

The Tomorrow People:

Entry to the Museum Workforce

Research report to the Museums Association and the University of East Anglia by Maurice Davies, April 2007

Appendix 3 Advice for individuals

- 1 Getting a first job
- 2 Should I take a museum-studies course?
- 3 How to thrive in the first few years of a museum career

1 Getting a first job

In addition to things listed in Box A, What employers want, the following will increase your chances (although will not guarantee a reasonable job will be found):

Varied relevant work experience (paid or unpaid)
Understanding of the specific role and organisation being applied to (don't do blanket, standard job applications)
Focus, commitment and determination
Patience
Flexibility about the type and location of work
Financial support
Good contacts
Getting your foot in the door (or several feet in several doors)ⁱ
Luck (being in the right place at the right time)
A good museum-studies course – see below

Also see sections 3 and 4 of the report The Tomorrow People: Entry to the Museum Workforce and bear in mind that, 'the lack of agreement between museums as to what qualifications and experience are required for different posts...means that aspiring museum workers may spend considerable time gaining skills which may not be needed'ⁱⁱ.

2 Should I take a museum-studies course?

There is no simple answer to the question of whether an individual should undertake a museum-studies course.

There are a few circumstances in which it is highly likely to be valuable:

- If you are already working in museums and take a course part-time to broaden and deepen your knowledge (especially if your employer will support you or at least agrees it is appropriate for you to do it)
- If you are a career changer and have already tried to gain work in museums, but have regularly met with the response that while your transferable skills are strong you need to increase your knowledge of museums (although a period of structured and varied volunteering and casual work might be more useful and cheaper, if less interesting)
- You have thought critically about museums, have ideas about changing and improving them and want to extend and deepen your thinking to increase your influence on them
- You are interested in continuing your studies and interested in museums, perhaps even heading towards a PhD

It is more likely that you are seeking a museum career and want the course to help you get there. In that case, there are a few things to bear in mind:

- The high level of competition for entry-level museum jobs means that some people never get a reasonable museum job, however keen they are, and whatever qualification and volunteering they do – although many people do, of course. This is no different to any other popular area of work. Think about whether you can get what you might need, as set out in boxes A and B
- Remember a qualification doesn't guarantee a job. It varies between courses, and every individual student has a different experience, but overall perhaps a quarter of graduates of museum-studies courses don't end up working in museums or related organisations. About a third get work in museums, but in jobs that do not make the most of their qualification. The good news is that about 40% of graduates are in reasonable jobs one to four years after completing the course. (Unfortunately the data isn't yet available to show how these numbers vary between courses.)
- A museum-studies qualification will help you get on the shortlist for some jobs – and may give you the edge if you're up against someone with similar skills and experience, but no qualification
- You'll probably need to get a fair amount of voluntary experience, too – unless you are exceptionally well suited to museum work
- If you *are* exceptionally well suited to museum work, you might well be able to get a job in museums without a museum-studies qualification – many people do, especially in areas such as curation in national museums, learning and community work (although for these you'll probably need paid or voluntary experience and perhaps a qualification such as a PGCE or a subject-specialist MA or PhD)
- Do some voluntary or casual work before you apply for any courses. This will help you decide whether museum work is in fact for you (just because you like visiting museums, or the subjects they deal with, doesn't mean you're suited to work there – eating in a restaurant doesn't mean you want to be a chef, after allⁱⁱⁱ). It will also help you decide which areas of museum work and what types of museum interest you. 'Many students often don't know much about the variety in museum work when they begin a masters course and it is only after a while that they realise, for example, that they want to work in [museum] education and so should really have done some other course or form of training.'^{iv}
- Think about other routes to museum work. A more widely useful qualification, such as a PGCE or marketing or business studies, combined with voluntary or casual work, might help you get considered for some types of museum work - and will be recognised by other

types of employer if at some point in the future you decide to give up on museum work. A university career adviser gave an example: 'A student who would like to serve the arts and heritage sector one day is well advised to do an accountancy internship and job (= training and internationally recognised qualification) and then go on and manage the finances of an arts organisation [and] have a senior and influential arts post by the age of 28, rather than being on £11,000 and demoralised.'^v

If you decide a museum-studies MA is probably right for you, then you need to take care to select the right one. Think about the following:

- Investigate several courses. Some are listed on the Museums Association website, some advertise in *Museums Journal*; the fullest list is published each year in the *Museums and Galleries Yearbook*
- Some were 'validated' by an organisation called CHNTO. Note that the CHNTO does not exist any more and the validation system is not currently being renewed
- Some are recognised by the Museums Association. This means the course gives a 'short cut' to the AMA (see box J), which might be worth taking into account as it may have an impact a few years into a museum career, but recognition does *not* refer directly to the way in which the course prepares people to enter the museum workforce
- Is the course aimed at the kinds of jobs and museums that interest you? Ask the course – but also ask around in museums. By now you'll have some voluntary experience and this will have given you a few contacts in museums. Ask them (and ask them if they would be willing to ask their colleagues working in similar areas in other museums) what qualifications they have – do they include the one you are considering?
- Ask the course for full information on the jobs that the last couple of years' graduates have got – are they really the kinds of job you want? To decide this, you need more than just a list of museums that former students have worked in. If the course can't provide detailed information, this might suggest that they are not too well informed about the jobs their students get
- Try asking the course what percentage of their recent graduates *aren't* working in museums
- Check out the amount and quality of work experience that the course will give you. Is it enough?
- Ask about the range of people who will teach you, both university staff and outside lecturers. Can they give you the balance you want of theory and practice? Do enough of them know their way round the workings of a modern museum?
- Try to get a sense of whether the course is really interested in having you as a student. Are they asking you about your motivations and checking that you know what you want from the course, or are they just sending out an offer by return of post? If a course makes you an offer it might be because they think you're well suited for museum work – or it might be because applications are low that year and they're offering places to every applicant with a 2.1 because they need the fees.
- If you're feeling brave, ask the course for their assessment of your likelihood of having a successful museum career
- If you take the course part-time or by distance learning, you'll definitely want to get extra work experience

Some courses might dislike you asking these questions, but remember it's your career at stake. Choosing the right course could be a more important decision than choosing what house to buy. One unhappy graduate wrote: 'My suggestion for all those considering taking a museum-studies MA is this: ask some very awkward questions and think long and hard before spending your cash and taking the course.'^{vi}

3 How to thrive in the first few years of a museum career

You've got that coveted first job. Now what? To progress you ideally need the good fortune of an employer, or at least a line manager, committed to training and development. Otherwise, in addition to excelling at the day job you need to get:

- Experience and understanding of a wide range of museum work
- Depth of skill and knowledge in a specialist work area or subject
- Management competence and leadership abilities
- Understanding of broader contexts – social, economic, political and cultural

The balance between specialism and range is a tricky one. Early specialisation can severely limit career options, but people who are wholly generalist can find it hard to get middle-management jobs (although good generalists tend to find it easy to get senior-management jobs). Larger museums often inadvertently push people towards a specialism. In smaller museums it can be hard to focus on any particular area in depth.

To do this you need to:

- Be self-directed
- Be demanding of your employer (be curious and slightly cheeky)
- Seize opportunities
- Take responsibility
- Be entrepreneurial and commercially aware
- Be decisive and imaginative
- Think strategically
- Improve your understanding of people and organisations
- Get experience of working in teams and partnerships
- Network with people in other museums and other types of museum work
- Attend plenty of conferences
- Organise job swaps, shadowing or secondments
- Keep studying and learning
- Do the AMA and be ambitious about the goals you set yourself
- Learn how to manage people, budgets, projects, performance – and yourself
- Take a leadership course (there's a growing number aimed at 'future leaders')

If you're on a narrowly focused short-term contract with no development opportunities, do all you can to leave.

Your chances of progression will be improved if you are:

- Flexible about the kinds of job you apply for
- Able to move where the work is
- Always looking for new opportunities
- Able to cope with uncertainty (and, at first, without much money)

This list is aimed primarily at people who expect to move between museums in the course of their career, rather than have a career in a single large museum, where a few factors may be different as many jobs will be extremely specialised.

ⁱ A museum conservator explains ‘You have to be a little cleverer than sitting round waiting for jobs to be advertised. Towards the end of my degree I wrote to each local council within close proximity of family members... I achieved three paid contracts as a result of this direct mailing. In the short periods between contracts I volunteered as a conservator at a local museum with a leaning towards my preferred specialism, in order to get valuable hands-on experience. This gave rewards on various levels: the people there offered immeasurable support whilst I continued my job search, it helped bolster my CV and was also viewed favourably by prospective employers, as evidence of my enthusiasm and my willingness to progress. I have since secured my first full-time position.’ Clarke, 2006

ⁱⁱ Holmes, 2005

ⁱⁱⁱ Analogy drawn by respondent 18

^{iv} Respondent 7

^v Respondent 17

^{vi} Michelle Scott, full (unpublished) version of letter to *Museums Journal* (edited version published June 2006, p16)