

Guidance on obtaining experience in museums, art museums, galleries and heritage before you join ICCHS

This document is designed to provide new ICCHS students with an introduction to obtaining experience in museums, art museums, galleries and heritage sites before they join the course in September.

Please note that obtaining experience prior to joining ICCHS is not essential, but any opportunities that students are able to obtain and develop will strengthen their curriculum vitae and assist in the organisation of their placement during the MA course.

This document is intended to be used as either a starter's guide and/ or a reference list. Please also note that this is not a definitive document as there are many ways to obtain experience in the cultural sector. The content is based upon the experience of ICCHS staff and their knowledge of setting up voluntary programmes/placements.

ICCHS recognises that many students are in full-time/part-time employment before they join us in September which makes obtaining experience very difficult. If this is the case, then please don't worry. Many opportunities develop during the first Semester of the course which provide students with the chance to develop their skills and gain practical experience within the sector.

Selecting Venues:

Initially, you should look at the types of organisations/ venues that are geographically accessible to you.

You should consider the demand that there may be for your first choice venue: remember that the larger the venue, and the more recognizable it is as a brand, the more likely it is to receive lots of requests for placement/ volunteers, and so the fiercer the competition is likely to be. With this in mind it is worth targeting several venues at the same time.

Also, think about the type experience that a venue can offer you, and what you want to achieve from your time there. Ask yourself: Is working in a smaller venue going to potentially provide a wider and more varied experience, or would working in a larger venue in a more concentrated and defined role within a specific team be beneficial to you?

You should then start by looking for sections on their websites which mention work experience, volunteers, internships and/ or placements in order to see what provision is made for people looking for opportunities. Investigate whether there is a formal route for applying. You should ask: Do you need to complete an application form, or do you just need to send in a CV? Is there a deadline for applicants or do they take people on all year round? Will there be an interview and if so, will you be in competition with other people?

If they don't have an area for voluntary work on their website/ a policy, then this isn't necessarily a negative! It might be a perfect opportunity for you to develop and negotiate a unique voluntary opportunity for yourself.

You should also research any venue thoroughly before speaking to anyone that works there, as your knowledge, enthusiasm and understanding of the venue will quickly become apparent and the first contact you make is a good way to create a lasting impression amongst staff there: It is easier to speak with enthusiasm if you are confident about your subject!

Occasionally large venues have a register that call upon people at short notice to assist with installations, event support and help with workshops etc. You should ask if the venue have a volunteer's register. This can be a useful scheme to join if there aren't any opportunities available at the particular time of your enquiry:

Managing your time and your commitments:

The next step is to set out the days that you available to volunteer: For example, if you are free to work for half a day, or a day each week, then make it clear that you are able to commit yourself to a venue for the same slot each week.

This can be a great help, especially for smaller venues, as it can free up staff to work on projects that they may otherwise not have time to undertake.

It might be that you are able to give a few weeks of part time work in a continuous block, and again, you should discuss this with staff...sometimes its worth suggesting the possibility that you could work on a specific project/ event/ installation over a set period of time.

Factor in your journey times and travel costs to and from the venue: some institutions offer help with travel expenses, so remember to ask if they can help out with this.

Don't overstretch yourself. If you are already working, either full time or part time, then factor this in, and make sure you can manage and deliver the commitments you make.

The most sensible approach is to treat your commitment to a voluntary post as if it were a paid position: The impression you create as a volunteer leaves staff with a lasting view both within the organization in which you are based and also with their immediate network of associated venues.

Remember, it is likely that you will continually meet supervisors and staff again later in your career, either through a project or even in a job interview! So treat colleagues with respect, and maintain a committed & professional outlook at all times

Remember you are an ambassador for the host venue whilst you are volunteering: always dress appropriately, and arrive on time.

CV and covering letters:

Avoid sending generic letters out to multiple venues: Staff normally receive lots of requests for voluntary posts, and so your letter needs to stand out. Basic errors can occur when you send out multiple copies of letters...typical mistakes include asking for experience in their 'museum' when really it is a 'gallery'!

If you show you know something about the institution's collection/ site etc. and that you are looking for an experience that is directly appropriate to their venue, then it is more likely they will pursue your offer.

Always include full contact details in your letters, **including email addresses and if appropriate Mobile telephone numbers**: The easier it is for staff to get in touch with you, the more likely it is they will get back in touch and offer you voluntary work.

Remember that it will take time to build your CV, so be flexible in the types of work you undertake: remember that in the early stages of career development, all experiences are valuable. Volunteering not only exposes you to areas you want to pursue, but it can also clarify those areas that you don't want to pursue as a professional.

Think laterally about how your skills are transferable both in the presentation of your CV, and how you can then talk about your experiences in an interview situation.

Rather than listing your skills, explain how you are developing as a young professional and how your skills can be transferred from one project to another: staff look for initiative, flexible individuals that can work both individually and in a team.

Networking & getting to know the sector:

Join as many Mailing lists as you can in your field of interest: If you are a member of a gallery/ museum or heritage site's mailing list then you are more likely to be invited to preview events and receive special invitations to venues, Exhibition open days etc.

By attending these events, you can begin to develop a network within your region, making yourself recognizable as a regular visitor amongst staff from a range of venues.

You can then use these events to keep yourself informed, approach people and develop your interpersonal skills whilst simultaneously broadening your contact base.

Final Notes:

Don't be disappointed if your applications are initially unsuccessful...if you don't manage to secure an opportunity with your first few applications then try again. It might take you quite a few attempts to secure work experience.

Remember, that often staff are very busy within the heritage, museum and gallery sector and it can take time for people to respond to you enquiry. It is normal to first send a written letter or email and then follow this up with a courtesy telephone call after about 10 days.