

# Survey of Special Collections and Archives in the United Kingdom and Ireland

## Summary and Recommendations

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A co-publication of OCLC Research and RLUK

Survey of Special Collections and Archives in the United Kingdom and Ireland

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February 2013

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Dublin, Ohio 43017 USA

[www.oclc.org](http://www.oclc.org)

ISBN: 1-55653-451-5 (978-1-55653-451-5)

OCLC (WorldCat): 827339315

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Suggested citation:

Dooley, Jackie M., Rachel Beckett, Alison Cullingford, Katie Sambrook, Chris Shepard, and Sue Worrall (2013), *Survey of Special Collections and Archives in the United Kingdom and Ireland*. Dublin, Ohio: OCLC Research.

<http://www.oclc.org/resources/research/publications/library/2013/2013-01.pdf>.

## Foreword

Our special collections and archives are essential parts of our research libraries. Spanning millennia, they offer us insights into times past, distant lands, and the human mind. They contain every conceivable medium, from stone tablets to the born digital, and cover the whole range of human history and endeavour. Much of what is contained within our special collections is rare or unique, making our custodial role both challenging and hugely inspiring.

In 2010, OCLC Research published *Taking our Pulse*, a rigorous, evidence-based appraisal of the state of special collections in the US and Canada. This groundbreaking piece of research highlighted for us the absence over many decades of any equivalent evidence gathering in the UK and Ireland. We felt this especially keenly at a time when the role of special collections is under grave threat. The financial upheavals following the 2008 crash have affected both budgets for individual institutions and the structure of wider national and international bodies that have traditionally provided a framework of support for special collections. In addition there have been 'existential' threats resulting from changing social, educational and technological factors—threats that some holders of special collections have been tempted, almost Canute-like, to keep at bay.

RLUK believes that it is now time to view the tidal surge in complexity as the origin, not of calamity, but of power and of energy. This report shows that many institutions have already been far-sighted in identifying the momentum of change and using it creatively to redefine the measure, meaning and application of special collections for users, teachers, students, researchers and the wider community. These institutions recognise the richness of their special collections and their power to surprise and excite.

Much work remains to be done, however, and it is hoped that this report will provide curators, special collections staff, archivists and their institutions with the evidence and inspiration to further the process of the transformation that their collections utterly warrant and deserve.

The report is the product of a warm and fruitful collaboration between RLUK and OCLC Research. I would particularly like to thank OCLC Research for their openness to the idea of a UK and Ireland survey and the great willingness shown by Jackie Dooley and Merrilee Proffitt to adapt the original US survey to the conditions on this side of the Atlantic. They have been unfailingly generous and enthusiastic partners in a project that has worked across two

continents and many time zones. Thanks also go to the members of the RLUK UDC (Unique and Distinctive Collections) Board: Andrew Green (its Chair), Chris Banks, Anne Jarvis and Sarah Thomas (with invaluable assistance from Mike Mertens), who have precisely illuminated the larger issues at hand. The Survey Advisory Board has also provided invaluable practitioner insights into the questions we have asked, and have been integral to the writing of the report itself: Rachel Beckett, Alison Cullingford, Katie Sambrook, Chris Sheppard, Melanie Wood and Sue Worrall. Finally, I wish to express my gratitude to the community of special collections holders themselves, who have made this report possible thanks to their assiduous engagement with the survey.

David Prosser  
RLUK Executive Director  
February 2013

## Executive Summary

It has become widely recognised across the academic and research libraries sector that special collections and archives play a key role in differentiating each institution from its peers. In recognition of this, Research Libraries UK (RLUK) established the workstrand 'Unique and Distinctive Collections' in support of its strategic aims for 2011-2014. The UDC workstrand will identify ways in which special collections can 'make the most of their potential for research, teaching and community engagement.' This survey forms part of the overall project by gathering data to enable better understanding of the sector. It was conducted as a collaboration between RLUK and OCLC Research.

As this report reveals, we face numerous challenges if we are to maximise potential and bring special collections to the attention of those whose research or learning would benefit from their use.

A few of the most salient issues that emerged from the data:

- Alignment of special collections with institutional missions and priorities is an ongoing challenge.
- The special collections sector is undergoing a major culture shift that mandates significant retraining and careful examination of priorities.
- Philanthropic support is limited, as are librarians' fundraising skills.
- Use of all types of material has increased across the board.
- Users expect everything in libraries and archives to be digitised; national strategies for digitisation of rare and unique materials are therefore needed.
- Many cataloguing backlogs have decreased, while some continue to grow.
- One-third of archival collections are not discoverable in online catalogues.
- Management of born-digital archival materials remains in its infancy; upper management must actively support this important work to ensure progress.

We asked respondents to name their three 'most challenging issues.' The following were the most frequently cited:

- Outreach (broadly defined)
- Space and facilities (particularly for collections)
- Born-digital materials
- Collection care
- Cataloguing and archival processing

One hundred twenty-two academic and research libraries with significant special collections received invitations to participate in the survey. The rate of response was 67% (82 responses), including 100% of RLUK members.

This report presents a summary and analysis of the data for all respondents, for RLUK members, and for non-RLUK respondents, with a complete set of data figures and tables for each. Also included is a comparison of the RLUK data with that of the Association of Research Libraries (US) members who responded to an OCLC Research survey of the United States and Canada (Dooley and Luce, 2010).

## Key Findings

### *Outreach and User Services*

More than half of respondents stated that use of special collections by all types of users has increased over the past decade. Few, however, were able to categorise their users by type, even those in their primary user population: 90% of users were reported as 'other' (i.e., type of user not identified). This could be problematic if it results in an inability to demonstrate the extent to which the primary audience is being served.

User services policies are evolving in productive ways: three-quarters of institutions permit use of digital cameras, and up to 80% allow access to printed volumes and archival materials in backlogs. On the other hand, 81% do not permit interlibrary loan, even of reproductions, which could be considered a disservice to distant researchers.

Despite these very promising data, many respondents indicated that the need to embrace new modes of outreach and service presents enormous challenges. This appears to stem from two principal factors: staff skills are being stretched by the need to undertake new duties, and, as a result, fulfilment of 'traditional' responsibilities is thereby rendered more difficult.

## *Staffing*

As mentioned above, the need to undertake new duties is proving to be a major challenge. The areas most often mentioned in which education or training are needed to fulfil the institution's needs were born-digital materials, fundraising, intellectual property, and outreach.

The data show that the mean number of permanent special collections staff across the entire population is 16.6 FTE. The median is only six, which reveals wide variation across institutions. This comparison is very different when the data are analyzed by type of institution. Forty percent of respondents have experienced an increase in the number of professionally qualified staff in recent years, while 29% had an increase in support staff. Across the population, 7% of special collections staff are likely to retire within the next five years.

A trend exists toward integration of once-separate special collections departments—more than half of respondents have done so within the past decade.

## *Collections*

Insufficient space for collections, or inadequate space needing renovation to satisfy current needs, ranked very high among the 'challenging issues.' More than one-third of respondents have special collections in secondary storage. Deaccessioning of unwanted materials, some of which have not been processed many years after they were acquired, occurs for appropriate reasons but is practiced by only a few. Review of unprocessed collections for retention could be one way to contend with insufficient space.

As the size of general print collections stabilise, such as through shared print initiatives and digital publication, a need to add more storage space for special collections would become all the more conspicuous.

One-third of respondents have undertaken one or more new collecting emphases in recent years. Although informal collaborative collecting is fairly widespread on a regional basis, formal arrangements of any kind are rare.

## *Born-digital Materials*

The data clearly reveal a widespread lack of basic infrastructure for collecting and managing born-digital materials. Sixty percent cited lack of funding as an impediment, while only slightly fewer noted lack of both expertise and time for planning. As a result, many institutions do not even know what they have, access and metadata are limited, half of institutions have not yet assigned responsibility for managing this content, few have collected

more than a handful of digital formats, and virtually none have collected at the level that is warranted.

The amount of born-digital archival material reported is miniscule relative to the extant content that warrants being preserved in archives: the mean collection size is only 2,800 gigabytes, and the median is zero. It is striking that only two institutions hold 80% of the material reported, while five hold 99%. Clearly, academic and research libraries have barely scratched the surface of the born-digital challenge.

### *Digitisation*

Perceived pressure to digitise collections comprehensively seems to be ubiquitous. Ninety-seven percent of respondents have completed at least one special collections digitisation project and/or have an active digitisation programme that includes special collections. Progress is impeded, however, by the fact that less than half can undertake projects without special funding, while one-third have a recurring budget for digitisation.

One-third stated that they have done large-scale digitisation of special collections (defined as a systematic effort to digitise complete collections and employing production methods that are as streamlined as possible) rather than selecting and interpreting particular items.

More than 40% have licensing contracts with commercial vendors to digitise materials and sell access.

### *Archival Collections*

While shared archival online catalogues have proven to be successful discovery hubs, only one half of archival finding aids are accessible online. This percentage would increase to 82% if all extant finding aids available only at the host institution were converted. The remaining 18% (no finding aid exists) reveals the archival processing backlogs that remain. The progress made in backlog reduction may be due, at least in part, to the use of minimal-level processing techniques by 70% of respondents.

The institutional archives reports to the library in two-thirds of institutions, while nearly half have responsibility for records management (of active business records). The challenges specific to these materials should therefore be core concerns of most libraries—and it is in this context that the impact of born-digital content is currently the most pervasive.



## *Cataloguing and Metadata*

Backlogs of printed volumes have decreased at nearly half of institutions, while somewhat fewer backlogs have increased. For materials in other formats, increases and decreases are roughly equal. The continuing existence of backlogs may be attributable in part to the lack of sustainable, widely replicable methodologies to improve efficiencies.

The extent to which materials appear in online catalogues varies widely by format: 78% of printed volumes, 64% of archival materials, half of maps, and one-third of visual materials are accessible online.

## *Collection care*

The preservation needs of both audiovisual and born-digital materials are well known to be huge, and our data confirm this.

The most widespread collection care problems are conservation repair of materials to enable their use and rehousing into improved boxes and other housings. Issues related to quality of storage facilities were cited by about 40%.

## *Metrics*

A lack of established metrics placed some constraints on the data that respondents could contribute and our ability to analyse it closely. Norms for tracking and assessing user services, metadata creation, archival processing, digital production, and other activities would make it more feasible to establish reliable community norms against which to measure individual institutions.

We did not explore the particular purposes that would be served by deployment of a set of uniform metrics; it would be important to do so before undertaking such work.

## Recommendations

These recommendations were formulated by the authors of this report and are wholly based in analysis of the survey data. Participants in the RLUK Unique and Distinctive Collections symposium held at the University of Aberdeen on 29 March 2012 very usefully vetted an early version, which the authors then significantly revised.

Note: This is not a set of recommendations officially endorsed by RLUK or intended for RLUK action; a forthcoming report on the UDC workstrand will fulfil that need.

In general, under each category we consider the first recommendation a higher priority than the other(s) in that group (e.g., we feel that 1.1 would potentially have a higher impact than 1.2).

### 1. Staffing

- 1.1. Analyse the array of duties performed by special collections staff and identify the new skills and expertise needed to move the profession forward in alignment with institutional missions.
- 1.2. Develop a plan to provide educational and development opportunities in areas, both traditional and emergent, in which skills need enhancement across the sector.

### 2. External Funding

- 2.1. Develop a set of arguments to assist institutions with development of external sources of funding in support of special collections.

### 3. User Services

- 3.1. Develop an outreach toolkit, including case studies illustrating best practices, to build skills for presentation, promotion, and engagement with special collections.
- 3.2. Develop pricing models, templates, and shared policies for user-initiated digital scanning to encourage consistency across the sector.

#### 4. Born-digital Materials

- 4.1. Define the basic steps involved in initiating a program for managing born-digital archival materials to assist libraries that have not yet begun this work.
- 4.2. Investigate the feasibility of extending broadly across the sector the adoption of successful technical environments for managing born-digital materials that have been developed by a small number of UK institutions.

#### 5. Digitisation

- 5.1. Develop both a national strategy for continued digitisation of special collections and a national gateway for discovery of digitised content. As part of the strategy, identify sustainable funding strategies and international partners with which to collaborate.
- 5.2. Develop cost-effective models for large-scale digitisation of special collections that take into account the special needs of these materials while also achieving high productivity.

#### 6. Archival Collections

- 6.1. Convert print archival catalogues using affordable methodologies to enable Internet access. Develop approaches to modifying existing descriptions that strike a balance between incurring overheads and being effective for discovery. Develop tools to facilitate conversion from local databases.
- 6.2. Develop a shared understanding of the goals, characteristics, and benefits of 'simplified archival processing.'
- 6.3. Establish a methodology to assess unprocessed archival collections and develop a plan to make the national collection more fully accessible.

#### 7. Metrics

- 7.1. Determine the potential value and uses of metrics for reporting core statistics (e.g., collection size, users, outreach efforts, catalogue records) across the sector. If warranted, define categories and methodologies and encourage their use across the sector.

#### 8. Collection Development

8.1. Define key characteristics and desired outcomes of meaningful collaborative collection development, and encourage collaborations in areas of national significance.

8.2. Scrutinise local collecting policies to determine how well they reflect the institutional mission and can feasibly be implemented.

## 9. Cataloguing and Metadata

9.1. Collaborate to share expertise and create metadata for cartographic materials to enable improved discovery of the national collection.

9.2. Build on the findings of RLUK's 'hidden collections' survey of print materials to identify national cataloguing priorities.

## 10. Collection Care

10.1. Further inflect the COPAC collection management tool to meet the requirements of special collections. Investigate its potential for determining priorities for preservation and other management activities across the national print collection.

10.2. Take collective action to share resources for cost-effective preservation of at-risk audiovisual and born-digital archival materials.

## 11. Building community

11.1. Identify beneficial ways in which to build productive relationships across the diverse community of special collections libraries that participated in this survey.