

## International Centre for Cultural and Heritage Studies Response to the report 'The Tomorrow People'

In April 2007 a report [\*The Tomorrow People: entry to the museum workforce\*](#) was published by the Museums Association. The report was based on a study carried out by Maurice Davies, deputy director of the Museums Association, during a Research Fellowship at the University of East Anglia.

The report attempts to describe the current state of affairs for people trying to get into the museums workforce and for those trying to progress in their careers, it also makes a series of recommendations.

Conversations with prospective students have indicated that some people have read this report and that it influenced their decisions regarding whether or not to enter the cultural heritage sector. For this reason, amongst others, we felt that it is important to present our responses to the findings and recommendations of the report.

We agree with some of the points made in the report, but we take issue with others.

In what follows we cite the report (in italics) and then give our response. The following is a fairly long text, but then again the report says a lot about careers in cultural heritage and about MA programmes such as ours.

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### *Recommendation 4*

*As well as considering the needs of individual students, museum-studies courses need to take greater, more strategic responsibility for their impact on the museum workforce as a whole. Increased cooperation between museums and courses would bring benefits for students, museums and universities.*

It's worth pointing out that, in Section 6 of the report, employers do have good things to say about MA programmes! However, this doesn't necessarily come across in the summary and recommendations. We would encourage you to read the whole thing, if you've got the time.

*Things are undoubtedly tough for job-seekers... (p.21)*

We would have to agree with the report that it is a difficult sector to break into. Then again, so are lots of other vocational professions - teaching and medicine being two examples.

*Volunteering is seen by some employers as a sign of commitment to museum work... (p.23)*

Again, we would agree with the report and its conclusions about the discriminatory nature of making volunteering more or less a requirement for applicants to posts. This is a problem area. The report recommends that *ideally museums would offer more structured, perhaps even paid work-experience and internships for people at a variety of levels*. Again, we think this is a good idea, but museums would need to put some real effort into solving the practicalities and the financing of such internships.

Despite reports and recommendations to the contrary, a lot of museums do still look for prior experience in candidates for jobs – this is why we put a work placement into our programmes.

The ICCHS MA programmes contain an obligatory 8 week work placement, which is valued by students and employers; as well as practical projects working in real-life situations in many of its modules, such as curating displays and exhibitions at local museums and galleries, or running education workshops with schoolchildren or other groups. Our intention is that these function to put the theoretical learning into a practical context and to provide the experience that employers are looking for.

ICCHS also offers an MPrac programme – which is essentially a 36 week structured placement arranged by the university in consultation with the student and potential hosts. One of the benefits of the MPrac programme is that it provides the extensive experience that more than meets employers require.

*University museums could link undergraduates seeking work-experience with the wider museum community. (p.26)*

Linking undergraduates seeking work experience with the wider community is, in practice, a job in itself. Newcastle university careers service is developing a new programme that may help with this. In the meantime the Placements Manager at ICCHS deals with any ad hoc enquiries. The North East regional museums sector is also working towards a streamlined way of making information about volunteering opportunities available to interested parties.

*Museums need to have a range of entry routes... (p.11)*

The sector is beginning to open up new entry routes. Creative & Cultural Skills (CCSKills) – the sector skills council for the cultural and creative industries - have recently launched the pilot projects for their new [Creative Apprenticeship Scheme](#) – this is aimed primarily at younger people.

The sector also draws in people from other fields and recognises the skills they bring. Training opportunities that introduce them to the sector they have entered (such as the Core Skills training programme developed by the North East Regional Museums Hub) have proven very successful.

*People on short term contracts are rarely encouraged to develop [...]. Short-term contracts are here to stay and individual museums, and the sector as a whole need to do more to support the development of people on short-term contracts (and freelancers). (p.46)*

*Career progression [...] is hampered by the number of over-qualified and experienced people looking for work. [...] There is a significant amount of stagnation in the workforce with many people feeling stuck. (p.48)*

Again, the prevalence of short term contracts, and the relative scarcity of permanent posts, is not unique to the cultural heritage sector. Unfortunately, career progression within a single organisation can be difficult and it is easier if you are free to move around the country. On the plus side the sector is full of people who are knowledgeable and help support each other

through subject-specialist and professional organisations, so progression in one's career/profession is possible. The [Creative Choices](#) site was launched in 2008 to provide sector specific careers advice.

*Employers tend to be unsure about what different courses offer. [...] There can be a tendency for employers to see courses as out of touch with museums. (p.27)*

Museum studies courses are not all equal – the absence of a recognition / accreditation system (because of decisions made by CCSkills and the MA) makes it difficult for both employers and prospective students to judge the courses. CCSkills intends to introduce framework to help with this but in the meantime course providers across the UK are getting together to see how they can address the issue.

In the meantime...

*The main way to [improve the situation] would be through closer working between museums and museum studies courses, ideally in formal partnerships. [...] There could be more local regional or even national discussion between courses and museums about skill priorities and course content. (p. 33)*

Museums Studies (etc.) courses do work with partner organisations. Staff from Tyne & Wear Museums are on ICCHS Board of Studies. 100 guest lecturers, who currently work in the sector, give lectures to our students helping make that link between theory and practice. In a meeting between employers and providers, hosted by the MA in January 2008, many of the providers there seemed genuinely bewildered by the suggestion that they don't talk to providers. On the contrary, they argued that they continue to have good relationships with employers.

Many organisations continue to offer to host ICCHS students on work placements, year after year, because they value the students that come to work with them on the placement. This is a very practical endorsement of our MA programme.

*In many professional areas employers tend to feel that university courses are more academic and theoretical than necessary. [...] Museum-studies courses want to produce graduates who think critically and creatively about the sector [...] but these qualities [...] are not always recognised as a strength by the sector. (p.28)*

This is a fair summary of the current situation. There is a need for a real discussion between employers and HE providers on what skills, knowledge and understanding employers need and what MA programmes deliver. To date, this discussion has not taken place. Our conclusion (from our own study and from the *Tomorrow People* report) is that there is no single ideal candidate – i.e., each employer has different ideas of what their ideal candidate is like, based both on the nature and culture of their organisation and the role in question. So MA programmes have to help their students develop a broad range of skills and aptitudes. However, as programme deliverers, we feel that our MA programmes deliver knowledge, skills and understanding that are broader than the specific set being demanded by employers but which are nonetheless of value to both employers and employees throughout their careers. Responses from our own graduates who now have jobs in the sector suggest that we have got the balance roughly right. ([Link to careers section of website](#))

*When selecting students who seek a career in museums, courses need to try to be sure that they really are likely to succeed. (p.37)*

This breadth in the range of qualities that employers look for means that MA programmes should not and do not apply admissions criteria that seek to filter out people who are supposedly unsuitable for working in the sector. Rather our role is to help people develop the skills they will need.

*Employers often lament the fact that so few men and so few people from minority-ethnic backgrounds apply for entry level jobs [...] (p.38)*

ICCHS has been actively involved in the Diversify scheme for many years and fully supports this approach. However experience of working with students and employers on this scheme suggests that it would be beneficial and timely to have more evaluation of the way the scheme currently works. The MA has recognised that 'diversity' is greater than ethnicity and we would support this and feel that the issue of diversifying the sector needs to be revisited and explored in more depth with all parties.

Following the publication of *The Tomorrow People*, ICCHS surveyed its alumni to judge some of the claims made by the report. Subsequently, the structure of the course has been shifted in order to make it easier for people who need to work part-time while completing the course. This adjustment will be applied from September 2009.