

Collections knowledge consultation: summary of findings

In Autumn 2008, the Museums Association (MA) published a consultation document on collections knowledge. For some time, people in museums have expressed concern that museums are running short of the knowledge they need to make the most of their collections and to bring them alive for the public. The MA wanted to explore the truth of this perception and to establish a set of priorities for action, where action is needed. This document summarises the findings from the consultation.

1. Developing expertise

The consultation document asked respondents what measures they thought would help people who work on collections in museums to develop their expertise.

Respondents emphasised the need for people working with collections to have dedicated time to spend researching the collection, and developing their knowledge. Respondents were positive about the Monument Fellowships from the MA, which seek to give retiring specialists the opportunity to work with their successors to pass on their knowledge. They agreed that the MA should try to fund and organise a parallel programme to invest in knowledge development in the middle of peoples' careers.

Such a scheme would benefit individuals participating directly. However, part of its value would be in raising the status of collections knowledge. Respondents suggested that there is currently some perception that developing a specialism can actually be an impediment to promotion. This may or may not be true. Perhaps it is more the case that people with expertise often do not want generic management positions that would take them away from the collection and so count themselves out of some promotion opportunities. However, a high-profile scheme that emphasised the importance of developing collections knowledge would be helpful in countering this perception or misperception.

Museums need access to good levels of knowledge about their collections if they are to enable people to experience those collections as richly as possible. Respondents commented that there has, in the past, been a perception of an ideological divide within museums, with those interested in developing collections knowledge on one side and those with a commitment to public service and the public-facing role of the museum on the other. This divide, if it ever existed, certainly should not persist. Respondents stressed that developing collections knowledge should be seen as an essential part of public service for people who work in museums. Collections knowledge is not for the individual curator or specialist's benefit, but for the public.

In order to go on to develop more specialised knowledge, people working with collections in museums need certain skills and basic knowledge necessary as a foundation. For example they need to know how to handle objects and to identify common materials. Some respondents suggested that new entrants to the profession have typically had little hands-on experience with objects as part of their training, and so have few of these basic skills. The sector needs to find ways to provide pathways into knowledge for people interested in developing collections expertise without this foundation. This is partly about training, but also about encouraging an environment in museums within which people feel able to admit to shortfalls in their knowledge and so take opportunities for informal learning. Some respondents noted that junior professionals can feel reticent about admitting what they don't know.

Respondents made various suggestions about possible new training approaches. It is clear that there are cost-savings to be made if organisations that offer training share resources and work together to develop standard training packages. Museums should also consider ways of supporting people who have benefitted from specialist training to pass that knowledge on. Respondents also suggested that training resources, and even training sessions, could potentially be shared with the public. Museums should not under-estimate the public appetite for specialised knowledge.

Respondents also noted that it would be inappropriate to consider the development of expertise in museums in isolation. Museums also need to have better strategies for collaborating with external experts. This is particularly pertinent to the discussion of research, covered in the next section.

2. Museums and research

Research is obviously a vital element in building collections knowledge. Museums should both undertake research themselves and support research into the collections by external researchers. Our discussion document argued that museums need to start from a broad and inclusive understanding of what research actually is. Research in museums should be understood as a spectrum, with in-depth study leading to scholarly publication at one end, and simple information gathering at the other. Respondents endorsed this view. However, museums do not always recognise activities on this spectrum as research. For example, respondents noted that the kind of basic information-gathering and checking that people who work with collections undertake all the time in response to public enquiries is often not recognised as research, and nor is the preparation for temporary exhibitions and displays.

The consultation tested out the idea that museums should be required or encouraged to develop research plans. Respondents saw the benefit in

producing such plans. For example, for some museums, a research plan could be a way of promoting collaboration or attracting funding. Respondents were open to the idea that having a research plan in place could be a requirement of Accreditation, but stressed that further work was needed to support museums in developing an understanding of what research is before it could be made a compulsory requirement. A first step towards this would be to establish an understanding in the sector that research, understood in the broader sense outlined above, was something that all museums could both support and undertake. Many smaller museums think that research means high-level academic research and is beyond their scope. Respondents suggested that, for most museums, research plans should not be standalone documents but should be built into plans that museums already have, such as collections management plans. This reflected a view that research should be seen as linked to exhibition programming and acquisition not as a completely standalone activity.

As well as promoting internal research into the collections, museums should also support and encourage research into collections by external researchers. However, respondents had some concerns about whether all museums were in a position to do this effectively. Some suggested that some people with responsibility for collections in museums may lack the basic skills and knowledge to be able to identify which parts of their collection would be of interest to external researchers, and that these building blocks need to be put in place before museums attempt to reach out to external researchers. It is certainly the case that museums cannot work collaboratively with researchers without a reasonably sophisticated knowledge of their collections and the broader subject context. But it should still be possible to publicise the contents of the collection and facilitate some basic access to stored collections: otherwise, what are they for?

The consultation also explored the idea that museums might be encouraged, or even required, to adopt and publish a research charter, setting out the levels of access and service external researchers could expect. A few museums already have such documents, but they are still far from common. Too many museums do not standardise access arrangements with the result that some researchers get more generous access than others. In answering this question, respondents tended to focus on using a researchers' charter as a means of managing demand and workload for those responsible for supporting research, rather than seeing its potential for promoting and encouraging research. Providing access to collections for researchers should be seen as a valuable opportunity for museums, not just a chore.

3. Working with academic partners

While research in museums does not always have to mean working with academics, universities are nevertheless important potential partners for museums. Museums could do much more to build effective partnerships with universities. The consultation document noted that there were under-exploited

opportunities for museums to collaborate with universities and to access academic funding. Respondents noted that there have been some helpful initiatives, particularly from the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC), to explore the potential for collaboration between museums and universities, but thought that museums needed to be much more active about seeking opportunities. Some suggested that museums needed to work harder to get all their staff enthused about working with universities, and more aware of what was involved. Many museums would need to improve their own research skills before they could understand how to work with academics.

Some respondents also endorsed the discussion paper's suggestion that one difficulty in making collaboration between museums and universities work is that universities do not share museums' focus on audiences. Some respondents suggested that universities and museums have fundamentally different objectives and that, while universities are being encouraged to disseminate their work more widely, 'knowledge transfer' is essentially an add-on to universities' core purpose, while it is fundamental to museum's role.

4. Sharing knowledge

Sharing collections knowledge is a core part of what museums are for. Museums need to find ways of sharing knowledge more effectively both with colleagues within the museum sector and with the public.

Within the sector, subject specialist networks (SSNs) have been seen as a key mechanism for knowledge sharing in recent years. This approach was endorsed by the MA's 2005 report, *Collections for the Future*, and MLA support has helped establish or develop some SSNs since then. There are also many other networks that have been established independently, and have not received funding. It is difficult to get an overview of what groups exist and respondents suggested that this limited their effectiveness. There is also a lack of clarity about their role: do SSNs exist to support their members or to provide expertise to others? In practice, SSNs are unlikely to be able to offer support to others without substantial funding. Even an SSN focused on mutual support for its members needs someone with the time and commitment to bring people together and to keep the network active.

One respondent noted that the potential for SSNs to create links between research-rich and research-poor museums, between universities and museums, between research funders and museums is enormous. This is not a role that they have been able to take on so far, but could be a focus of any new funding.

To share knowledge effectively with the public, museums need to make good use of information management and information technology. Respondents to the consultation emphasised the need to revisit information management techniques in the light of the changing expectations of users. For example museums could

use social networking sites and Wikipedia and similar sites relying on user-generated content to share museums' work, rather than relying on would-be users accessing the museum's own site. There may be a training need for museum staff here. Respondents also noted that there is no forum where non-specialists can debate future uses of IT, with conferences and discussion groups on IT-related topics tending to be dominated by small groups of technically-minded enthusiasts. It seems that there is a need both to open up the conversation to include non-specialists and to increase the understanding of new media of everyone who works with collections.

One respondent also noted that museum knowledge is potentially useful and valuable to many businesses, especially publishing, picture libraries, auction houses and art and antique dealers. Museums should perhaps think harder about how to ensure that they benefit from their transactions with such organisations, and whether there is scope to benefit financially. Can museums charge commercial organisations for access to knowledge, at the same time as making it more widely and freely available to the public? This is a difficult but important area and one that museums need to think about carefully.

5. Next steps

Collections knowledge remains a priority for the MA and we are continuing to research funding opportunities for schemes to promote knowledge development and sharing. We are still interested in hearing from individuals or museums who want to share their thoughts about the future development of our work in this area.

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