A guide to student volunteering in museums

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Introduction

The original proposal for the 'Volunteers for Museums' project grew out of the University of Reading’s volunteering programme for museums and collections, which between 2005-8 grew to incorporate a programme of student volunteering opportunities alongside the development of a pilot accreditation and training project. This guideline document draws on this experience and on other student volunteering initiatives in the Berkshire, Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire region to examine the benefits of including student volunteers in the museum workforce more widely.

While there is no universal definition of a ‘volunteer’, the term is generally accepted as referring to a person who engages in unpaid activity, giving their time to help an organisation or an individual that they are not related to. By 'student' this document refers to a specific sub-section of volunteers who are in further or higher education, either full or part-time. Most students will be aged 18-25 and would come under the banner of 'young people' addressed in various government policy documents. However, there are a growing number of 'mature students' who may share some features with other volunteer groups. Unsurprisingly, the issue of student volunteers has been of particular interest to University Museums, and the examples in this report reflect that bias. Nevertheless, this document will attempt to outline the challenges and benefits of recruiting students to the museum volunteer workforce on a wider scale. It is intended both as a 'how to' guide for volunteer managers, and an advocacy document for those in the HE or museum sectors.

This guide has been produced as part of the 'Volunteers for Museums' (VFM) Project, which was funded by Renaissance South-East for non-hub museums in Berkshire, Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire (BOB). Based at the Museum of English Rural Life, University of Reading, the project partnership involved museums and heritage services across the BOB region: Banbury Museum, Buckinghamshire County Museum, Chiltern Open Air Museum, Oxfordshire County Museum Service, Reading Museum, River and Rowing Museum, Wycombe Museum and Milton Keynes Heritage Service. The focus of the case studies and evidence cited in these guidelines relate primarily to work in the BOB region, although it will reference relevant and interesting examples of best practise from elsewhere and hence these guidelines and recommendations will have application to the wider museums community.
Why recruit student volunteers?
The reasons for recruiting student volunteers are likely to differ depending on the type of museum. University museums often have a specific remit to provide opportunities for students to engage in volunteering or placements, whilst other museums may find they attract more or less interest from student volunteers according to their size, location and collections and subject areas.

This section examines the main motivations for, and benefits of, student volunteering for both the University Museum sector and the wider museum community.

University Museums
Museums owned and administered by Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), or those with Independent Research Organisation status (such as the Victoria and Albert Museum), face particular pressures from funders and policy makers to develop links between the academic community and collections. On the other hand, they are also being asked to look outwards and engage with non-academic communities, despite their limited resources. Between 1989 and 2001 a national survey was made of university collections in the UK (UMG 2004, Arnold-Forster 1999). Around four hundred collections were identified, of which only 10% had dependable core funding and only 25% were open to the public (UMG 2004). The other 75% were accessible only to academics and research students. A 2004 advocacy document by the UK Universities Museum Group publicised examples of best practice and examined the factors in successful management of such collections. The university museums that fared best were usually those who have been able to prove their interest to both the wider public and the university community.

Some university museums have attempted to strengthen their position within their HEIs through developing collections based teaching (Brooks 2010). However, another increasingly common way to engage with students is through volunteering and related programmes of work experience and internships. Management of these volunteers or interns has often been ad hoc in nature, although small groups of students have benefited significantly from these opportunities. Some university museums have attempted to formalise these arrangements and recruit larger groups of students to be trained and managed as part of organised programmes (e.g. Oxford University Museums Service). There is an increasing focus on the importance of employability and enhancing the student experience in HE/FE. Thus, such programmes have gained additional value and have assumed growing prominence within the sector. Opportunities to support student volunteering from internal and external HE sources (see case studies) have also helped stimulate the development of the student volunteer workforce.

The wider museum sector
The benefits of student volunteering to university museums may seem obvious, but what can the museum sector in general gain from working with students? Whilst there are employment opportunities in museums which do not require HE/FE qualifications, the majority of entry level posts in the sector require a ‘degree in a relevant subject’ as minimum. However, for many posts relevant work experience, usually on a voluntary basis, is also an essential.

The Museums Association’s (2007) ‘Tomorrow People’ workforce development report showed that one of the most important factors in being accepted on to post-graduate professional programmes, and eventually finding work in the sector, was relevant experience. The report suggested that this requirement might be partly responsible for excluding people from low socio-economic backgrounds, men, and those from BME backgrounds from the workforce. Providing well managed volunteer opportunities at undergraduate level can therefore help to attract under-represented groups to the workforce, by offering structured experience without the need for unpaid work after graduation.

As part of the information that museums will be expected to provide as part of their workforce policies, new guidelines for Museum Accreditation will expect museums to demonstrate that they have volunteer management plans in place as part of their evidence of effective employment and management procedures for both paid and volunteer staff. When examining organisational
strategy and policy on volunteering, there are a number of reasons why non university museums should consider the potential of including students as a target group.

What can students offer a museum?
The Russell Commission (2005) suggested that many organisations need to move beyond stereotypes of young people and celebrate the skills that they can bring to a workplace. For example, many museum volunteer teams are primarily made up of retired people who may lack IT skills. As more museums tap into social media networking as a marketing tool it is useful to have ‘the experts’ on hand to help. Students will also have high numeracy, literacy and oral communication skills. They will have experience of library research and potentially archival and lab-based research. With a little understanding of how universities and colleges work, volunteer managers will find that there is much more to student volunteers.

Universities and FE colleges also face specific requirements to deliver on a number of related agendas that can add to their interest in supporting volunteering opportunities for students. These include:

- demonstrating impact of teaching and research on the non-academic community
- distinguishing themselves from competitors in terms of providing an engaging student learning experience
- proving an ongoing interest in graduate employability

Partnership working
Partnership working with a large educational organisation such as a University can provide evidence of the museum’s worth to key stakeholders and, although potentially challenging to initiate, may lead to significant mutual benefits, including access to funding and to a pool of young and energetic volunteers which can also help to reinvigorate a museum’s image and allow new types of activities to be piloted. The Beacons for Public Engagement programme illustrate a number of exciting projects where museums have benefited from collaboration with HEIs.

Focussed volunteering
Student volunteers can be extremely useful for projects which require intensive periods of work or large numbers. By contacting a relevant university department or school, a museum can access hundreds of potential volunteers very quickly, in a way which is not always possible with community volunteer marketing. Other routes into universities include their student unions or career advisory services. Working patterns among student volunteers may not be the same as those of community volunteers – many have only a limited time during term, but may wish to offer to work intensively during vacations which can lend itself well to specific tasks.

Inter-generational volunteering
Yet despite their specific skills set, students should not be treated as a completely different category of volunteer. Students often work best when integrated with a team of community volunteers on large-scale projects. For example, students can work as IT literate partners to elderly community volunteers, listening to testimony, capturing knowledge and recording information on laptops. This kind of inter-generational work allows people to socialise and share skills in a way which is beneficial for both types of volunteers. In this way students can enhance a community volunteer team and help to support the delivery of a range of different programmes.

Discipline Specific Skills
For specific disciplines extra training is given to students, which they are often willing to put into practice in the workplace as a volunteer. For example, undergraduates in Archaeology will often be trained in graphic illustration of artefacts and have knowledge of the scientific analysis of objects. Likewise, Psychology, Sociology and Business students will have training in designing and conducting surveys and focus groups. Students with prior training can support other volunteers as they develop new skills and academic departments may assist with training and equipment. As
the types of activities carried out in museums become increasingly diverse and specialised, a university department may allow access to a large number of people with the specific skills you need.

**Subject Specific Knowledge**

Students may also have subject specific knowledge of collections that can make them excellent guides and researchers. Volunteer work with collections may also alert undergraduates to potentially interesting research topics, which in turn can reinforce the mutual benefits for student volunteers and museums of working together. Undergraduate dissertations, based on museum collections, are an unusual kind of volunteering as it is unpaid work, but it contributes significantly to the student’s degree result. If collections managers can identify interesting and achievable research topics and advertise them via departmental dissertation workshops, this can lead to detailed research being undertaken on previously unstudied artefacts. This kind of research need not be purely library and archive based. For example one student in the University of Reading Archaeology Department undertook advanced microscopy work on Coptic textiles from the Ure Museum of Greek Archaeology’s collection.

**Tapping into funding**

HE funding streams can sometimes be found to enable students to get workplace experience. The term internship or apprenticeship may best describe these placements. However, they are a useful extension to any volunteering programme by helping volunteers make the transition into full-time work in the sector.

On a smaller scale, Friends organisations and University Arts Committees may offer funding to buy equipment for student volunteers or to fund bursaries for student internships within university museums.

**Tapping into students skills**

With respect to vocational courses, design students, IT specialists and trainee teachers can support staff with specific projects that may lack resources. Graphic design students can produce high quality brochures, IT students can reinvigorate websites and PGCE students can design and trial school workshops in collaboration with trained staff. Such projects may have longer time frames and require more staff input than working with professional contractors. However, academic staff, who are often respected consultants in their chosen field, will supervise the students’ work and result in the production of an extremely high quality and cheap product when time is not of the essence.

**Developing new audiences through student volunteering**

Despite their commitment to lifelong learning, museums often experience difficulty in attracting learners between the ages of 18 and 30. Hence, engagement with HEIs and FE colleges can contribute to the museum’s audience development. As students become a part of the team they will also bring in friends and family and, as the Russell Commission (2005) illustrates, they can become effective advocates for volunteer organisations. Students can also offer advice and support on this audience group.

**Universities and Museum Volunteering**

The concept of students and academics contributing to their local communities through volunteering is of growing importance in the HE sector. The most notable recent initiative in this area has been the Higher Education Funding Council for England’s (HEFCE) Beacons for Public Engagement 2007-2011 programme. The Beacons for Public Engagement are university-based collaborative centres to help support, recognise, reward and build capacity for public engagement work across the UK. HEFCE, the UK funding councils and the Wellcome Trust, have invested £9.2 million in to this initiative in order to support a step-change in recognition for public engagement across the higher education sector. There are six Beacons around the UK, and one National Co-ordinating Centre. National partners include the BBC, V inspired and the MLA. Partner museums include the British Museum, the National Museum of Wales, Techniquest, Manchester Museum of
Science and Industry alongside the university museums at beacon HEIs (e.g. UCL, Manchester, UEA). Student volunteers have been involved in the design and delivery of the public events, exhibitions and workshops which this programme has funded.

The National Co-ordinating Centre for Public Engagement’s and Institute for Volunteer Research’s 2010 report ‘Bursting the Bubble’ has provided much needed data on the impact of student volunteering. They found that 63% of students have taken part in formal volunteering since starting university. Of these, 38% were introduced to volunteering by their university or student union, while 48% received no support. Those students who were supported by their HEI or union reported much greater personal development from the experience. The long term benefits can be seen in the fact that 51% of recent graduates under 30 years old in paid work stated that volunteering helped them to secure employment (NCCPE 2010). The report found that while senior staff were committed to supporting volunteering, there were funding constraints. The major barrier to student engagement in volunteering was found to be lack of time owing to academic pressures. The authors of the report suggested that linking volunteering to academic subjects or careers teaching might help to overcome this. At the University of Reading placements are now becoming a mandatory part of all undergraduate degree programmes.

The report also found that student volunteers reported increased transferable skills (ability to lead, confidence, self-discipline), community spirit (sense of feeling part of the local community/part of the university) and career skills (readiness for paid employment, chance of gaining employment in chosen field). Of those interviewed 45% also reported that volunteering had improved their knowledge of their chosen degree subject. However, as the title of the report ‘Bursting the Bubble’ suggests, the major benefit of volunteering was seen to be bursting out of the student ‘bubble’ and making a meaningful contribution to society.
Recruiting Student Museum Volunteers

The past ten years have witnessed increased interest in student and youth volunteering. Related research in this field has found that the routes and barriers to volunteering for students may differ from those of other volunteer groups. This section will examine some of the specific factors which may affect the success of heritage volunteering in higher education.

The Russell Commission (Russell 2005) identified a number of factors distinguishing young people's engagement in volunteering.

- Younger people placed greater emphasis on volunteering as a route to employment, and hence were more interested in opportunities which accredited volunteering.
- Many volunteer organisations need to challenge stereotypes of young people in order to appreciate the skills and knowledge which they can offer.
- Time demands on young people may differ from other groups of volunteers, so flexible placements such as short/taster opportunities can be successful.
- Young people can be extremely effective advocates for volunteering and volunteer organisations.
- Young people may need specialist support in accessing organisations which do not actively target them.
- Young people relied on the internet more than other volunteers as a means of finding out about volunteering opportunities.

Recruiting student volunteers

There are a number of challenges related to recruiting young people. Recruiting students can hold its own difficulties, especially for non university museums. FE colleges and universities are large complex institutions and it can often be difficult for external volunteer organisations to get access to students. Consequently, adopting a variety of approaches to recruiting students, and a multi-pronged strategy, usually works best.

Directed marketing

- Contact relevant heads of department or departmental administrators letting them know what you are offering. Ask for advice on the best way to let students and relevant academics know about these opportunities. These are very busy people so you may not get a response.
- Do some web research on specific programmes and courses being offered. For example, a museum/heritage module or a module linked to your collection may be found on an online module catalogue through searching for key terms. Module descriptions will often list the academic who runs or 'convenes' the module and their contact details can be searched for on the staff webpage.
- Don’t expect an immediate response as academics have a number of competing demands, but if you get somebody who is interested it can lead to a productive partnership.
- Don’t send information directly to mailing lists without permission from somebody at the university.
- Ask to have information included on course websites or on the university Virtual Learning Environment (VLE). You can look at what is already there and have something prepared in advance if you want to speed up the process.
- Send posters to departmental secretaries. E-mails often get deleted without viewing, posters can be simple but effective.
- Contact academics responsible for departmental careers provision. Offer to provide a talk.
at a relevant careers session, staff are often desperate for speakers.

Get them early

- Look up information on the Open Days at your local or home HEI. Contact the person in charge letting them know what you are offering, they will probably be in a department called something like ‘student recruitment’. You could also contact relevant departments to find out who their Admissions Officer is. Ask if you can set up a stand or provide fliers for Open Days. If you are on campus offer the museum as a location for recruitment and outreach activities.

- Contact departmental administrators and ask about their Freshers Week activities. Somebody in the department will be responsible for organising a week designed to orientate new students or ‘Freshers’ to the university and department. Ask whether you can put a flier in Freshers Packs and ask to be included in ‘Freshers Week’ orientation activities. e.g. many departments at the University of Reading include museums on their ‘campus treasure hunts’.

- Hold an event during Freshers Week. At the University of Reading we found it difficult to compete with the range of socials held in the evening but a coffee morning has proven successful. We talked to staff from relevant departments to avoid a timetable clash. We publicised the event on our Fresher’s Week fliers and sent an e-mail to departmental administrators.

Tap into non academic networks

- Social networking and internet presence can be an important way of contacting students. If you have a webpage, Twitter account and/or Facebook page you can ask for links to be included on student facing websites. This will also allow students who are searching the internet for information to stumble across you.

- Student Unions often have sophisticated systems for managing volunteers. Their student volunteering webpage will usually list a contact who you can provide with information on volunteering opportunities.

- Careers Service contacts can be found via University webpages. Careers Services offer the same provision and may also include you in official events if you ask e.g. graduate recruitment fairs.
Becoming 'student friendly'

The 'Volunteers for Museums' project developed a checklist of key recommendations regarding volunteer management. This can be used to assess current practice and also points to sources of advice on best practice in this area. As the Russell Commission (2005) and the NCCPE (2009, 2010) have found, young people and students may have particular needs as volunteers. This section of the report will not seek to recount general work on volunteer management, but will highlight areas which may be of particular importance with regards to student volunteers. Of interest here is the University of York’s research on student volunteers with the York Museums Trust (Braudel and Hogarth 2005). The series of interviews with a small group of student volunteers offer an insight into the experience of being a student volunteer in a non university museum. This section also draws on 6 years of experience of managing the University of Reading’s museums and Collections volunteer programme.

Understanding volunteering as a two way process

Managers of volunteers are aware of specialist training, recruitment and training available through outside volunteering organisations.

Students are able to benefit from training opportunities and a wide range of volunteer experiences. However, they may also be isolated from local organisations and so may stay particularly loyal to one organisation e.g. their departmental museum. Volunteer managers must balance the desire to retain high quality volunteers with the knowledge that students may be ‘professionals in training’. Managers of student volunteers should consider whether it may be in the student’s best interest to point them in the direction of other organisations, even if it means ‘losing them’.

Resources

Succession planning is in place for key volunteer roles.

Student volunteering can be much easier to plan as it follows the patterns of the academic year. However, this also means that the museum must take this in to account in the plans of their volunteer team, for example recognising that student volunteers may not be available out of term time. Students will usually move away and stop volunteering at the end of their degree. Hence, it is advisable to recruit students early in their degree programmes. The advantage to this turnover is that students can be recruited, put through induction and trained together at the beginning of an academic year, for instance through dedicated ‘freshers programmes’.

Students will often not be available during vacations if they move home outside of term time. However, if they live locally they can work intensively over the vacation period in a way that other volunteers may not be able to. The exam period and the beginning and end of term are also tricky times for contacting student volunteers. Some universities set aside particular afternoons for sports and volunteer activities. However, this may involve competing with other activities or time which is used for paid work. As the University of York’s study found, it is also worth thinking about student ‘downtime’ when planning group activities for volunteers e.g. Christmas parties or training.

Diversity

The museum is open to involving volunteers from a wider variety of backgrounds and abilities.

Information about the museum and ways in which volunteers can be involved is as widely distributed as possible.

Research is carried out to understand the barriers to volunteering within the team and at the museum.

As has already been suggested, it can be relatively easy to recruit students if you are able to tap into existing marketing processes. However, such students are self selecting and may not reflect the full diversity of the student population. For an example of research into student volunteer
diversity, see the case study on the Fair Access programme (pg 14).

In a university museum this ease of recruitment may lead to complacency amongst volunteer managers. With a little marketing, students can easily be recruited in numbers so large that it makes it difficult to meet demand. However, volunteer managers should continue to make time for community volunteers. For people with no experience of post-18 education universities and colleges may be seen as exclusive and elitist. It can be hard to break down these barriers when trying to attract people from non-traditional backgrounds to University Museums. Hence, a volunteer programme which is biased towards students in terms of marketing, training, hours offered etc may put off some community volunteers. While, in a university town, students and staff may reflect a large section of the local community, volunteer managers should monitor how the diversity of the team reflects local statistics. Students can gain a lot from inter-generational and community integrated volunteer work and vice-versa.

**Appropriate rules**

*Where possible, tasks are adapted to suit the needs, abilities and skills of individual volunteers.*

Disabilities such as dyslexia and dyspraxia are increasingly recognised conditions among the student population. Students may have university support or may be completely unaware of their disability. If you suspect a problem you can get confidential advice from support staff at the university. The Volunteers for Museums project developed a self-led evaluation kit that allows museum volunteers to assess their own abilities. This toolkit also provides guidelines on ‘reasonable adjustment’ for volunteers in museums.

It is also worth noting that some students may desire specific advanced training or professional level experience beyond usual volunteer projects. This is most usually delivered through internships and work placements, however it can also take place outside of a formal programme. If this is well managed it can be beneficial for the museum and the student. For example, a student may wish to study a specific section of a collection for an archaeology dissertation or an art student may wish to stage an installation in a museum. This is especially the case at a post-graduate level, for example a PGCE student may wish to develop events or workshops in collaboration with an education officer rather than purely assist on a session. It is important to note that the line between volunteer and staff may become blurred in these instances and the limits of the project need to be formalised. Staff should be careful not to put too much responsibility on to student volunteers. They should allot sufficient time for supporting the volunteer and be sensitive to the other demands on students’ time.

**Recruitment procedures**

*At some point during recruitment the individual's reasons for volunteering, their expectations and aspirations are discussed.*

Student volunteers may have very little understanding of the museum sector when they are first recruited. However, they are likely to be volunteering in order to develop experience for a future career in the sector. Some students have very fixed ideas about what they think they want to do. It is important to guide them to get as wide a range of experience and training as possible, in order to better plan for the future.

Volunteer managers may be asked by students for specific advice regarding career planning. This usually happens on a one-to-one basis and with a large volunteer team this can be quite demanding. At the University of Reading we developed museums careers events and workshops to provide careers support for a large number of students at one time. These events allow student volunteers to talk with members of staff who do not directly supervise them as volunteers e.g. archivists, librarians, conservators. Other institutions have developed webpages with similar information, for example see St Andrews wikipage in the links section at the end of this document.

After graduation student volunteers may keep in touch with volunteer managers regarding job applications. This may happen for a number of years after graduation while a former student
establishes themselves in the museum sector or any other line of work. Good record keeping is essential for all volunteers, but 'exit references' from supervisors can also help when providing references at a later date. See the section on routes into employment for more information.

**Volunteer Recognition**

*The museum offers volunteers with the opportunity to further develop their skills with access to workshops, training and other kinds of learning.*

*Volunteers who have made a regular commitment are offered a reference or the opportunity to have their work accredited.*

All volunteers can benefit from training opportunities and formal recognition, whether this be a reference or some kind of certification. Such opportunities allow even retired people to feel a sense of achievement and of being valued. For students, training and accreditation are extremely important as they build up experience for the world of work. The more formal the training and accreditation is, the more impressive it will look to future employers. However volunteering is an extra-curricula activity and it should not feel too much like academic work, so training and accreditation has to be flexible and fun. This flexibility allows organisations to offer the same opportunities to students and community volunteers. See the case study on recognition and accreditation at the University of Reading for some examples of how this has been achieved (pg 16).

Publicising training and accreditation opportunities can help to attract those who have not previously volunteered. However it does involve a great deal of commitment from volunteer managers and their organisations. This can be alleviated through collaboration with local volunteer organisations. Regional museum development offices may also allow volunteers to attend training events. You can also team up with other local museums for training and to swap skills. A very simple way of doing this is through an ‘away day’ where teams of volunteers go behind the scenes of another museum.

Most kinds of volunteer work in museums involve some kind of basic training. This is normally carried out on a one-to-one basis for each individual volunteer. Individual training can often be easily adapted into a workshop for a number of volunteers. This saves staff time and has a number of other benefits. Even if a student is not working on a specific project, training on something general such as cataloguing will enhance their CV. Such sessions will also allow volunteers to form friendships and will give them an official training session to cite in job applications.
Routes into Employment
Volunteering is an important factor in getting a first job in to the museum sector. This section outlines how volunteer managers who supervise students may give advice on career development. Two of the case studies at the end of this document will discuss specific projects in which museums and universities supported students in using volunteering as a route into post-graduate training and employment. However, in general volunteer managers should take time to think about the way in which volunteer experience may look on a CV. For example, would a student who had volunteered at 3 different museums be more employable that a student who had worked at one museum for 3 years? As has already been stated, what might be good for a museum supervisor is not always good for a student’s long-term employability.

Volunteer managers should also think about how they may support student volunteers after graduation. This may involve writing an ‘exit reference’ at the time of departure to be used for future applications. It is also good practice to keep in touch with students so that they can contact you for advice and references. As ‘professionals in training’ they can become part of your professional network over time. Encourage students to keep in touch but lay down ground rules e.g. alerting you to reference requests. Some students are hesitant to ask for advice, others will expect you to provide information and advice at the 11th hour. Clearly defined communication ground rules will also alert them to informal networking protocol in the sector. As heritage professionals, volunteer managers and supervisors can provide useful advice on entering the job market, which will not be available elsewhere.

What looks good on a CV:
- formal training
- recognition/ accreditation/ certification
- a range of different types of experience
- a range of different types of organisation
- careers training
- special responsibility
- paid work
- internships

Internship and part-time work
An intern is a category which falls between employee and volunteer. An intern is somebody working in a temporary position with an emphasis on on-the-job training rather than employment. They can be paid, unpaid or partially paid through a stipend or bursary. Internships can help committed volunteers to take their first steps on the career ladder, and even when they are unpaid they can provoke a great deal of competition. Hence, museum staff should be careful not to show favouritism and offer these opportunities as widely as possible.

Increasingly students will be working to fund their degrees, and paid work can take up a great deal of their spare time. Some students are not able to afford to engage in unpaid volunteer work, and paid or stipended internships are their only chance to get museum experience. The other option is to advertise opportunities for part-time paid work to the student community. For example, weekend front-of-house positions can allow student to gain experience whilst still earning money. As with internships, it is important to advertise these opportunities as widely as possible. Graduating students may also apply for junior posts that come up in the museum and it may be difficult to give advice without providing an unfair advantage. Volunteer managers should consult senior staff if asked for advice from a student volunteer with an internal application. They can also facilitate feedback to make sure students are supported in what is often their first job application. In this way volunteer managers can support members of their team as they make the transition from valued volunteer to member of the workforce.
**Case Study 1: Fair Access**

**Background to the project**

The volunteer team in the University Museums and Special Collections Service (UMASCS) at the University of Reading were approached in March 2010 to provide evidence of excellence in student volunteering. This was incorporated into a university-wide bid for funding for the University’s successful application to Higher Education Council for England for a programme of allocated undergraduate internships.

‘Fair Access’ internships are part of a wider government initiative to broaden access to the professions. The scheme was aimed at under-represented groups within specific professions. Funds were provided to help students overcome the obstacles that might prevent them from undertaking the work experience needed to enhance their career prospects. The University was successful in securing this funding and allocated UMASCS the funds for four internships.

**Process**

The overall scheme was managed by staff within the University’s Careers Advisor Service, with the UMASCS volunteer team being asked to organise four weeks placements during the 2010 summer vacation and to recruit students. The students were paid £200 per week, plus a contribution to travel expenses. We learnt of the success of the bid early May 2010 and a training day was planned for 2nd July which gave us less than two months to negotiate placements, recruit and interview students.

The central team provided the following suggestions of types of exclusion: professional networks, exclusion on the basis of age, gender, ethnicity or disability, socio economic exclusion. Students were asked to define how they were excluded and demonstrate their suitability for the scheme in a short essay. Given the ethical difficulties of ‘ranking’ different types of social exclusion we made a decision to interview all students who met at least some of the ‘Fair Access’ criteria. This gave students the experience of applying for a museum position which we deemed to be a valuable part of the scheme. It was decided that successful students should also be able to demonstrate a passion for the profession and have transferable skills which would make them suitable for a museum internship.

‘Volunteers for Museums’ project partners were given first priority and when they unable to provide the full quota we approached other local contacts. As other university departments were unable to fill all of their allocated internships, UMASCS was given another placement to organise, a week before the deadline. Nevertheless, we successfully managed to organise 5 placements: High Wycombe (2 placements), Museum of Reading, Slough Museum and the River and Rowing Museum in Henley.

**Results**

Nineteen applications were received for the scheme. The students who were successful were from BME backgrounds, had a learning disability and/or came from single income families. All of the chosen candidates were female and came from arts, humanities and social science departments. Overall, there were only three male applicants and only one applicant with a disability. Most applicants cited low income status as evidence of need and it was clear that they would be unable to support themselves through an internship without this kind of financial backing.

It is difficult at the moment to demonstrate the long term impact of this project on student employability, as the successful candidates have not yet graduated. However, all of the interns are now pursuing placement and volunteer opportunities with their host museums or other organisations.
Impact

‘I learnt loads from my work at the museum, from how museums are run, to how objects are stored and collected, as I was working with the education officer at the museum. I learnt tons about how museums interact with the community on an educational basis, and even had the opportunity to take some sessions myself!’

Sarah

‘Since I worked in a small museum I had the opportunity to work in many sectors of the museum. I learnt there were many different areas you could work in, such as front desk, working with museum collections/exhibitions, auditing collections, and also areas that were new to me, such as working in community fairs to promote the museum to the public on weekends, over the half term holidays producing activities the museum provides just for kids.

Before working in the museum, I always saw myself working behind the scenes of a museum, working with the objects, maybe exhibition, but I realised as I mentioned earlier, there was many more opportunities and I didn’t realise that I had more passion with working with the public then being stuck upstairs repeatedly auditing or working with collections. You think you want to work in a particular field but the internship makes you either confirm this or dissolve it altogether, which helps in building you future career.

Lastly more importantly you get to learn the museum databases when you learn this it is a very useful skill since all museums would have a database and I feel confident knowing I have a skill that can be applied most museums.’

Natalie
Case Study 2: Recognising student volunteering

Background to the project

In 2008-9 the UMASCs volunteer programme at the University of Reading engaged in a project funded by two Centres for Excellence in Teaching and Learning; CETL-AURS (CETL for Applied Undergraduate Research Skills) and CCMS (CETL for Careers Management Skills). CETLs were funded by the Higher Education Funding Council for England to develop and disseminate best practise in HE teaching and learning. Additional funding was provided by the former MLA South East’s Workforce Development Fund.

The project involved the creation of new training resources and the development of an accreditation programme of volunteer work for University of Reading students volunteering with the University’s museums and collections.

Process

In 2008-9 a new scheme was piloted. The University’s Student Union had already created an accreditation programme for their volunteers called MASIV (Modular Accreditation of Students in Volunteering). Students would submit a logbook of volunteering activity and an essay outlining what they had learnt from these experiences. A fellow volunteer and a volunteer supervisor would also submit references for the volunteer. This would all go into a portfolio which would be assessed by a committee comprised of Student Union and University representatives. If it met a pass/fail criteria the student would have this noted on their degree transcript. It should be noted that completion of this programme did not affect the student’s overall degree results as the programme did not carry any academic marks.

In order to support this initiative, new workshops and resources were created in conjunction with the Berkshire, Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire Museum Development Officer. These workshops gave sector specific careers advice and practical training in various aspects of heritage management. The potential of e-portfolios as a method of supporting student reflection was also explored.

Twenty-five students engaged in the pilot accreditation scheme with even more attending the related workshops. Accreditation was assessed through a log, references, a portfolio of evidence and a self-reflexive essay. Recognition of the award was given via inclusion of a ‘non-credit bearing module’ on the student’s degree transcript. This meant that volunteering was formally recognised without affecting grades.

Results

The flexible nature of the assessment seemed to suit students’ schedules. The need for self-reflexion also helped students to think about their experiences and provided a template for future job and post-graduate applications. The students who applied were self-selecting and were mainly existing volunteers. However, feedback suggested that the offer of accreditation was instrumental in attracting some new volunteers.

The programme also seems to have had an impact post-graduation; the student who is quoted here was accepted on Leicester University’s Museum Studies programme immediately following graduation. The Student Union’s MASIV scheme has recently been integrated into a more comprehensive award offered by the central university administration, the Reading Experience and Development or RED award, and it follows the MASIV programme’s example in making accreditation suit the student schedule

http://www.reading.ac.uk/internal/readingexperienceanddevelopmentaward/reda-home.aspx
Impact and outcome

Impact on students
'I met different kinds of people working with members of the Road Locomotive Society on the project. I was the only student and they were mainly retired but I learnt a lot from them and they were extremely welcoming.

The skills I have acquired as a volunteer have helped me in my degree and in making decisions about my future career. I am planning on working in this sector so I am hoping that the mixture of training, experience and accreditation from this project will impress potential employers.'

Frances Potts

Impact on staff
'Working as the sole member of staff on a cataloguing project it has been a really positive experience having a volunteer to assist on some areas of the listing work. Supervising the volunteer has given me valuable knowledge of managing others which I would not have the chance to have otherwise. The volunteer is gaining hands-on experience of working with a collection as well as producing a clear, accurate and consistent list which will be used to ensure material worthy of permanent preservation is retained.'

Hayley Whiting

Impact on service
'Being able to harness the enthusiasm and energy of our student community, while at the same time giving individuals a taste of working in our sector, has been a thoroughly positive experience for us. The diversity of our collections often means that project archivists are required to work in “silos”, and so creating small teams of volunteers and professionals enables us to add value to projects and to develop management skills among our team. Achieving the balance between preservation and outreach is a constant struggle for archives services, and volunteering is one of the ways in which we can achieve both. It is too early to draw firm conclusions but the involvement of students in volunteering projects seems to be paralleled by an increase in their use of the collections in their studies. A community that is involved in both preserving and using the collections – isn’t that what every heritage professional would like to see?’

Guy Baxter
Case Study 3: Oxford University Museums Service - Wow!How?

Background to the project

In 2003 the Oxford University Museums and Collections were funded by HEACF (Higher Education Active Community Fund) to increase volunteering opportunities for University staff and students with local communities, via volunteer-led family activities in the museums. A Volunteer Coordinator was appointed to work across all six collections and volunteers were recruited via posters in Departments and Colleges, attending Freshers’ Fair, and a website (now [www.museums.ox.ac.uk](http://www.museums.ox.ac.uk)). Students came forward and successfully helped at family activities, vastly increasing what the museums could offer to the public. However, it was notable that the largely female group of volunteers came, in the main, from an arts/humanities background. When a female scientist came forward with an idea to put on a family science fair at one of the museums, and recruit some of her friend scientists to help her, the Oxford University Museum of Natural History responded positively.

The Joint Museums Volunteer Service is now funded by Renaissance in the Regions and has a pool of about 500 volunteers at any time.

Process

Wow!How? takes place on the last Saturday of term in March, which is usually in Science and Engineering Week. Recruitment of science students and staff starts in earnest as soon as the spring term starts, and is done by e-mailing last year’s volunteers, all science department administrators and sending posters to colleges. Making the most of this being a chance to practise science communication skills in a safe and friendly environment, with a guaranteed audience has been very effective in volunteer recruitment. A briefing evening in the middle of January usually attracts about 30 volunteers, but not all potential volunteers manage to come. They are invited to participate in one of four ways:

- to come up with their own idea for a science stall and develop it, with help from the volunteer service
- to lead on a ‘tried and tested’ stall which they can be briefed on
- to help on another stall
- to help generally on the day covering breaks, taking photos, doing evaluation forms

All lead volunteers are encouraged to recruit scientist friends so that the day is more fun for them and they can help each other take breaks. New volunteers register on the volunteer website and two references are sought for each new volunteer. Deadlines are provided for volunteers to present their initial idea, and then the volunteer service broker the conservation and health and safety issues with museum staff from Front-of House, buildings maintenance and curatorial teams. Another deadline is provided for volunteers to present their formal risk assessment and demonstration of their stall.

Results

‘Wow! How?’, is now in its eighth year, and has become the university’s largest Science and Engineering Week event, attracting about 3000 people every year. In 2011, over 140 volunteers will run nearly 45 different stalls, showing off their favourite science demonstrations and experiments amongst the dinosaurs, fossils and minerals of the Natural History Museum and now also the man-made treasures of the Pitt Rivers Museum.

Over the years alka-seltser powered rockets have been built and launched, bugs have been handled, slime manufactured, DNA extracted, marble runs constructed, ice-cream made using liquid nitrogen, chocolate microwaved to work out the speed of light, star jumps jumped to discover how many are needed to burn off the calories in a Smartie, and so on and so on…

Over 50% of volunteers for Wow! How? have been male, and whilst many WowHow? volunteers
choose only to be involved in this event, many come back year after year, and recruit their friends. A good proportion (around 20%) do continue to volunteer at other events at other University museums, in other capacities. For example, most of the largely male group of volunteer tour guides at the Museum of History of Science were recruited via one stalwart Wow!How? volunteer.

The local branch of the British Science Association has provided a small amount of sponsorship in some years. However the cost of Wow!How? is small, since science departments see this as a chance for students to use the ‘science communication’ element of grant funding they receive for outreach purposes.

**Impact**

‘Just how 'up for it' all the volunteers were! Really positive Thank you all.’

‘Really had a lot of fun, really appreciate all the work that went into it.’

‘I'd like to raise my voice in support of WowHow. It is a great opportunity to get practical science in touch with the public in a great atmosphere. No stuffiness or atmosphere of 'teaching'. Just lots of noise and mess with some serious science lying underneath - perfect.’

‘Almost all scientists live and work on public funds - be they given under law (tax) or given out of generosity (charities). It's nice to have a space and a plentiful supply of interested public - so that I have a chance to engage them with the work we do.’

‘Events like WowHow force scientists to think about their work in English for a change and enhance the communications skills of graduate students. They have to explain how what they are doing matters, rather than listing what they've done and what the results are. It's an important skill.’

‘My table explored the variety of leaves and their functions in nature. ……Children were encouraged to spray water on huge waterproof banana leaves and touch the gel-like insides of a cut-open aloe vera leaf. On craft tables, kids made leaf identification keys and their very own Venus Fly Trap. Their enthusiasm was infectious and before I knew it, we had spent six hours engrossed in science. ..........Many families come every year to ‘Wow! How?’ and I know that I will be returning as a volunteer. Years of bench work during my PhD and post-doc had lullled me into thinking perhaps only scientists may be interested in science. Volunteering with the ‘Wow! How?’ Science fair reminded me that everyone can share in the excitement of scientific discovery.’
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Travers, T. 2006. Museums and Galleries in Britain: Economic Creative and Social Impacts. LSE.


University of St Andrews. Careers wiki.

http://www.st-andrews.ac.uk/careers/wiki/Museums_and_Galleries

Links

University Museums Group UK  http://www.umin.org.uk/
The Institute for Volunteering Research (IVR)  http://www.ivr.org.uk/
Pathways through Participation  http://pathwaysthroughparticipation.org.uk/
National co-ordinating centre for public engagement  www.publicengagement.ac.uk
Beacons for Public Engagement  http://www.publicengagement.ac.uk/about/beacons
The Engaged University: A Manifesto for Public Engagement.  
www.publicengagement.ac.uk/sites/default/files/Public%20Engagement%20Manifesto.pdf
Knowledge Transfer Partnerships  http://www.ktponline.org.uk/
Undergraduate Research Opportunities Programme (UROP)  http://www.reading.ac.uk/internal/urop
SEED  http://www.reading.ac.uk/ktc/seed/ktc-seed-company.aspx