

## The British Museum Research Strategy

### 1. Introduction

- 1.1 Research is one of the most important means whereby Trustees fulfil their obligation to ensure that public benefit is generated from the collection - through the creation and dissemination of –innovative ideas and new knowledge about the history of humankind as represented by the objects that the British Museum maintains and displays. British Museum research speaks not just to the academic community, but to the whole world.
- 1.2 The Museum's research programme is already an outstanding success. This strategy seeks to build on this success and sets out our ambitions for the future. It reaffirms the Museum's commitment to supporting research of the highest quality to ensure that the collection can inspire, inform and challenge our audiences now, and in the future. In order to deliver it, we will need to sustain and develop expertise in a broad range of academic disciplines, including anthropology, archaeology, art history, conservation and collections care, history, museology, and the relevant physical and life sciences.
- 1.3 The strategy is intended to shape the type, scale and range of research carried out, commissioned or supervised by staff across the Museum. It will guide Heads of Departments and individual curators, scientists and other staff expected to carry out research to plan their future activities and publications. It will assist the Museum in coming to decisions concerning the allocation of money, staff time, studentships and other resources, and for identifying staffing needs of the Collections Directorate. Research carried out in the Museum should reflect and deliver the objectives of the strategy.
- 1.4 This strategy builds on the achievements of the *British Museum Research Strategy 2010 to 2015*. It is closely related to the Museum's strategies on display, digital, archives, international activity, and collections care. *The British Museum Science and Conservation Research Strategy*, agreed in 2014, specifically addresses the ways which scientific research will deliver aspects of the wider research strategy.
- 1.5 This document first outlines the Museum's research objectives, then outlines a new structure for how research groups will be organised. It lists the main risks to the successful delivery of the strategy, and identifies measures of success and discusses implementation. Above all, it seeks to foster creativity and innovation.

### 2. Objectives

- 2.1 The British Museum should help our audiences, both academic and general, to learn, understand more about and be inspired by human history from all parts of the world through the objects in its collection and, by extension, from the collections of partners and lenders.
- 2.2 To this end the Museum actively promotes research of the highest quality by its own staff, and supports the research of others. This research is intended to advance the future care, display and public understanding of the history of humanity as represented by the objects in the British Museum's collection and other collections, and to help people learn, understand and be inspired by human history through objects.

- 2.3 The Museum will achieve this vision through research carried out, initiated or supported by the Museum's staff that seeks better to understand the following questions arising from the collection and its implications for the history of humankind:
- 2.3.1 **How the 'lives' of objects – from their making, use, reception, loss, collection and later use – can contribute to their understanding.**
  - 2.3.2 **How objects can reveal the social, cultural, religious, creative, economic and political history of their makers, users, owners, depositors and collectors.**
  - 2.3.3 **How objects can be best cared for in order to ensure their preservation for future generations of researchers and the general public.**
  - 2.3.4 **How objects and their histories can most effectively be presented, exhibited and explored through different media and forms of public and learning programmes.**
- 2.5 **Wider activities:** Other Museum activities may also lead to research projects and outputs, especially where research provides an effective means to support partnerships, training, or support for the Museum's international and UK programmes.
- 2.6 **Quality, not quantity:** There will be an emphasis on highlighting the quality of the Museum's research programme and outputs. The Museum aims to continue to be seen as a centre of high-quality collections-based research. We want to increase the proportion of our research publications that would be recognised by external peers as “central points of reference” and as “making a substantial contribution” to their fields.
- 2.7 **Galleries and Permanent Displays:** A key objective is to underpin the development of future permanent displays and galleries through long term research on the objects in the collection and the history of their makers, users and collectors.
- 2.8 **Public Programme:** The research programme should feed the Museum's exhibition and public programme in London, across the UK and internationally and, in turn, the public programme should also lead to academic publications and further research projects.
- 2.9 **Career Development:** The Museum wants to ensure that its staff have the appropriate skills and experience to develop, deliver, win funding for, and lead high-quality research projects. This encompasses the recruitment and retention of appropriately skilled staff, the provision of training, and the proper development and management of research careers.
- 2.10 **Funding:** To deliver this strategy successfully, the Museum will raise adequate external funding to support the programme, with an emphasis on increasing the proportion of external funding that will contribute to salary and other core budget costs.
- 2.11 **Partnerships:** The Museum will work closely with other major museums, collecting and heritage organisations, as well as universities, in the UK and internationally to conduct, support and promote collections-focused research.

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2.12 **Profile:** The Museum will raise the profile and promote the achievements of its research programme in its public communications and to appropriate stakeholders and supporters.

### 3. Research Groups

- 3.1 To support the fundamental objectives outlined in points 2.1, 2.2. and 2.3 above, the Museum will build five research groups. These will bring together staff working in different departments, different disciplines, and different parts of the world to identify common issues and to work collaboratively across the world and across the collection, while also encouraging projects and activities that promote responses across the groups. The groups will not be mutually exclusive, and staff will be able to contribute to discussions across the groups.
- 3.2 The five research groups will be:
- Human origins to the first cities, 3 million to 3000 BC
  - Ancient worlds, 3000 BC to AD 500
  - The world AD 500 to 1700
  - The modern world, 1700 to the present
  - Collecting histories and questioning the world
- 3.3 Four of the research groups are defined chronologically, in line with the categories applied in the proposed Display Strategy which advocates concentrating our displays on human origins and the ancient world on the ground floor and dedicating the first floor galleries to the world after about AD 500. The proposed Modern World group is intended to reflect the comparable emphasis on this period in other collections strategies and identifies this as a research area in need of strategic emphasis in the coming years.
- 3.4 The research groups are intended as a means of bringing together staff working in the same broad period of human history in different parts of the world and on different areas of the collection. The fifth group will focus on the history of the collection and how museums and collecting have both shaped and challenged our understandings of the past and of human cultural achievement.
- 3.5 The research groups are intended to support the growth and re-display of the Museum's collection, by ensuring that future galleries are underpinned by long-term, up-to-date research.
- 3.6 Each group will have a research leader who will be tasked with identifying research questions, themes, and priorities. These may be particular to one group (e.g., a focus on monumental sculpture would, given the strengths of the Museum's collection, naturally be led from the group covering the ancient world), or may cut across a number (e.g., a focus on bio-archaeology or religion and society, would involve more than one group). The groups will work closely together to generate the right ideas and questions across the collection, and many staff will contribute to more than one.
- 3.7 In support of objectives 2.3.3 and 2.3.4 above, the Museum also wants actively to pursue high-quality research into a) collections care and b) the presentation of the collection in exhibitions, galleries, digital media, and learning and community programming. Each of these two areas will have also a research leader.

## **4. Challenges**

Successfully achieving the objectives outlined in this strategy will require senior management, heads of departments and research-active staff to address several demanding challenges and risks.

### **4.1 Integrating research with other museum priorities**

A significant challenge will be the development and planning of curatorial resource: how to integrate this strategy's aims with other Museum priorities. This will require the setting of clear, realistic goals and deadlines through the planning and line-management process, and the effective monitoring of their delivery.

### **4.2 External Partnerships**

The aims of this strategy will only be achieved if we continue to work closely together with partners – universities and museums – across the country and across the world, building on existing successful relationships and identifying new ones.

### **4.3 Pressures on funding**

There may be increasing competition for research funding in the coming period. We will need to look beyond traditional sources of external funding, especially in the private sector, and prepare outstanding applications. The Museum's own resources will need to be carefully targeted.

### **4.4 Management and research**

Implementing the strategy will require skilled research and financial administration – both centrally and within research-active departments – to support the initiation and management of the research portfolio. It will also require clear leadership across the Museum for the individual objectives identified in the strategy.

### **4.5 Research students**

Museum-supported PhD students will make a significant contribution to delivering this strategy. This makes the successful management of the Museum's research student programme of major importance. Greater attention to the choice of research topics, to supporting students, and ensuring that student research leads to quality outcomes will be necessary.

### **4.6 Space and facilities**

Provision of appropriate and flexible spaces at the Museum and other facilities will be needed to support team-based projects and facilitate research requiring long-term access to large quantities of material, and to make provision for visiting researchers and research students.

### **4.7 Digital humanities & curation**

As the Museum's research increasingly uses digital methods, there will be major challenges in terms of technical infrastructure and resources, staff skills, collaborative procedures and the curation of resulting data. The Museum's Digital Strategy will ensure that we can support the extra requirement for tools, equipment, support, training and data storage. Collaboration with external digital humanities organisations and universities will also be important in realising the potential of digital methods to enhance the Museum's research activities.

#### 4.8 **Library and archives**

Important aspects of this strategy will depend on the efficient organisation of, and proper support for, the Museum's libraries and archives. Sustained access to paid-for online resources, journals and e-books will be essential to the success of this strategy. Partnership arrangements will need to be investigated, for which the new Knowledge Quarter may provide a fruitful context.

#### 4.9 **Open Access**

The Museum will also need to find financially and technologically sustainable ways to be open-access compliant.

### 5. **Measuring success**

5.1 This strategy outlines clear objectives the success of which can be seen through the type, range and quantity of research, funding, publications and other resulting outputs that support each. We will not adopt the same criteria as are current in the university sector. For quarterly reporting purposes, the strategy will be monitored against the following KPIs:

- 5.1.1 **Projects:** we will aim to maintain a portfolio of 25 key research projects and 15 PhD projects that clearly support one or more of the above objectives.
- 5.1.2 **Publications:** we aim to achieve an annual target of 130 books, exhibition catalogues and peer-reviewed articles or papers either written by current Museum staff, or by former staff and BM-supported students where these are the result of Museum projects.
- 5.1.3 **External Funding:** we will aim to raise a rolling total of £6 million over 3 years, with at least 3 exhibition, gallery or programming projects over the 3 years securing external research funding and at least 15% of all funding contributing towards existing salary or other core costs.

5.2 However, certain crucial measures of success will be qualitative, as follows:

- Changing and enhancing public understanding through exhibitions, performance, artistic responses, publications, broadcast, and digital projects
- Making a significant difference to the stories we can tell about the past with our collection
- Improving how we present, conserve, document and store the collection
- Doing research that peers in museums and universities point to as being significant, essential, and exciting
- Producing a significant proportion of our publications that would be regarded by any review of our research as being *central points of reference* for, and/or will make a *substantial contribution to*, their fields

These will form the criteria for regular external reviews of Museum research (see 6.3).

## **6. Implementation and Governance**

- 6.1 Immediately upon approval, this strategy will begin to be implemented through the development of a three-year rolling research plan. This will contain current and planned research activities, projects and publications mapped against the objectives and measures of success outlined above. All collections departments will be expected to contribute to delivering the strategy as appropriate to their staff numbers, academic disciplines, and other commitments. Relevant parts of the Public Engagement Directorate will also contribute.
- 6.2 Each research group will require clear leadership to develop a vision, priorities, and themes for the development of new research activities and partnerships. These will then feed into the three-year rolling research plan.
- 6.3 In 2016 the Museum will organise a review of the quality of the Museum's research and its outputs at the start of the lifetime of this Strategy as a report to the Research Committee to assess its current success against the qualitative criteria set out in 5.2 above. The review will include external, international level researchers and its impact and usefulness will be assessed. If useful, it will be repeated towards the close of the lifetime of the Strategy.
- 6.4 The delivery of the Strategy will be monitored by the Research Committee at its biannual meetings, and by the Standing Committee and the Board through the quarterly Operating Plan reports and the annual report on research.
- 6.5 The content of this Strategy will be reviewed no later than in financial year 2020-21.

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