used for a wide range of research projects, ranging from citations in publications to articles and monographs on particular items, and are increasingly the basis of major funded research projects. CRC also runs projects to make collections accessible for research. Recent examples include the Carmichael-Watson project <http://www.carmichaelwatson.lib.ed.ac.uk/cwatson/> (funded by Carnegie, AHRC and Leverhulme) and the Towards Dolly project <http://www.archives.lib.ed.ac.uk/towardsdolly/project.php> (funded by Wellcome Trust). Large parts of the collections have never been fully researched and so present opportunities for numerous such projects. CRC staff have lists of possible project opportunities which we are happy to share with prospective researchers.

Impact

Working with collections has particular advantages in that we can offer routes to measurable impact, particularly in terms of community engagement. These include:

- Exhibition spaces in the Main Library on the ground and 6th floors.
- Online platform for delivery of digital images <http://images.is.ed.ac.uk/>, which are now released where possible under a CC BY licence.
- Existing programme of events and outreach activities.
- Skilled curatorial staff with strong experience of research project support.
- Established programme of volunteers and interns.
- Access to spaces for performance and engagement such as St. Cecilia's Hall.
- Strong partnerships with other Universities and cultural institutions, in Scotland, the UK and internationally.
- Networks beyond the University including the professional sector (CILIP etc.), the media, other public sector bodies and private scholars.
- Facilities in the Centre for Research Collections for teaching and learning, with both original collections material and technical support for digital scholarship.

Issues to consider

A project involving collections is most likely to succeed if collections staff are involved at an early stage. Other factors to consider include:

- Timescales. E.g. a major exhibition normally needs to be planned at least 3 years in advance; if you want to access a whole collection through the Reading Room, you should discuss with staff at least 3 weeks in advance.
- Costs. E.g. a major exhibition costs at least £20,000.
- Legislation. Copyright, Data Protection, Freedom of Information, Prevent legislation may impact on the access you can have to particular archives and may limit how you can disseminate your research. It may also dictate how research data must be anonymised. It can also impact on timescale too – as a permissions process can take some time, especially if the issues are complex. Legislation is complemented by national best practice guidelines for archives.
- Ethics. Collections may include references to living people, e.g. oral history recordings, films, medical records. As well as the relevant legislation you should take advice from curators and the relevant ethics committee as to how you conduct and present your research. The subject matter of some collections means that they retain a high level of sensitivity, regardless of when they were produced.
- Conservation. Some physical collections may not be fully accessible due to their needs in terms of conservation and preservation. This work can often be costed in to a funding proposal, and curators can advise.
- Cataloguing. Some collections may not be fully discoverable online, and specialist library or archive work is often required to create appropriate catalogue records. If you wish to work on an unsorted / unlisted collection, you will not be able to re-arrange or list it yourself in isolation. This work can often be costed in to a funding proposal, and curators can advise.
- Digitisation. Digitisation can be an excellent vehicle to expose research as well as a tool to investigate research questions. There are many different kinds of digitisation and technical options (e.g. file sizes). Some collections may be appropriate for high-resolution photography, others may require transcriptions, text encoding and commentary in addition. Website development may also be required. This is specialist work which needs to be discussed at an early stage.
- Preservation. You will probably create data sets and other digital research materials during your project. These need to be managed in accordance with the University's Research Data Policy, but in addition some of them may be worth preserving as part of the archives themselves. Please speak to curatorial staff who can advise about digital preservation issues.

The Centre for Research Collections staff are happy to advise about these issues.

Joseph Marshall, Head of Special Collections