

# Managing Collections by the University Library. ETH Zurich's Strategy 2015-2020

Stefan Wiederkehr  
*ETH Library Zurich, Switzerland*

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Stefan Wiederkehr, ETH-Bibliothek

## **Managing Collections by the University Library. ETH Zurich's Strategy 2015 – 2020**

### Abstract

The collections and archives of ETH Zurich encompass just under twenty facilities. Their diversity reflects the historic development of collections at the university and its modern potential for research and teaching. In 2014 ETH Zurich's Executive Board agreed on the *Strategy 2015 – 2020* for ETH Zurich's collections and archives.

This paper presents the strategic approach of ETH Zurich's Executive Board and focuses on the role of ETH-Bibliothek in collection management. In keeping with ETH Zurich's policy, ETH-Bibliothek coordinates the maintenance, preservation and further development of the university's collections. It acts as ETH Zurich's competence centre for metadata management and digitisation. The convergence of libraries, archives and museums in the digital age gives ETH-Bibliothek a key role in making the holdings of ETH Zurich's collections and archives accessible and mediating them.

### Introduction

ETH Zurich is one of the leading international universities for technology and the natural sciences. Founded in 1855, ETH Zurich now has more than 18,500 students from over 110 countries, including 4,000 doctoral students. About 500 professors currently work at ETH Zurich. Twenty-one Nobel Laureates have studied, taught or conducted research at ETH Zurich, underlining the excellent reputation of the university.

ETH Zurich's collections and archives encompass just under twenty facilities. Their organisation within ETH Zurich differs in as many ways as their external partnerships and collaborations. At least half of them are maintained or co-maintained by ETH-Bibliothek.

Within ETH Zurich, the heads of all the collections and archives are united in a plenary assembly. A commission appointed by the university's Executive Board ensures the coordination of the activities and serves as an advisory expert body within the university. ETH-Bibliothek's task "to coordinate the maintenance and further development of the culturally and historically important collections and archives at ETH Zurich" is anchored in Art. 22 of ETH Zurich's Organisational Ordinance from 2003 (ETH Zürich, 2015).

Until recently, the shared activities of the collections and archives of ETH Zurich were limited to just a few: they had a common presence on ETH Zurich's website. They were advertised in a collective flyer and a joint annual programme of evening tours for the public was put together.

### Status Determination 2013

As a result of an internal audit in 2011, the ETH Board recommended that ETH Zurich draft a coherent overall strategy for the collections and archives it owns or maintains. With a view to realising this recommendation, ETH-Bibliothek managed to gain an experienced collection expert in Dr Thilo Habel (Berlin), who, after several months of inspection, produced a status determination of ETH Zurich's collections and archives for internal purposes in 2013. This extensive, non-public report contains ninety-three concrete individual recommendations regarding the facilities, storage and organisation; issues concerning indexing, digitisation and the presentation of the holdings; and the involvement of the collections and archives in ETH Zurich's research, teaching and science marketing. The expert based his inspection on the questionnaire *Status Determination for Scientific University Collections* (2014, in German 2013) recommended by the Coordination Centre for Scientific University Collections in Germany. When I joined ETH Zurich in May 2014, the expert report had not been published or announced within the university. I soon realised three things:

1. If it is not the collection itself that commissions the status determination, it is essential that the commissioner actively indicate his goals, the procedure and possible outcomes. This is an essential condition of success.
2. It is not an easy task to set priorities and find a level of accurateness that appropriately addresses *different* target groups and stakeholders.
3. A status determination is not a strategy. The task recommended by the ETH Board was yet to be realised.

#### The 2014 Public Report and the Strategic Decisions by the Executive Board

Against this backdrop, I advised the commissioners to re-work the internal report compiled by the expert in such a way that it could be made accessible to the public. The brochure *Sammlungen und Archive der ETH Zürich: Wissenschaftliches Erbe für die Forschung der Zukunft* proved to be a success and was out of stock within a few months. An English translation of the second German edition (Habel & Wiederkehr 2015) is in the pipeline. This brochure serves a starting point for all future plans and decisions, which at the same time means that the original internal report written by the expert was not an official document, nor will it be in the future.

In November 2014, the Executive Board of ETH Zurich agreed on the one-page *Strategy 2015–2020* for its collections and archives (ETH Zurich, 2014). At the same time and in a follow-up decision in March 2015, it agreed on the organisational reforms proposed by ETH-Bibliothek and granted funds for the strategic development of the collections and archives.

#### The *Strategy 2015–2020* and its Priorities

In 2011, the German Council of Sciences and Humanities published Recommendations on Scientific Collections as Research Infrastructures. According to these recommendations, the four most important functions of scientific collections are:

- use in research
- use in teaching
- use in the transfer of scientific knowledge to the public
- the preservation of cultural heritage (Wissenschaftsrat, 2011).

Of course, these functions are closely related.

In ETH Zurich's policy, the first purpose is the most important. Collections are research infrastructures: "ETH Zurich's collections and archives ... have a role to play as reference collections for current research and teaching (research *in* collections) and in the history of science (research *about* collections)." So far, the focus of ETH Zurich's collections has not been on presenting its holdings in exhibitions to the public. Most collections are hidden in stack-rooms. In the future, however, their potential should be exploited: "ETH Zurich uses its collections and archives strategically as a science marketing instrument ... In their uniqueness, [the collections and archives] reinforce the university's identity." Preserving cultural heritage is also an issue: The *Swiss Inventory of Cultural Property* (Bundesamt für Bevölkerungsschutz BABS, 2010) lists the majority of ETH Zurich's collections and archives as collections of national importance: "The preservation and scientific development of this cultural heritage is part of ETH Zurich's strategic orientation and the services it performs at national level." The *Strategy 2015–2020*, thus, directly addresses each of the four functions mentioned.

First of all, ETH Zurich operationalises its strategy in the digital environment. This corresponds to its identity as one of the world's leading technical universities. Therefore, the main goal is to meet the highest quality standards in the digitisation of analog objects, create metadata that meets the current standards of information science for the digital objects and present them on innovative platforms. This includes standardisation, interoperability and persistent identifiers. The *Strategy 2015–2020* reflects an important global trend: the convergence of libraries, archives and museums in the digital age. Libraries, archives and museum collections were separated into three different institutional types with clear profiles over the last few centuries. The dividing lines were copies versus unique specimens and texts versus non-textual objects. Today, these differences are becoming blurred before our very eyes: in a time when an increasing number of digital copies are accessible via the internet, the distinction between originals and reproductions is becoming increasingly more meaningless. These days, three-dimensional objects can be scanned and depicted digitally as easy as textual "flatware".

Libraries in general and ETH-Bibliothek in particular started indexing and describing their holdings electronically before archives and museums did. And their experience in data management is even greater. The same goes for digitisation in high quality and great quantities, and the handling of material that exists exclusively in digital form. The reversal of the historical divergence of libraries, archives and museum collections predestines ETH-Bibliothek, with its expertise, to assume a leading role in mediating the holdings of ETH Zurich's collections and archives and making them accessible in the digital age.

The *Strategy 2015 – 2020* allows ETH Zurich's departments to accomplish projects together with ETH-Bibliothek that render their collections visible in the global scientific community in a way that befits their importance.

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