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Focus *Julie Nightingale* on making an entrance

Why work in museums?

A student at the Hunterian, University of Glasgow

Cast an eye over the staff list of a medium-sized UK museum and the variety of roles on offer might surprise you. Today's treasure houses – from world-famous national museums, heritage sites and regional galleries to independent institutions, historic homes and town museums – all require a range of skills, knowledge and experience that casual visitors may not suspect.

While the size of a museum will in part determine the staff it has in-house, and many positions encompass different roles, departments in museums include:

- Visitor services and front-of-house
- Audience development, community, learning and education
- Facilities and estate management
- Marketing, media, digital and events
- Exhibitions, collections management and curatorial.

“It's useful to have an idea of what kind of museum work you want to do because there are an enormous number of

specialisms,” says Alistair Brown, the policy manager at the Museums Association (MA). The sector is an exciting place to work not just because of the amazing collections that institutions hold, but also because it provides a chance to shape how people see the world.

“That's one of the most fascinating things you can do: encourage people to look twice at stories that they think they already know, introduce them to new ideas and change people's lives,” Brown says.

The pandemic has brought immense challenges to the sector. The financial impact on museums means that jobs have been lost and hiring freezes are in place. Jobs at senior level as well as lower-paid posts are the most at risk of being made redundant, sending well-qualified people into the job market to pursue fewer vacancies.

The pandemic followed a period of economic austerity, which had already hit museums hard, with cuts to local authority and

central government funding, fuelling the rise of short-term contracts, reliance on freelancers and job insecurity.

There are structural problems, too. Competition and demands for higher-level qualifications has made entering the sector difficult. Poor wages at lower levels are also a barrier to entry.

But the past few years have also seen the emergence of a new sensibility in museums, one that is mindful of these limitations and keen to address them. Recruitment practices are also changing, though slowly, says Tamsin Russell, the MA's workforce development officer.

For students or people hoping to work in museums, volunteering remains an excellent way of getting to know the sector and gaining experience and contacts. Most venues have structured volunteering programmes that ensure participants get what they need from the experience as well as vice versa. And the union Prospect accepts volunteers as members to help protect them and also avoid undermining the professionalism of the sector.

Following job vacancies – which you can find on the MA website as well other sites and via social media – enables you to better understand the skills and experience you need for

the jobs you'd like to apply for. If you are interested in a role, contact the postholder and see if they will share how they got there. It's also important to follow developments in the sector and to keep up-to-date with current practice and standards.

Competition remains keen, so when applying for an internship, voluntary work or a paid position, think about how you can draw on your experience of other jobs and roles – and think creatively about how to package it, says Russell.

Digital skills, such as running personal social media accounts and working with databases, as well as organising teams for a student society, are all transferable skills that are useful to museums. And dealing with customers via work experience in a pub or restaurant can be rebranded as problem-solving.

In the early part of your career, you can capitalise on professional development opportunities by knowing what you want to develop and seeking it out.

"Professional development needs to be purposeful. Think what it is that you want or need to have to move ahead in your career," Russell says.

Julie Nightingale is a freelance writer

Human remains being put into storage at the Pitt Rivers Museum, part of the University of Oxford. Decolonisation and repatriation have become important issues in museums



Focus *Julie Nightingale* on the challenges that new entrants will need to tackle

The changing face of the museum sector

There are any number of developments set to reshape the museum world and the roles of those who work in it over the next decade. Some are universal: the fallout from the pandemic, digital advances and globalisation.

But there are sector-specific ones that are already triggering reflection followed by action in terms of what museums are for and how they can continue to act as a platform for the stories and experiences of communities, local, national and global.

Decolonisation

Decolonising collections and setting objects in a richer, truer cultural context has become a major theme in the past few years. To understand it, people need empathy, patience and a willingness to

talk to those who have different lived experiences, says Liam Wiseman, senior relationship manager, south east, at Arts Council England.

"There is a challenge there about your own emotional intelligence and how to deal with situations that challenge your understanding of the world and the history you learn," he says. "Being a museum curator or collections manager doesn't necessarily mean you will be working on your own with the collections. You are pushing to engage with the widest possible range of people to get their feedback and incorporate their understanding of history and their ideas into the exhibitions and collections you will be working with, so that you can have ►

Think creatively

Kate Knowlden did a master's in curation at Norwich University of Arts and is now the curator of the Museum of East Anglian Life in Stowmarket in Suffolk, where her role includes managing an Esmée Fairbairn Collections Fund and Headley Trust supported project to reinterpret collections.

She was drawn to the sector through her love of history and enthusiasm for lifelong learning. Knowlden volunteered with the collections team at the National Trust-run Ickworth House near Bury St Edmunds, Suffolk, to gain experience.

"If you are able to get experience volunteering, do



as much as you can and take any opportunities that come your way," she says. "If that doesn't work for you, look at other routes into the sector.

"At Norfolk Museums, for example, we have a paid traineeship programme for people new to the sector or who want to make a career change. Don't think that you have to do a degree to get your foot in the door, as there are plenty of other ways in."



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In Practice

a more holistic approach to producing this content.”

Responsibilities for this work doesn't just lie with leaders or bigger museums. If you are volunteering, or in an entry-level job, there are still opportunities to get involved.

“You might propose a small-scale review that centres on a particular part of the collection that you know has the potential to include more diverse histories to try to uncover something,” says Wiseman. “Or you could lead on some community engagement with different groups that you might not have worked with before. You could try to create a display or educational material that includes narratives outside the established history present in the museum.”

He recommends being proactive. “Instead of an organisation giving you things to do, you could share your ideas and think about how you could push your own professional development.”

Socially engaged practice

Museums know more work is needed to engage with different audiences, but this demands new ways of thinking and working, says Stephen Welsh, a freelance consultant and curator.

“Prioritising communities is going to be what museums and galleries have to do in the future, particularly because funders such as the National Lottery Heritage Fund as well as arts councils are looking for different ways to get money to community groups and charities, which are generally not as successful as museums at accessing their grants,” he says.

Welsh thinks the current model – where museums apply for funding to work with a community group on an exhibition or project – is likely to change.

“This will flip, with the money going to grassroots organisations that will be empowered to choose a heritage or arts organisation to work with,” he says.

This means museums will need more grassroots staff working on the ground with community groups to develop projects together. Welsh says



Above: students at the Hunterian Collections Study Centre Kelvin Hall, which is part of the University of Glasgow

Below right: team members from the Reimagine, Remake, Replay project, which won the 2020 Museums Change Lives award, at Belfast Pride

‘We’re seeing the rise of the term “produce” and it says what it does. Producers do a lot of project management and administration, but it’s also addressing the creative side of their work’
Dhikshana Pering



Dhikshana Pering, the head of engagement and skills at Somerset House in London, and MA board member



that although collections-based skills will always be important, new entrants should explore how they can develop a broader skillset to build relationships with those who may have different lived experiences than them. Such experience may also need to be gained outside the sector, by volunteering for the NHS or refugee charities, for example.

“It could give you the interpersonal skills to work in a museum,” Welsh says.

Learning and engagement

In November 2020, the Museums Association (MA) launched its Learning and Engagement Manifesto. Developed over two years, it is a call to the sector to embed thinking about learning, engagement and audiences in to their work and vision, says Dhikshana Pering, the head of engagement and skills at Somerset House in London, and MA board member, who was involved in the manifesto's development.

Digital technologies already play a key role in learning and in engaging audiences of all kinds, but the Covid restrictions have highlighted some of the gaps in museums' digital strategies, she says.

“Organisations are looking at what activities and events really help make a connection with their audiences,” she says. “Anyone hoping to build

a career in learning and engagement will need to think about how they adapt activities to work in different ways – a gallery, online or classroom – and from multiple perspectives.”

Pering also believes job titles will evolve in the future: “We’re seeing the rise of the term ‘producer’ and it says what it does. Producers do a lot of project management and administration, but it’s also addressing the creative side of their work.”

Museums will also look for more media partners, she believes, as much as collaborating with cultural and heritage institutions. Museums becoming producers, like Netflix and others, is not impossible.

“For young people, working for Netflix or BuzzFeed sounds more exciting than a museum or gallery,” Pering says. “But there are parallel



The benefits of work experience

Sara Sarf discusses what she gained from her placement at the Open Eye Gallery in Liverpool

I decided to become a museum professional after studying a master's in anthropology and history at the University of Aberdeen. I did an internship at the Ethnography Museum in Budapest to further my anthropology studies, and through that position I fell in love with the collections and social history of the museum.

After the internship, I realised that the two areas of studies that I loved, anthropology and history, combined with collections, are what museums are all about: cultures, people and history.

The last module of my master's in museum studies at the University of Leicester was an eight-week placement at the Open Eye Gallery in Liverpool. This contemporary and forward-thinking institution supports and encourages inclusion and local connections, and continually rethinks what gallery and photography practices are for.

This gallery connects people, ideas and art through photography, including community-based socially engaged photography projects. It is a great example of how cultural institutions can integrate care and respect for their communities – which is something that I only learned in theory throughout my studies.

During my placement I took on tasks ranging from research and social media engagement to programme planning and interviewing an artist. I wanted my engagement projects to be accessible and amusing, but also easy to understand and relate to, therefore connecting people with shared experience and interesting ideas. Through these tasks, I learned more about socially engaged practice, contemporary



photography and museum practice as well as how to work with and for the people at the Open Eye Gallery.

The best thing I achieved during the placement was the work I did on an Open Eye activity pack. I designed it to be on the topic of lockdown so people could reflect on positive aspects of their experiences. The pack contained workshops that used photos to help people think about what they missed during the pandemic, what new activities they had started and how and why these activities made them happy. I feel that spreading positivity and connecting with others are more important than ever, particularly because of Covid-19.

My hopes for the future have been interrupted by the pandemic as it has made it harder to start my museum career. At the moment all I wish for is a steady job and to be able to see my family and friends. The lockdowns in the UK made me realise how quickly life can change so I am still working on being flexible and adaptable.

I aim to improve my digital skills and my knowledge of marketing and education. I want to offer a well-rounded skillset to museums. I am excited and eager to start working in the museum, but I expect it will be a slight wait due to the uncertain state of cultural organisations all over the world.



jobs in our sector. Bringing more diverse people in would organically help us start to diversify.”

Embracing changes

Overall, these shifts are set to change the dynamic in museums, bringing in new ideas, people and ways of working. Charlotte Holmes, a member of the Museum Detox committee, the network for museum and heritage workers of colour, says people entering the sector should look after their own interests and wellbeing, alongside contributing to debates and making their voices heard.

“I would encourage new entrants to know their worth,” Holmes says. “Many museums still operate in ways that mean some employees, especially those from underrepresented backgrounds, pay a high price. Make sure your basic needs are met, that you can pay your bills and that you feel safe and valued at work.”

Learning to recognise signs of stress and trauma is also important, she adds.

“What stops us from speaking in meetings and what drives our need for high levels of detail and control? How can we be open to different approaches? We should try to understand our needs and ask our employer to meet these because if you don't ask, you don't get.”

The future of study

These developments have implications for the design of

postgraduate degrees, which have long been a common entry route into the profession. Many universities already work closely with local museums and wider communities to develop their understanding of audience needs, which informs how their programmes evolve, as well as creating work experience opportunities for students.

Neil Curtis, the head of museums and special collections at the University of Aberdeen, says institutions need to be more critical of what is taught on courses.

“We need to challenge students to think about the unequal histories of collecting and museums, and the dominance of elite European perspectives in collections and interpretation,” he says.

“We should be trying to help students so that they can carry out successful work in museums that addresses the legacies of colonialism, for example. At the same time, we also need to look at how we teach and who does the teaching, so we can tackle the racism and other prejudices some students face.”

Curtis says universities should also think about who the students are.

“Postgraduate museum studies programmes have been the product and creator of privilege. Universities need to consider how we can contribute to diversifying the workforce.”

Julie Nightingale is a freelance writer

Creating an online learning workshop at the Scottish Maritime Museum



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Jenny's Home kitchen set, Tri-ang Toys Limited, Belfast, 1960s, V&A Museum of Childhood.

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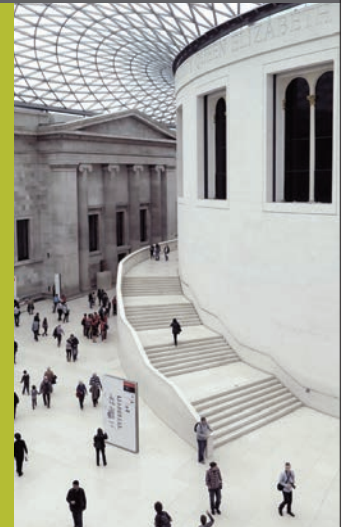
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MA Museums Association

Trendswatch *Deborah Mulhearn* on how courses and students have adapted

Distance learning

Distance learning is not new, but the Covid pandemic has made it a necessity. Museum studies courses have had to quickly adapt to blended learning. Practical courses and study visits have had to be cancelled, but digital platforms can encourage wider participation and many students have flourished with creative online learning.

“Not being able to give students practical experiences, such as visiting the museum store to choose items for their exhibition, has been one of the biggest challenges,” says Neil Curtis, the head of museums and special collections at the University of Aberdeen. “Instead, we created a course to help students reflect on the museum workplace and their own position, interviewing

staff who would have been their hosts and developing a continuing professional development plan.”

Virtual learning

“A visualiser lets us show small details of objects, while digitised archives mean that students can work in a place and time that suits them. Developing digital skills, such as virtual exhibitions, is going to be important for those joining the profession.”

This has led to a new course being developed, Navigating the Museum Workplace. “There has been even more thinking about learning and teaching,” Curtis says. “The model of long lectures didn’t translate well online. Small group discussions in chat rooms have been more effective.”

Engaging with remote working

PhD researcher Jenny Durrant is an experienced distance learner. As a guest lecturer at the University of Leicester, remote working has enabled her to continue engaging with students.

“I’m also the PhD rep for distance learners in my department, and I’ve heard students’ voices from around the globe. The most common problems are the loneliness, being isolated from your academic peers and colleagues, and juggling mental jumps between work,

study and home life,” Durrant says. “I hope there is a new understanding of the complexities of the distance learning journey. I’m relieved that perceptions of remote working have improved significantly – meetings, training and social events don’t need to be in person.

“This huge societal change enables access for a greater range of people and is especially important for the numerous students who have chosen this study route for health reasons.”



The University of Aberdeen created a course to help students reflect on the museum workplace

The School of Museum Studies at the University of Leicester has had a flexible learning programme, Socially Engaged Practice, since 2016, with virtual study visits and remote work placements with National Museums Liverpool. It used this as the basis for an online placement module for campus-based students last summer (see p63).

“We looked at delivery models that could support students to have an equitable experience,” says lecturer, Katy Bunning. “The shift to live online teaching has been well received by students.”

Digital modes of teaching have also opened up new opportunities for staff through collaborations with practitioners across the UK and internationally.

“We have delivered sessions with museum professionals based in places we would not be able to travel to,” says Bunning.

Another advantage is that online systems allow students to rewatch sessions and access an enhanced level of personalised support.

“We’ve pushed ourselves to create better learning materials, which make it more inclusive for different learning styles,” says Charlie Pratley, a lecturer on the MA course in museum and heritage development at Nottingham Trent University. “We’ve been experimenting with filmed tours and cross-disciplinary

discussions. Where we would have visited one museum and spoken to one staff member, three staff were able to give their time to an online talk.”

Positive action

Despite the advantages, the lack of immediate feedback is a challenge. “In a classroom, you can pick up on mental health or engagement issues,” Pratley says. “Online, we have to work harder on relationships with students but there have been positive consequences to this.”

In one pre-Covid activity, students were asked to upload their work to an online discussion board and give each other feedback. “They engaged with the first part of the task, but not each other,” says Pratley. “This year, the activity has been successful; students now understand that their digital presence is as important as a physical one. Occasionally, babies join virtual sessions where previously childcare issues may have prevented students from participating.”

Enrolment on distance learning programmes is on the rise, with the School of Museum Studies at University of Leicester reporting a 26% increase on last year. Distance learning is here to stay, and the sector has shown that creative alternatives are available.

Deborah Mulhearn is a freelance writer

CAREERS
GUIDE



Talk to others in the sector about their experience and expertise

Below: students working together on clock conservation at West Dean College

Guide *Tamsin Russell* on the best ways to keep up with professional development

Making a career of it

Working in museums requires a mix of theoretical knowledge and practical experience. These can be gained in a number of ways, whether you are studying at university, participating in a traineeship, working as a volunteer or taking an apprenticeship.

Professional development should be meaningful and purposeful. No one has endless time or money to support it, so understanding what you want out of it is key. And remember, learning can take place outside formal taught courses. The following can help your professional development:

Look forward

Working in museums may be your career aspiration but the nature of work in the sector is always changing. Reflecting on the diversity of disciplines and roles in the sector, and how they are evolving, can help you think about your development. It can inform what you study, the projects you do and the work placements you apply for.

Connecting with others

Whether you are on a work placement or volunteering,

connecting with others in the same organisation is a professional development must. The sector is a generous space and we love talking about our work, so if there is someone you want to chat to about their expertise, talk to them. Take them for a coffee – in real life or virtually.

Keep up to date

It has never been easier to keep up with advancements and insight in museums. Social media, magazines, blogs and vlogs can all keep you in the know with breaking stories, reflections and comment. Having your finger on the pulse enables

you to refine your thinking and professional practice.

Join a network

Joining networks such as the Museums Association is a great way to make connections, hear diverse views and gain insights into the way the sector works.

Participate everywhere

There are many ways to participate in the sector – from completing consultations to being involved in Twitter initiatives such as @MuseumHour. Participation can increase your confidence, keep you up to date and helps develop your own views.



Watch, listen and learn

Having role models can help us develop in different ways. They can be good for honing skills, such as giving presentations or chairing meetings, but are also useful to learn about areas such as leadership and management.

If you see someone do something well, this should contribute to your professional practice. Equally, taking note of the negative impact of certain behaviours or lack of competence is a way of developing positively. Remember to listen and observe. What do your role models say and how do they say it?

Read and reflect

When on a work placement, reading documents about the museum can provide you with great insight about how the organisation approaches its work. Taking the time to go through an institution's corporate or strategic plan, annual reports, strategies, policies and procedures can help you build a picture of an organisation. Many of these documents are publicly available, which means you can compare museums.

Volunteering

Volunteering develops skills, extends networks, gives something back and provides an inside view of a role or organisation. At the heart of any successful relationship is meeting the needs of the volunteer and the organisation. Remote or time-limited tasks provide a ringfenced opportunity for development, so there is the chance to develop skills and

experience alongside other life commitments.

Tools and techniques

Whether you are visiting a museum in real life or participating in a virtual tour, tools such as the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats analysis help to develop a professional eye.

Ask yourself the following:

- What did the museum do well (strengths)?
- What would you do differently (weaknesses)?
- What did the museum miss out (opportunities)?
- Who or what might affect its success (threats)?

Record your learning

One way of embedding your learning is to record it. Learning logs or maps can help – use an Excel spreadsheet for a linear and searchable approach, or a Trello board for visual progress. Capturing what you learned and reflecting on it helps it become part of your professional practice.

Development during Covid

The pandemic can make professional development seem more challenging. The opportunities for hands-on practical development may be reduced, but there is the chance to develop a broader horizon. For example, digital conferences, workshops and webinars are plentiful and are often easier and cheaper to attend than a physical event.

All the above complement more formal learning programmes and can support your development as a well-rounded museum professional.



Nottingham Trent University has created exercises that are more suitable for different learning styles

The benefits of work experience

Njeri Njoroge gives an insight into her online work placement at the East End Women's Museum

I have always loved history, which has drawn me to the museum sector where the past is an interactive experience and you can engage with objects rather than just reading about them.

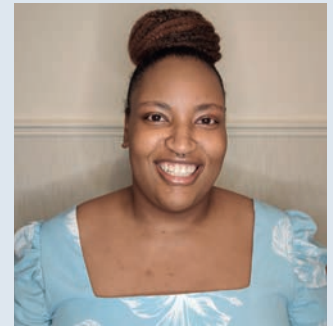
I am interested in working in audience development and engagement, and was able to work in this area during my placement at the East End Women's Museum in London as part of my studies at the University of Leicester.

While I was with the museum, I created an easy-to-read guide for neurodiverse visitors and those with learning difficulties, which will be hosted on its website. I also undertook some research into its local audience in the borough of Newham. From this research, I produced two reports: one identified potential Newham-based collaborators, while the other highlighted key information about the local population and made recommendations on how to best engage with them.

Working on the Newham population report was a real eye-opener, as I learned about the barriers that prevent people's engagement with heritage and museums. Some of these I had simply not considered, such as gender-based challenges facing some women in the area.

As well as making me more focused on how museums can open heritage to all audiences, my work placement also made me feel better equipped to address these challenges.

While I was at the East End Women's Museum, I learned more about its mission, aims and values. I was really impressed to find out about its social justice mission, its commitment to challenging gender inequalities and stereotypes, and the support



it gives women and girls to share their stories and find their civic voice.

It was amazing to work for a museum that was focused on engaging and educating audiences and being an advocate for them. As someone who identifies as a minority, I am passionate about building representation for social groups that historically have not received much recognition, so I really identified with the museum's mission.

It also reminded me of what excites me most about the sector – that museums are more than just collections and archives, and that they can be active participants in social justice.

I am now seeing more museums using their historical knowledge and collections to address issues of the past and present, and working to present more diverse narratives. This makes me really proud to be involved in the sector.

In the future, I hope to work in a socially minded organisation, as I want my work to not only educate but also to advocate. I hope to have a role where I will be reaching out to and actively engaging with museum audiences.

I am particularly interested in working with audience groups that are perhaps less likely to attend museums and addressing the barriers that might be stopping them from visiting.