Museums Association consultation

Collections knowledge

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Knowledge is a fundamental aspect of what museums are and what they can deliver. A museum is a source of knowledge and a resource and inspiration for the development of knowledge. It is knowledge that gives meaning to objects, inspires exhibitions, and creates connections with audiences. Although museums value the knowledge that they have and strive to use it creatively, they could be much better at developing, sharing and managing it. The sector often talks about a decline in collections knowledge and museums are now hitting a critical point. They are recognising that valuable expertise and knowledge is being lost through the retirement of long-standing curators. It is time to take an overall view of the issues in a sustainable way.
This paper looks at the knowledge that is associated with collections and it divides collections knowledge into two main areas: developing knowledge (creating new knowledge through the development of expertise and through research); and sharing knowledge both within the sector and beyond (making sure knowledge is not lost, by passing it on to others and enabling it to be both understood and utilised).

The Museums Association (MA) has been developing work and ideas on collections knowledge since it emerged as an issue in the Collections for the Future report, 2005. An update on opinions around research, knowledge development and knowledge management was published in the MA report Making Collections Effective, 2007. Progress has been made in the area of succession planning through the Monument Fellowships scheme, and conference sessions have helped to raise the profile of collections knowledge issues.

The aim of this paper is to stimulate discussion in order for clear ideas to emerge to ensure we sustain the knowledge we have and continue to develop new knowledge and expertise in the future. Responses will help the MA to develop its own work in this area and inform other organisations in the sector.

A summary of all questions can be found on p15. The deadline for responses is Monday 15 December. Please email or send responses to Nikola Burdon, policy officer, Museums Association, 24 Calvin Street, London E1 6NW, nikola@museumsassociation.org

Developing collections knowledge

If museums are to develop in line with their audience needs, they must continue to replenish their stock of knowledge and encourage the development of staff expertise. It is knowledge, expertise and research that refreshes and expands the possibilities of collections.

Knowledge is an investment. The driver for this investment should be public benefit, not the personal interest of a curator, with the knowledge being relevant to the mission and aims of the museum.

Museums can never have the capacity or resources to hold the expertise that is needed in-house (Collections for the Future). It is essential that knowledge and expertise is accessible from other museums, universities, specialist groups or sectors, and that partnerships or connections are made. Knowledge also comes from and is created by many sources including visitors, enthusiasts, local groups and donors, who can play a vital role in the development of collections knowledge. Museums should be prepared to take advantage of this resource.
Developing an individual’s expertise

There is a strong view in the sector that people entering into the profession and those at their mid-career point are not being given the opportunity, or encouraged, to develop an expertise. The workforce action plan for the cultural heritage sector states: “There are certain skills and knowledge unique to this sector that could well be classified as “fragile” or “at risk”. This includes the knowledge of our collections…” (The Cultural Heritage Blueprint, November 2008). Today’s museum professionals need many skills, however the build up of knowledge and expertise that comes with regular time spent working with objects is often neglected due to other demands. The increase of short-term contracts for new entrants means that they frequently move without the opportunity to study a specific collection. Although professional development does enable individuals to develop their knowledge and skills further, generic skills, such as project management, are often favoured above collections expertise in order to help with career progression. After five to ten years in the profession people often consider themselves to be a generalist, with a variety of museum experience but little or no collections expertise. Those that have developed collections knowledge by their mid-career often find it difficult to then consolidate and advance this due to other demands, such as project and people management duties. At this point giving staff with ten to 15 years’ experience the opportunity to formalise, record and enhance collections knowledge would be a sensible investment for the museum and the sector as a whole.

Q1

One way to encourage the development of expertise could be through a mid-career secondment scheme, enabling individuals to spend time with collections and other experts. Do you think this is the right way forward? If so, how should the scheme be structured?

Q2

Apart from a secondment scheme, what other ways could the sector support the development of expertise?

Developing collections knowledge and research within an organisation

Research is widely seen as a luxury, but it is an essential part of a museum’s role, whether carried out externally or internally (Making Collections Effective). Many feel that academic research is only for large museums. However there are a variety of ways in which smaller museums can benefit or open up their collections for research. Visiting researchers, volunteers, experts from Subject Specialist Networks, or postgraduate award schemes are just a few examples. To profit from research, museums must identify their potential and priorities for research and find ways in which they might realise them. Developing a research strategy is the first step, helping to give a museum the confidence to move into the realm of research and proactively directing it.

Q3

Should all museums be encouraged to have a research plan/strategy with someone responsible for it?
The role of Subject Specialist Networks (SSNs)
SSNs and other specialist groups link together individual and organisational subject expertise and research. Grants from the Museums, Libraries and Archives Council (MLA) have helped to develop some existing networks and establish new ones, but there is no overview of what networks exist as there are many that have not received MLA funding. There is also no assessment of the crucial role that they could play in identifying where research/expertise exists and where there are gaps. Many have links beyond the UK museum sector, to academia, amateur experts and international bodies.

Currently specialist groups and SSNs exist independently, often reliant on the goodwill of members and with a wide range of remits and aspirations.

Q6
What role would you like to see SSNs playing in the development of expertise and research? What needs to be done in order to make it a reality?

Funding research
In order to tap into funding from research councils, some museums have developed links with Higher Education Institutions or have Independent Research Organisation (IRO) status themselves. However, museums are often unsure of how universities operate and find establishing relationships difficult. Better dialogue and guidance on working with these institutions could open up many funding options through the Arts and Humanities Research Council and other research councils. Currently this type of funding and research is driven by the needs and wants of the academic world. Audience needs and wants are not necessarily part of the equation and museums can often find themselves on the periphery of the project—benefiting from the results but not heavily involved in the process, and with little staff development.

Q5
Is building more partnerships with universities, university museums and IROs the way to ensure more research within the sector? If so, how can we encourage that research to be audience driven and the research process to be of greater benefit to museums?

The Code of Ethics for Museums (MA, 2008), point 9.4, states that museums should ensure they: ‘Develop mechanisms that encourage people to research collections, develop their own ideas about them…’. But a common barrier that museums have is that they are not research ready. Being open and accessible to external researchers is essential. Researchers come from all backgrounds – academic, community, personal, other sector (eg businesses) and local societies. Having procedures, resources and welcoming attitudes in place to accommodate all types of researchers can allow collections to be seen from alternative and challenging viewpoints. Although there are some leading examples within library and archive facilities and study centres, access to objects for external researchers could still be more widespread.

The Collections for People research project by Suzanne Keene, University College London, stated that ‘97 per cent of museums report a steady or increasing demand for access to collections’, but only ‘13 per cent of museums strongly promote public access to stored collections’ (Collections for People, 2008, www.ucl.ac.uk/storedcollections).
Sharing collections knowledge

To halt and reverse the decline in collections knowledge we need to create new knowledge and share it. In knowledge-management terms, developing a culture of sharing knowledge between individuals, organisations and beyond is as important as the technical capture or documentation of information and knowledge. Two common barriers to this are lack of time and not realising how useful the knowledge would be to others. The culture within museums needs to change to encourage people within organisations to work together and museums to collaborate. Museums need to be open to the widest range of sources of knowledge and researchers.

Sharing knowledge between individuals

The museum sector currently has many experienced curators and other staff who have extensive collections knowledge. Many have risen to management positions and as a result have other demands on their time. Little use is made of their specialist knowledge, or of passing this on to other staff. Too often, when an experienced curator or specialist leaves a museum, much of their knowledge of the collection leaves with them. Museums need a systematic approach to retaining and sharing knowledge within their organisation to prevent a valuable resource being diminished.

There is a range of methods for passing on knowledge from one person to another. Documentation is one, but writing something down does not ensure that the recipient understands what is written or that what is recorded is what the recipient is seeking. Within knowledge management there is a spectrum of methods of transferring knowledge between individuals, in order to capture tacit knowledge, know-how, intuition and values, as well as the explicit knowledge that gets documented. These methods include mentoring, interviews, communities of practice (specialist groups), training and storytelling.

Mentoring and communities of practice/specialist groups are two methods that work well in capturing all aspects of knowledge, both explicit and tacit. They are also methods of working that are familiar to the sector.
Succession planning within an organisation

Many museums are coming to a critical time in terms of their future requirements for staff. As current experts are heading towards retirement or leaving to pursue other avenues, museums are recognising that some form of succession planning is essential. Succession planning in the business world is based on the needs of huge organisations and can mean fast-tracking, head-hunting and secrecy, but this is obviously not appropriate for the museum sector. However, some form of planning for the future and sharing of knowledge before it is lost is needed.

The Monument Fellowships scheme is helping a small number of museums to address succession planning. With funding from The Monument Trust, the MA has launched a pilot programme of fellowships for retired museum professionals. The fellowships encourage knowledge sharing and succession planning to be embedded into the working practices of the host museums. The fellowships do not support research but aim to record and share existing collections knowledge that might otherwise be lost. The first round of seven fellowships across the UK was announced in October 2007. A second round of eight fellowships was announced in October 2008. For more information about the scheme see www.museumsassociation.org/monument

Over the next few years, the MA will develop information, guidance and good practice on succession planning for the sector, building on the experience of the Monument Fellowships scheme.

Q8

The Monument Fellowships scheme is tackling succession planning in a small number of museums. How can succession planning be encouraged more broadly across the sector?

Sharing knowledge across the sector

Within the Monument Fellowships scheme fellows are encouraged to spread their collections expertise wider than their host museum by holding masterclasses for the sector. These practical workshops have proved very popular, and ensure that hands-on knowledge is passed on and understood. In general, provision of training in the sector is good, with many hubs and federations providing accessible local training on collection-related topics such as disaster planning and collections care. However, there is a lack of workshop-style training that concentrates on a specific range of objects or subject. Some subject specialist groups fulfil this role but they are limited due to lack of resources.

Q9

How might we encourage more hands-on, subject-specific training with objects across the sector? Or, is there a better way to share knowledge to a wider range of people?

Sharing knowledge beyond the sector

Museums share knowledge with their audiences through exhibitions, events, websites, gallery tours and many other traditional ways. But to truly share or transfer knowledge there needs to be an understanding from one person to another. Do we truly comprehend what knowledge our varied audiences want? Are we delivering that knowledge in the right way? Do we understand the knowledge that is passed to us from our audiences?
Questions

Q1 One way to encourage the development of expertise could be through a mid-career secondment scheme, enabling individuals to spend time with collections and other experts. Do you think this is the right way forward? If so, how should the scheme be structured?

Q2 Apart from a secondment scheme, what other ways could the sector encourage the development of expertise?

Q3 Should all museums be encouraged to have a research plan/strategy with someone responsible for it?

Q4 How can we encourage more museums to be research ready and open towards all types of external research?

Q5 Is building more partnerships with universities, university museums and IROs the way to ensure more research within the sector? If so, how can we encourage that research to be audience driven and the research process to be of greater benefit to museums?

Q6 What role would you like to see SSNs playing in the development of expertise and research? What needs to be done in order to make it a reality?

Q7 How can we develop mentoring and specialist groups within organisations and the sector to encourage the sharing of knowledge between colleagues?

Q8 How might we encourage more hands-on, subject-specific training with objects across the sector? Or, is there a better way to share knowledge to a wider range of people?

Q9 How can we encourage museums to be more ambitious and innovative in how they share knowledge?

Deadline for responses is Monday 15 December.

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