

Volunteering and Professionalisation in UK Museums

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Museum professionalism refers to the execution of professional duties within an accountability and ethics-based framework. This concept presupposes that museums are complex institutions with common goals and challenges that require generally accepted industrial management and museum-specific standards. A profession and professionalism develop when like-minded individuals and groups are motivated to adhere to agreed-upon performance standards, skills and values. Bernard Barber established four tenets of professionalism: subject knowledge, community-based interest rather than self-interest, a reward system, and a self-imposed code of ethics developed by the profession.¹ This code of ethics represents an ideal system of principles that typically reflects a higher standard of duty than legal regulations require. Knowledge of museum-specific standards and consistent ethical conduct by museum professionals, defined as individuals who work for, govern, or volunteer in museums, is vital for the United Kingdom museum sector because “the actions of a few can affect all.”²

The growth in volunteer-run museums and trusts accounts for the great influx of museums in Britain through the 1980s. By the early 2000s, volunteers assisted in 92% of museums, and tripled the size of the museum workforce. At the time, there were 25,000 full and part-time museum volunteers and 12,500 paid employees.³ Typically, museum volunteers are well-educated professionals pursuing careers in other disciplines who fill assorted roles in the museum: in visitor services, registration, collections, finance, and as trustees, administrators, fundraisers and money handlers. Museum volunteers are academically assessed either for their economic benefits as an unpaid and potentially unreliable and unprofessional workforce,⁴ or to determine their motivations in order for organisations to better manage volunteering hours.

Kirsten Holmes’ article ‘Volunteers in the Heritage Sector: A neglected audience?’ outlines the current state of museum volunteering in the UK.⁵ While internal and external factors have affected the professionalism of unpaid staff members, Holmes examines to the root of volunteers’ interests to best assess how museums can utilise volunteer work hours. Mirroring Sinclair Goodland and Stephanie McIvor’s investigation, Holmes questions whether most volunteers participate in museums as a “leisure activity”, or as active visitors: “[volunteers] were trained and deployed as staff, but their motivations to work and perceived benefits were found to be more akin to those of visitors.”⁶ Volunteers are a specific type of committed client, making the volunteer program part of a museum’s educational and outreach mission. These volunteers, however, are museum ‘insiders’ who view themselves as part of the museum team.

Individuals volunteer in museums for social interaction or interest in the subject matter, among other reasons. Holmes notes that, while representing a small percentage of museum volunteers, some museum employees themselves began as museum volunteers or interns attempting to gain work experience. These employees presumably approached their volunteer duties differently than volunteers engaged for other purposes. This can lead those museum employees to expect a professional demeanor from the volunteers they manage, but overlooking volunteer motivations can affect volunteer retention. Re-casting volunteers as active visitors as opposed to unpaid staff can enable museum administrators to better manage and align the museum's needs with the volunteers' desires. The challenge is then to motivate volunteers to perform at professional levels and to understand the need for implementing basic standards.

Volunteer culture and ideology are strong in the UK, and movement to professionalise volunteers through training, management, or oversight has concerned volunteer-run organisations. In the 1970s and 1980s, "management [was] an ugly word with ugly connotations, particularly in the voluntary world. It smack[ed] of hierarchy, of commanding and controlling, even of manipulation."⁷ Individuals may balk at or grow disinterested in volunteer work if required to fulfill formal expectations similar to those of paid employees. Volunteers' "values [may] sit uneasily with formal management tools such as job descriptions, appraisals and disciplinary and grievance procedures."⁸ Since the mid-1990s, demand for charity management training has increased. Though many museums continue to be entirely volunteer-run, the field of volunteering has made steps to professionalise in Britain since the 1980s.

In the past decade, charity experts and academics have attempted to improve voluntary sector skills by consolidating tenets from the corporate and public sectors. As of 2011, numerous UK support bodies offer training in best practice. The National Council for Voluntary Organisations provides governance and leadership support to charity boards with private consultations, training courses and events. The Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action (NICVA) has a similar remit, offering sector-wide conferences and training sessions on leadership, networking, fundraising, governance, charity law, and policy. NICVA also lobbies on behalf of Northern Ireland's charity sector. The Scottish Council for Voluntary Organisations (SCVO) and Welsh Council for Voluntary Action (WCVA) perform similar duties.

A sector with such a large number of volunteers and with consistent turnover may require different training standards for volunteers than for employees.⁹ Yet academics argue that volunteers ought to be considered equal to paid staff members, and treated as such.¹⁰ Justin Davis Smith notes this outcome may be unavoidable since the requirements that funding bodies place on the sector are becoming more complex and technical.¹¹ Similarly, additional legal requirements, regulations, codes of conduct, expectations from the charity community, and expectations associated with

specific professional associations, such as the Museums Association, are changing expectations for volunteer conduct. Peter Drucker found these new expectations to be the most significant advance in the charity sector.¹²

Third sector volunteers and individuals working for entirely volunteer-run organisations are beginning to meet new expectations, since it is possible to unite governance best practices with voluntary sector values. Quoting a fellow volunteer specialist, Davis Smith notes that “professionalism is not automatically the kiss of death for the voluntary ethos ... unmanaged and undirected volunteering usually is.”¹³ Recent studies demonstrate the public trust in charities is indeed stronger than trust in either the public or private sectors.¹⁴ This trust, however, may result from the public’s understanding of charity sector characteristics, which could be undermined by a changing policy and regulatory environment. Nick Aldridge states: “There is a specific tension between the voluntary tradition of charitable governance, historically one of the hallmarks of the sector, and the increasing risks and scrutiny to which trustees are subject.”¹⁵ Volunteer-run museums in the UK may face challenges going forward because many do not engage in best practice management policies, and are unaware of reasons to do so.

Volunteer Training

Volunteer-run museums supply a range of training schemes to personnel who vary in beliefs and expectations regarding the need for ethics training. It is rare for induction training or ongoing ethics or policy training to take place in volunteer-managed museums. Some volunteers believe training is not required for the sole reason that they are volunteers and not paid professional staff: “*All workers at the Museum are volunteers so we don’t need or do training*” and “*we are all volunteers, so these [survey] questions about training do not apply.*”¹⁶ One volunteer museum manager believes “*All this is rather irrelevant to a small, all-volunteer museum. There are no paid staff and almost all volunteer stewards and other officers are retired from other professions and jobs. ‘Ethics’ is not in question. All Trustees and officers are good friends and difficult matters are discussed openly.*” This point of view is not shared by all volunteer-run museums. Other museums offer informal training, are “*trained on a ‘common sense’ basis*”, or “*incorporate many of the policies [the survey] asked about in a small way in our general museum operation, but not as specific policies.*” One small organisation with “*no paid staff ... does have induction training and follow-up training that is taken very seriously for the very reason that we are not paid professionals.*” These survey results indicate, however, that this commitment to induction and ongoing museum training is uncommon amongst volunteer-run museums.

Making training accessible to museum workers and board members removes a significant obstacle to expanding the sector’s skills. Professional development requires institutional investment: time away from regular duties, time away from

the museum, and financial costs to attend training courses. Time constraints and financial hardship for travel to training sites are particularly pressing for volunteers and part-time workers. It is difficult for small museums to cover for absent employees, and skills training courses for charities may not be applicable to museums. Thus, “learning ‘on the job’ on a ‘need to know basis’ by working with others was often the only solution they could envisage ... Smaller organisations were also more inclined than larger organisations to use trustees and volunteers in response to a skills gap.”¹⁷ Solutions to practical training problems include increasing in-house training sessions, mentoring between organisations, forming good-practice networks, sharing specialised personnel, engaging in distance and online learning, and incorporating training into the daily fabric of charity management.

A professional approach to volunteer management has developed as well. Goodland and McIvor have noted that a “Lack of management of volunteers in the past has often been based on the false assumption that volunteer time is unlimited and free. In fact, it is neither, and therefore needs to be carefully managed.”¹⁸ Museums should have volunteer policies and guidelines, paid staff should learn how to manage volunteers, and museum insurance policies should cover volunteer activities. These expectations have been increasingly put in place since the mid-1980s. If museums can better harness volunteer time, the volunteering experience can be mutually beneficial for the volunteer and the museum.

Trustee Accountability

Nonprofit museum governance is a specific skill and responsibility. It is challenging to build a board of directors with trustees knowledgeable about finance, fundraising, charity law, human resources, management, accountability, etc. Though the 1992 Charities Act clarified trustee duties, many board members are ignorant about their legal duties as trustees,¹⁹ or believe that they fill a “ceremonial” role rather than one with considerable implications.²⁰ Trustees traditionally do not engage in charity governance, unaware of their responsibilities until an organisational crisis arises.²¹ Moreover, some charity trustees are unqualified to govern a charity and “have rarely been competent to handle quite complex roles and responsibilities as employers or supervisors.”²² Board members also broadly lack knowledge about potential risks from employees who may engage in financial or administrative fraud.²³ Charity regulators and other groups supporting the museums offer numerous guidance reports and training in governance-related areas. Unfortunately, for various reasons board attendance at training courses is rare,²⁴ and persuading trustees to attend or insisting upon board participation in training sessions could work against the purposes of training, discouraging individuals from taking on board service.²⁵

A divide exists between professional museum practitioners and volunteer trustees whose work experience has not prepared them for museum work as a specialised discipline. Marie Malaro noted that most board training is “generic” and

widely-applicable, yet not necessarily museum-relevant.²⁶ While boards may be well-versed in running charities, they may lack the nuanced point of view required to govern museums with diverse stakeholders, unique needs and specific ethical norms. Due to the sector's high standards, specific ethical requirements, and diverse training, museum staff members can have greater expertise than the non-professional board members responsible for museum governance and oversight. As Edward Alexander and Mary Alexander have asked, "With the growing professionalism of museum staff do volunteer boards of directors provide the best oversight for 'the public good' for museums?"²⁷ Many organisations do not have trustees or volunteers qualified to assist with charity administration. Board expertise typically lies outside of museums, and many members come from a corporate culture having been selected for their business acumen. Yet, these board members seldom implement or expect the same professional or ethical standards in museums they govern as in businesses with which they are associated.²⁸ However, according to the *Third Sector Skills Research 2008* report, employee and board attitudes are the greatest barrier to charity training, which they do not prioritise.²⁹

Throughout their tenure, trustees receive ongoing ethics training in only 14.2% of museums, as opposed to ongoing museum policy training in 45.9% of museums.³⁰ Data demonstrate that independent museums offer more ongoing ethics and policy training for trustees than for staff, while the opposite is true for local authority museums, which provide more ongoing training for staff than trustees. University museums also do not appear to conduct any specific ethics training, relying instead on university-wide ethical controls and staff conduct policies. Similarly, regimental museums and local authority museums look to Ministry of Defence and local council policies for codes of conduct and disciplinary processes.

Museums in the UK are at a crossroads. A disparity exists between museum professionals who have received museum-specific training, and those who have not. Challenges associated with museum training impact the state of museum-specific ethics and professionalism in the workplace. Volunteers, including board members, work for the best interest of their organisations, but may not be aware of how best to fulfill their duties or satisfy stakeholders through professional practices. Museum professionalism has improved in recent decades, yet professional development for volunteers and employees is still absent in many museums. Additional targeted outreach and training would further professionalise museum volunteers, including board members. Similarly, museum-specific courses discussing governance, legal expectations, and practical museum accountability solutions can serve to teach museum professionals the difference between assuming responsibility for a museum, and being accountable to the public for decisions made on the museum's behalf. Laudable accountability programmes do exist in museums, and these organisations can be tapped to aid training at other museums. Museums must now adapt to assume increased responsibilities, meet opportunities, and reassess their professionalism as a means to assure the stability of museums.

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