The past of the future - collecting computers

Bjarne Toft
Mathematics and Computer Science
University of Southern Denmark
DK-5230 Odense M
Denmark
btoft@imada.sdu.dk

Computers have changed society profoundly - the way we work, the way we communicate, the way we behave socially. Yet there is no or very little interest in creating collections illustrating how this revolution for mankind has come about - most universities consider outdated computers as garbage rather than valuable objects of the past to be used in the future to understand the changes. Also museums often find computer related material too new and too common to be of interest.

This talk will focus on ideas and problems related to creating new university collections for future use in research and teaching, exemplified by experiences in preserving, exhibiting and using outdated computer related material at the University of Southern Denmark.

Universities are banks of knowledge – researchers collect data, information, objects. Is it possible and valuable today – from such material – to create new university collections of interest and use in the future? If all five of the following questions have positive answers the answer should be YES. Is the problem with a collection of vintage computers that it does not give clear positive answers to all five criteria?

- Authenticity – is the material authentic/original?
- Uniqueness, rarity – are such items difficult to find/get hold of?
- Usefulness – can such items help to solve scientific problems (of say a technical or historical nature)?
- Appearance – are such items catching and interesting to look at and study – do they create curiosity?
- Feasibility – are the needed physical and work related resources available?