Managing the scientific heritage of a medieval university: Uppsala University phase II

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Abstract

Since August 2008 a project at the Uppsala University Museum, the Museum Gustavianum, has been auditing the university’s unmanaged departmental collections. Two years into the audit the project has entered into its second phase and in this article we discuss the goals we have in mind as well as some of the problems that we have encountered. By way of two case studies we illustrate the development of the project and finally we discuss the results that we have already achieved as well as those that are expected.

Streszczenie

Opracowywanie dziedzictwa naukowego średniowiecznego uniwersytetu: Uniwersytet w Uppsali, faza II. Od sierpnia 2008 roku w Muzeum Gustavianum przy Uniwersytecie w Uppsali są prowadzone badania mające na celu opracowanie niezinwentaryzowanych kolekcji poszczególnych wydziałów. Dwa lata po rozpoczęciu projektu badania weszły w drugą fazę. Artykuł omawia założenia oraz problemy, które powstały w trakcie przeprowadzania badań. Na dwóch przykładach przedstawiamy rozwój projektu, już osiągnięte, a także oczekiwane wyniki.
Abstract

Since August 2008 a project at the Uppsala University Museum, the Museum Gustavianum, has been auditing the university’s unmanaged departmental collections. Two years into the audit the project has entered into its second phase and in this article we discuss the goals we have in mind as well as some of the problems that we have encountered. By way of two case studies we illustrate the development of the project and finally we discuss the results that we have already achieved as well as those that are expected.

Introduction: the Uppsala audit phase I

Most of the older European universities have collections of all imaginable sorts and of immense historical value. Uppsala University, founded in 1477, is no exception. Many of these fantastic items can be found at the university’s museums. However, there are also many departments at the university that have preserved items that are no longer used in either research or education. The vast majority of these collections are only known to the staff at the respective departments and in some cases hardly even to them, thus these collections go largely unmanaged. In the fall of 2008, a project aimed at auditing these unmanaged departmental collections commenced at the Museum Gustavianum.

1 Concerning the cultural heritage of UU see Bryggen över sekler: Museers och föremålssamlingars uppgifter, organisation och finansiering vid Uppsala universitet, Rapport från 1999 års museiutredning, Dnr 9053/98, Uppsala 1999.

2 Similar auditing projects have been conducted at a couple of universities. One project that has been an inspiration is reported in R. Wittje, O. Nordal, Universitetshistoriske samlinger ved NTNU:
The first phase of this project was aimed at gathering information as to how many of the university’s 83 different departments that actually have collections, how large they are and what sorts of items have been preserved. So when a collection was located, together with representatives from the department we would tour the collection, take notes of the objects, contact persons and take photos of some of the items and document how these items were being kept. After this initial investigation was done, recommendations were made to the university leadership regarding how these collections were to be taken care of in the future.

By the end of the first year, 31 different collections had been located. All of the items that have been located can fit into three different and very general categories. Firstly, there are collections of items that have been used to facilitate research and education such as telescopes, microscopes and other such instruments. Secondly, there are collections of study material such as rocks, plants and so forth. Thirdly, there are more miscellaneous collections of items that mark the interests of a department or mark milestones in its history. These items could be gifts to individuals at the department, ceremonial regalia or personal collections of different sorts that have been donated to the department, etc. These departmental collections constitute an important part of the university’s cultural heritage. Unfortunately a number of collections have already disappeared over the years and the preservation of the ones that remain is far from guaranteed.

The goals of phase II

Having identified the departmental collections, their scope and the manner in which they are kept, in phase II we wanted to take steps towards preservation and accessibility. This is unavoidably a long process, which has a real potential for becoming expensive. It is for this reason that our first step must surely be to convince the university leadership of the importance of these collections. There are a number of different ways to accomplish this. Firstly, exhibitions can be made which focus on telling the story of highlight items from the university’s history. Secondly, research articles about items from the university’s history could be written. These departmental collections constitute an important part of the university’s cultural heritage. Unfortunately a number of collections have already disappeared over the years and the preservation of the ones that remain is far from guaranteed.


versity’s collections can be published\(^5\). Thirdly, students can become involved with the collections either by way of research or education, or in various other ways. The point being to show the university leadership that what they have hidden away in closets and storerooms all over the campus is cultural capital. In other words, these collections make up an important and as yet untapped source which represents centuries of research and teaching excellence. Investing in the preservation of these items is not solely a money-losing proposition. If used properly, these collections can vastly enhance the reputation of the University\(^6\).

The next step is to inventorize each of the 31 different departmental collections. This is in itself a long process that ultimately must involve more people as it is a question of several thousand objects spread out all over the whole university campus. This is one of the reasons why we have taken the only step we thought possible and that is to use students to do what we refer to as field inventories\(^7\). Naturally this is not something that we would do without caution. Students are not archival specialists nor are they used to dealing with antiquities. The students work in close cooperation with both the department whose collection they are inventorizing and the museum itself. Great care is taken so that no harm comes to either the students or the antiquities that they are inventorizing.

Identification, however, is only the first step in a much longer process. The next step would be to ensure the security of the collection. After which the acquisition / de-acquisition process can begin. This allows the museum to analyze each individual item so as not to spend precious funds on the preservation of redundant items. This, however, must be done in a controlled environment where records can be made of that which is kept as opposed to that which is discarded. Then, once recorded and accepted into a collection, the items can be returned to a secure storage facility. An obvious prerequisite for this process however is additional financing so that a secure environment can be ensured for the items that are accepted into the collection.

After documentation and preservation, accessibility would be the final step in the process. With accessibility comes the ability to truly utilize the items in the collection. A collection that is accessible is a collection that will “work for its keep”.

### Problems encountered during phase II

If we are to achieve the above mentioned goals several problems will have to be solved. First, while the museum has been given responsibility for the departmental collections it has been given neither the finances nor the storage space to be able to properly care for them. What’s more, the items in these collections cannot be found on any list or

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5 One article has already been published about a collection identified by the project. See U. Josefsson, R. Flodin, *Julius Swanlunds farmacihistoriska samling*; „Uppsala Medicinhistoriska förening”, 2011, p. 116–121.
