

UNIVERSITY OF ABERDEEN

UNIVERSITY COLLECTIONS

Forward Plan 2025-30

1 PURPOSE

Since 1495, the University of Aberdeen has been open to all and dedicated to the pursuit of truth in the service of others. University Collections supports this foundational purpose, aiming to curate, enable, innovate and promote access for all to the University's internationally important archives, museum collections and rare books for research, teaching and public engagement.

The University Collections' forward plan identifies priorities for work over a five-year period. It was developed from a consideration of the University's strategic plan, Aberdeen 2040, the outcome so the Scottish Funding Council's Museums Galleries and Collections Grant, Scotland's Museums and Galleries Strategy 2023-2030, forward planning in the Directorate of Digital & Information Services, a review of previous forward plans, and focused discussion among University Collections staff, the University Collections Academic Forum, and the Directorate Leadership team.

2 STRATEGIC CONTEXT

2.1 Aberdeen 2040

The University of Aberdeen is committed to delivering outstanding teaching and first class research, and to achieve that, has put people at the heart of everything that it does. The strategic plan is structured around four themes

- Inclusive. We welcome and support students, staff and partners from all backgrounds, organisations and communities. We value diversity.
- International. We connect with others, and extend our networks and partnerships around the world. We think across borders.
- Interdisciplinary We innovate in education and research by generating, sharing and applying new kinds of knowledge. We learn together.
- Sustainable. We understand and nurture our environment, and take care of our resources, including our people and our finances. We work responsibly.

2.2 Scottish Funding Council

The Scottish Funding Council's Museums Galleries and Collections Grant contributes to its strategic objective that is to ensure colleges, universities and specialist institutions form part of a successful, world-leading, coherent, and sustainable system of education that responds effectively to the future needs of learners and the skills needs of the economy and society, enhances our rich cultural life, and strengthens Scotland's international connections. The expected outcomes of the grant are therefore:

- An appropriate level of care and management to maintain its contribution to Scotland's strategies for education and culture
- Harmonisation of strategies and ambitions with its host institution's Strategic Plan
- A service to the wider research community beyond the needs of an institution's own researchers
- A high-quality teaching and learning experience provided to the wider HE community
- A contribution to widening access to promote and provide the opportunity of successful higher education to everyone who can benefit from it, by providing an access point to university facilities and through other community engagement and outreach work.

2.3 Scotland's Museums and Galleries Strategy 2023-30

Scotland's Museums and Galleries Strategy was developed by Museums Galleries Scotland with the vision that Scotland's museums and galleries are thriving, connected, and resilient organisations which are agile in embracing change. Trusted and valued by the widest diversity of Scotland's people, our collections, and the shared stories we tell, are accessible and

inclusive to all. The strategy centres around three thematic strands of Connection, Resilience and Workforce.

- The Connection strand explores how museums and galleries can help drive social change, impacting positively on the education and health and wellbeing of our communities and sense of place.
- The Resilience strand highlights the need to be equipped with the right skills and infrastructures to sustain an energetic and resourceful response to change by investing in skills and knowledge on collecting, ethical disposal and repatriation, and the resources for appropriate display, storage and care.
- The Workforce strand addresses the need to ensure jobs and workplaces are effective, fair and fulfilling for all.

2.4 Directorate workstreams

Forward planning within the Directorate of Digital & Information Services is focused on seven workstreams.

- Customer First
- Enhancing Business
- Enabling Research Excellence
- Enabling Education Excellence
- Next-Gen Work: Enabling Efficient Administration
- Embedding Security & Governance
- Knowledge for Tomorrow

3 AIMS FOR UNIVERSITY COLLECTIONS

University Collections will play a leading role in the national and international archive, museum, and rare book sectors, participating in collaborative projects and being well-regarded for research and innovative interpretation, consistent with the status as a Recognised Collection of National Significance. University Collections will play a prominent part in the life of the university, with high quality displays and activities attracting members of the university community and visitors, and contributing to the ambitions of a world-leading university to engage with its regional community.

Working within the context described above, University Collections will focus on five areas of work. It will enable research and tertiary education, provide excellent and accessible public engagement, develop and care for the collections, while ensuring that this is done within a caring, responsive and professional environment for all the people concerned.

The period of this plan will be one of restricted resources, so there will be a focus on ensuring efficiency and attracting resources. This will include a focus on identifying opportunities for income generation, philanthropy, applying for external funding for projects, and working in collaboration with others. Such opportunities will be considered alongside the priorities outlined here and an ethical appraisal of their implications.

4. UNIVERSITY COLLECTIONS OBJECTIVES FOR 2025-2030

OBJECTIVE A - ENABLE RESEARCH AND TEACHING

The collections form an important aspect of the University's research profile, being one of the unique strengths of the University. Research will reflect research themes that have been identified as institutional priorities as well as the strengths of the collection. Research relating to the collections, and activities using the collections, will be undertaken by academic researchers, University Collections staff, students, and members of the public, with results contributing to the understanding and documentation of the collections as well as personal and disciplinary research. The research support offered will aim to enable a wider range of activities, including community-led research, interdisciplinary research, non-textual research processes and outputs, and to ensure that opportunities for research are accessible and inclusive. All work will be guided by the *Research and*

Academic Engagement Policy and other policies as appropriate. These documents will be kept under review and revised as appropriate.

- A1 All collections will be freely available for all who wish to use the collections. Building on the Enhancing Collections Research Project which has embedded the use of an Enterprise Service Management system for collections enquiry and research support services, we will enable access to a wide range of material from across the collections in the Collections Research Room and other venues, and continue efforts to enhance the experience of people using the collections.
- A3 University Collections staff will support researchers in the development of research proposals, including participation in funding applications as Co-Applicants where involvement is significant. Efforts will be made to improve involvement in the grant process to ensure that the implications of proposed research and public engagement activities are fully considered.
- A4 Potential collections research projects making significant use of the collections will be identified for undergraduate and postgraduate research projects. Where such projects would require access beyond that normally available to researchers, the availability of staff resources will be assessed before a project is approved.
- A5 University Collections will contribute to a range of degree programmes, principally within the University of Aberdeen, offering learning opportunities and contributing to the University's teaching profile through access to collections and the expertise of University Collections staff. The contribution to teaching by University Collections will be considered as part of the annual Course Weightings Exercise to ensure that resources are allocated appropriately.
- A6 Teaching using the collections by academic staff will be encouraged, with relevant staff being appointed as Honorary Curatorial Fellows and given the required training to enable them to work with collections without the need for supervision by University Collections staff.
- A7 Where teaching within a specific discipline by a member of University Collections staff is significant, their appointment as Honorary Curatorial Fellows will be considered, enabling their involvement in assessment, supervision of students and course co-ordination.
- A8 Consideration will be given to courses being developed by University Collections staff, particularly those involving substantial use of the collections and online delivery.

OBJECTIVE B - PROVIDE EXCELLENT AND ACCESSIBLE PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT

The collections and academic research will lie at the heart of the public engagement programme, contributing to public lectures, schools programme, exhibitions and other events, and ensuring a wide disciplinary spread of activities. Engagement with the collections will aim to be enjoyable and centred on the needs of people, emphasising participatory practice and aiming to make a positive contribution to society. All work will be guided by the *Engagement, Exhibitions and Events Policy* and other policies as appropriate. These documents will be kept under review and revised as appropriate.

- B1 In conjunction with the development of new museum collections storage in Old Aberdeen, there will be work towards creating a high profile, long-lasting, accessible and challenging display that will use the diversity and richness of the collections to welcome people to the University.
- B2 There will be a focus on the Zoology Museum as the principal venue for family engagement. This will include infrastructure improvements to increase accessibility, the use of a wider range of material from across the collections in exhibitions, revised labelling, and increased emphasis on displaying current research and a focus on the biodiversity crisis. Weekend opening is an aim, alongside continued staffing during busy times of year.
- B3 The main venue for changing exhibitions will be the Gallery in the Sir Duncan Rice Gallery. Exhibitions will focus on displaying the collection in accessible yet challenging ways, making strong links between academic research, the collections and the public. The exhibition programme will be kept under constant review.

- B4 The involvement of academic staff and other experts as co-curators will be developed, including the full implementation of a project management approach to ensure clarity in roles and responsibilities.
- B5 The display of collections across the University will be continued, including a programme of relabelling to ensure that all works are appropriately interpreted. Small displays will be maintained and reviewed in the Medical School, Science Teaching Hub, Confucius Institute and King's College.
- B6 We will write an Access Plan to increase access to the collections. We will endeavour to ensure free access to venues, and to limit charges for events. Instead, donations will be encouraged, including the use of contactless technology, and identify opportunities to generate income where this is consistent with increasing access.
- B7 Effective communications and marketing will ensure high visibility, maximise the number of people participating, and foster integration within the University's engagement programmes, and the work of the Friends of Aberdeen University Library. We will develop user engagement, including greater opportunities for consultation and feedback.
- B8 There will be continued emphasis on participatory practice and co-production of the engagement and exhibition programme with academic staff, students and other communities, aiming to address biases and enable other expertise and perspectives to be embedded. Collaborative work with local and associated communities will aim to build from community engagement building up to co-production, responding to their needs and wishes.
- B9 There will be a strong online presence for University Collections, bringing together information about the collections, exhibitions and events, online resources and academic opportunities and increasing awareness of the international significance of the collections. The use of social media platforms will be kept under review
- B10 The events programme will continue to aim to build collaboration and ensure wider access. The programme will include events associated with wider festivals (such as Scottish Book Week, Explorathon and Doors Open Days), a series of research-led talks and discussions, and a small number of large-scale events for families and young people. Where possible, these will be organised in collaboration with other university sections to maximise impact.
- B11 The service for schools will be reviewed to ensure it is distinctive, sustainable and responsive to demand. The focus will be on visits to the University and the use of the collections for object-based learning in support of the Curriculum for Excellence.
- B12 The engagement programme will include a strong focus on addressing historic legacies of colonialism, slavery and other inequity, and embedding an anti-racist approach in all activities.
- B13 Services will be designed to be suitable for people of all ages and abilities, but with a strong focus on activities for young adults to reflect the significance of university students in our community. Efforts will be made to better understand the needs and wishes of the people we engage with, such as through a greater understanding of audience segmentation.
- B14 There will be a focus on working with people living in areas of multiple deprivation, of which many are close to the University. Opportunities will be sought for engagement with local schools in the St Machar Academy Associated Schools Group and other schools with pupils living in places that are recorded by the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation as being in the 20% most deprived areas.

OBJECTIVE C - DEVELOP THE COLLECTIONS

The strategic development of the collections will ensure they remain current, relevant and fit for purpose. All work will be guided by the *Collection Development Policy*, *Collections Documentation Policy*, *Access Policy*, *Digitisation Policy* and other policies and plans as appropriate. These documents will be kept under review and revised as appropriate.

- C1 Acquisitions to the collection will be selective and considered carefully within the *Collection Development Policy* to ensure a record of significant aspects of the history of the University, its

community and its region, support significant teaching, research and academic impact, enable display and public engagement activities, or to address previous biases and inequalities in acquisition practices.

- C2 Working within the *Collection Development Policy*, review and disposal projects will be carried out on selected collections to ensure that the collection is appropriate for long-term curation. Priorities will include scientific instruments, archaeological assemblages from excavations in Scotland, particularly identifying bulk environmental samples of low research potential, newspapers and magazines published outwith North-East Scotland, and archives where the association with the University is weak and where there are more appropriate repositories
- C3 There will be active focus on restitution and return, including proactive identification of ancestral remains, belongings and other items, as well as responding to proposals for returns.
- C4 Loans to other institutions will be considered within the availability of resources, particularly where they support income generation or as part of collaborative partnerships. This will include work relating to major international loan programmes in China and Canada.
- C5 Research-based reviews of the collections will be a priority, contributing to the documentation of the collection. This will include specific collections documentation projects, including a focus on the Latin American, African and Asian human culture collections, the provenance of the rare books, and the enhanced documentation of archival collections.
- C6 A priority will be 'connecting the collections' to make links between the archives, museum collections and rare books, such as where owners have given collections to the University but which were then split between the different domains.
- C7 Strategic digitalisation of the collections will be a significant aspect of all work. Working within the *Digitisation Policy*, this will include 2D and 3D digitisation of items in the collection and their online delivery in support of research, teaching and public engagement priorities, as well as income generation through digitisation for external users.
- C8 As part of the University Information and Records Management Plan, a digital preservation system will be implemented.
- C9 The Collections Management System, currently using CALM for archive and museum collections, ALMA for the rare books, ALMA-D for images and PRIMO for searching, will be reviewed, noting that Axiell will be withdrawing support for CALM.

OBJECTIVE D - CARE FOR THE COLLECTIONS

The strategic preservation and conservation of the collections will ensure they will remain sustainable. All work will be guided by the Collections Care, Conservation and Security Operational Policy, Digitisation Operational Policy, Documentation Procedures Manual and other policies and plans as appropriate. These documents will be kept under review and revised as appropriate.

- D1 The conservation of the collections will be professionally managed and a 10 year strategy put in place.
- D2 The conservation laboratory at Marischal College will be relocated and merged with the studio at the Sir Duncan Rice Library to form a unified service
- D3 The main focus for improvements to collections storage will relate to the development of new storage facilities, principally in Old Aberdeen, for museum collections that have been in Marischal College.
- D4 Working closely with the School of Geosciences, and with the support of the UKRI Research Infrastructure for Conservation and Heritage Science 'Ark of the North' project, new storage, research and teaching facilities will be developed in the Zoology Museum to house collections of animal bones and human remains
- D5 New storage and display facilities for the Pathology collection will be developed within the Integrated Mortuary at Foresterhill.

- D6 The Disaster Prevention Plan and associated documentation will be reviewed to address the merger of Museums and Special Collections, the increasing co-location of collection, and the need for documentation to be concise and effective.

OBJECTIVE E - ENSURE A CARING, RESPONSIVE AND PROFESSIONAL ENVIRONMENT

University Collections will actively engage with University and Directorate efforts to ensure that there is a healthy, safe and supportive environment for staff, volunteers, students, visitors and contractors. The needs of users will lie at the heart of everything that we do, including embedding a culture of continuous improvement, ensuring increasing efficiency, and the use of technological solutions to enhance services.

- E1 Staff development and training will focus on the annual review process as the means of identifying both professional and personal needs. Efforts will be made to ensure that opportunities are fairly shared across the team, recognising the requirements of different posts.
- E2 Communication within University Collections will be kept under review, with the aim of having weekly all-staff meetings, regular reports from the management team of University Collections to other staff, an annual away-day to discuss issues of shared importance, and close engagement with the wider Directorate. Attention will also be paid to ensuring social gatherings, and the provision of meeting space for breaks.
- E3 The University Collections team will have clearly defined roles, but will also be able to provide support outwith their immediate area of responsibility. Training and staff development will focus on opportunities for staff to engage with leading professional practice, supported by documented policies and procedures. There will be an increased effort to avoid the development of siloed working and to ensure that collaboration is supported wherever possible.
- E4 University Collections will lie at the heart of a network of partnerships, with a particular focus on the work of other sections of the university involved with collections and public engagement, as well as those responsible for research and teaching.
- E5 A priority will be given to close working with archives, libraries and museums in North-East Scotland, particularly those of Aberdeen City Council, and collaboration with other university collections. University Collections will also play an active role in developing partnerships with other museums in Scotland and beyond, aiming to provide leadership for the sector.
- E6 Close partnerships will be sought to widen collaboration beyond the sector, particularly focusing on work with the local communities, organisations and charities that have related aims.
- E7 There will be a review of opportunities to increase inclusion with a focus on ensuring equity. This will include recompensing collaborators in co-production where they are not otherwise being paid.
- E8 Alongside formal learning opportunities, students will be given opportunities to participate in the work of University Collections through its events and exhibitions, but also through a systematic volunteering programme (including an increased number of opportunities for groups of students) working with the collections and in support of public engagement (such as events), planned opportunities for internships. This will include increased liaison with Student Support, the Students' Association, student societies and course co-ordinators.
- E9 Detailed risk assessments and operating procedures will be developed for specific venues and activities to address security, health & safety and emergency procedures, with training provided for all staff and volunteers involved to ensure their effective implementation. This will include active participation in University planning to ensure safe public events.

5. PLAN RESPONSIBILITY AND REVIEW

This forward plan will be reviewed at least annually by the Management Team of University Collections, with changes to be approved by the Directorate of Digital and Information Services

Leadership Team. Associated forms, guidance and charges will be consistent with this policy and are approved by the Management Team of University Collections.

Approved by Directorate of Digital and Information Services Leadership Team, 13 January 2026.