

Internships: Students and Collections

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Abstract

This paper examines the benefits of students working with collections through the formal structure of internships in tertiary museums studies programs. The sophistication of skills required to work in the industry means that not only do those aspiring to work in museums need tertiary qualifications but they also need a combination of skills and knowledge that increasingly come from outside formal learning paradigms. With the growth in popularity of internships as an educational tool, it is important to understand the relationship between the museum sector, the education providers and, of course, the students. Internships provide a crucial bridge between formal and informal learning paradigms, but current practices in the profession are *ad hoc* and inconsistent, and in need of comprehensive debate across the sector.

Introduction

The skills needed by those aspiring to work in museums and heritage have become increasingly more sophisticated (ICOM 2000; ICTOP 2008). Historically, on-the-job training and within-institution mentorship offered typical entry-level career routes, but few museums remain able to allocate significant levels of funding to train the next generation of professionals through in-house apprenticeships or professional development (Abasa 1995; McShane 2001; Holmes 2005). Instead, would-be employees are expected to arrive as fully competent professionals ready to hit the ground running. Tertiary institutions thus play a significant role in formally educating the museum and heritage staff of tomorrow, both in disciplinary-based specialisations and through dedicated museum studies courses.

However, despite the internationally recognised need for cooperation between universities and collecting institutions in providing highly trained museum professionals, there has long been an element of contention between the relative emphasis to be placed on the values of the respective learning environments (Chen 2004), although the learning commonalities

and the symbiotic relationship between higher education and museums are increasingly being articulated.⁴⁰ We see student internships⁴¹ in museums as providing unparalleled opportunities to foster this relationship, and especially to act as a nexus between theory and practice. This paper describes the current internship practices at the Australian National University in the context of a broader understanding of the role of internships in professional education, and uses these practices as a platform to consider the potential for a more integrated approach to internships across Australia's tertiary and industry sectors.

Internships at the nexus of theory and practice

Museum and heritage studies are fields that fundamentally exist at the intersection of theory and practice (van Mensch 1990; Howard 2003; Baxter et al. 1999). Although characterised by a commitment to achieving collaboration across the university and museum/heritage sectors, as well as with governments, policy-makers, constituents, and audiences, such cooperation is notoriously difficult to achieve (Mason 2006; Macdonald 2006), and museum and heritage professionals commonly decry the over-theorised nature of research undertaken by university-based academics. This tension often becomes most evident in the context of student internships, where students fresh from the fields of theory clash with, or sail past, the professionals in the realm of practice. The UK's Museums Libraries Archives Council reported the persistent perception of a mismatch between employer needs and the skills and knowledge developed through higher education (MLAC 2008). This is a concern endorsed in American research (Chen 2004) and by American graduates, one of whom commented: 'the work was just what I expected, but the politics, management, and inter-museum problems were bizarre. I didn't have as much training ... in dealing with this ... real-world stuff' (Pyle-Vowles 1998:66). This concern—echoed in Australia, both in the limited research (Wallace-Crabbe 1992; Abasa 1995) and anecdotally—shows the importance of internships, which not only allow students to access the 'real world

⁴⁰ This was the focus of a recent UK conference: *Learning at the Interface: Museums and University Collaborations*, 1-2 July 2010, Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

⁴¹ Also known as work placements, practicums, and work-integrated learning.

stuff for themselves, but also creates the opportunities for this understanding to be taken back into the universities to fellow students and academics. It is thus no surprise that, in their book about museum careers, Glaser and Zenetou (1996:163) describe internships as ‘essential to a complete and comprehensive [museums/heritage studies] program’.

The Australian story

While the potential value of internships may not be in question, the realities are that the placement of students into internships, and their successes or failures, are highly variable, inconsistent across both tertiary and collecting institutions, and best judged as ‘curates’ eggs’ (i.e. good in parts). The three major stakeholders in the internship process—the host institution, the university and the student—each have their own agenda and motivations. Professional associations and individual researchers/academics in the sector have repeatedly argued for strategic change in the way museums/heritage internships are managed in Australia, including more awareness of appropriate internship management models, effective quantification of costs and benefits, and especially more consistency in curriculum development and assessment (Young & McIntyre 1991, Wallace-Crabbe 1993, Abasa 1995, Simpson 2003, Hinchcliffe 2004).

Nevertheless, the most recent research exercise by Museums Australia concluded that, while the internship processes in Australian cultural institutions were largely *ad hoc*, and the tertiary institutions had a range of differing requirements, “cultural and learning institutions are accommodating of each other’s diversity and neither sector is placing unrealistic or irresponsible demands on the other” (Hinchcliffe 2004). Almost certainly, it is this very diversity and capacity to be accommodating, coupled with a level of competitiveness for both interns and placements, that has so far militated against any concerted attempt to work towards any form of quality control or serious debate at the sector-wide level.

The ANU Story

While at an individual level many Australian universities have developed high quality internship programs, the high variability that exists both within

the Australian museum sector⁴² and the higher education sector may be contributing to the recognised inconsistencies in approach. Museum internship courses sit within university departments as diverse as art history, social studies, environmental and heritage management, liberal arts, and museum studies, and internship focus and expectations vary according to institutional and lecturers’ interests, personal enthusiasm and expertise. The ANU’s postgraduate Liberal Arts internship courses are thus probably similar in many ways to those offered by comparable tertiary institutions, but also present some specific and unusual features that are worthy of discussion.

The profile of students seeking museum internships at ANU is one such feature. Most would-be interns are part-time students already employed within the ‘local’ museum sector, which, given ANU’s location in the national capital, generally means a national collecting institution. Similarly, our ‘local’ placements are generally in national settings that other universities around the country also see as highly desirable for their own students. The opportunity to engage in authentic hands-on learning experiences in different national museum settings is clearly a crucial element in attracting students to our courses. However, far from being able to be complacent about this bonus of location, this situation has demanded that our museum studies courses provide a flexible, stimulating, cutting edge and innovative learning environment that will extend a cohort of interns who are essentially already museum professionals.

Educational designing with flexibility, constructivism and reflection in mind

With this perspective, in 2007 the ANU’s Museums and Collections internship courses were reviewed, both to improve their internal design and learning outcomes and also to align them more closely with the university’s agenda for greater flexibility in learning

⁴² Museums Australia (MA Constitution 2002) and International Committee of Museums (ICOM) take the expansive approach to defining museums as institutions that include science centers, history and art galleries, keeping places, natural, archeological and ethnographic monuments and sites, botanical and zoological gardens, cultural centers and other entities that facilitate the preservation and management of tangible or intangible heritage resources.

design and delivery. This process inevitably led to a detailed examination and questioning of the placement, management and assessment structure framing the courses, with the bigger picture questions becoming centre-stage: what makes internships work, and how do we measure this from the triple perspective of student, academic institution and museum.

At the practical level, our 2007 review led Drs Beckmann and Peoples to redesign the internship courses to incorporate:

- flexibility to accommodate regional, national or international placements
- constructive alignment across all educational elements i.e. outcomes, activities and assessment (informed, *inter alia*, by Biggs 1999)
- guidelines for workplace supervisors to educational issues related to informal learning and professional competence (informed *inter alia*, by Chivers & Cheetham 2005)
- attention to ongoing three-way communication and reflection (i.e., between intern, workplace supervisor, and university internship coordinator)
- structured, guided reflective practice (informed, *inter alia*, by Moon 1999).

With an action research model in place to monitor outcomes, it is clear that this redesign has been very successful, with the courses now used as templates for internships across the ANU. Key elements that have emerged as crucial are the recognition that the experiential and constructivist learning paradigms underpinning internships are also relevant to museum interactions with their own audiences, and that each intern experience is both unique and additive, contributing to our understanding of the bigger picture of modern museum practice.

Learning paradigms

Clearly museums and higher education institutions employ different learning paradigms in terms of their relationships with audiences/students, and these paradigms of informal and formal learning may appear to constitute an irreconcilable divide. Yet more and more both kinds of institution are recognising that 'learning is a process of construction moderated by the learner's previous experiences, knowledge, skills and attitudes and by their social environment' (Brown

2010). Internships exist at an extreme end of the types of learning associated with university teaching. While there has been little research into the learning processes that occur during internships, we believe they provide a natural cross-over from the formal learning of higher education to the experiential learning (Boud 1993) and informal learning (Falk & Dierking 2000) that provide focus points in contemporary understanding of the way museum audiences learn. Making this explicit to students, by encouraging them to reflect on their learning as well as on their professional practices as interns, is potentially a more powerful approach to engaging students in the realities of social constructivism and the new museology's approach to audiences than simply addressing these ideas through lectures or readings.

Issues of concern

What factors affect the success of internships in Australia? We know from experience that internships can help develop formal ties and links between universities and museums, facilitating the exchange of specialised knowledge from both sides, and often creating stimulating research opportunities. Yet there is virtually no empirical data on student satisfaction, optimal educational design, or costs and benefits to museums to show us how to maximise good outcomes. In the absence of rigorous research, we are still unsure of all the issues, but our own experiences and discussions among professionals in the field suggest that the following are relevant.

a) The role of universities

- There is great variability in the duration, structure, curriculum and management of internships, with no indicators of optima in these areas.
- Internship coordinators often rely on personal networks to place students within host institutions. This can be unsustainable when there is high turnover in either the university or museum networks.
- If internship support is relegated to administrative staff or junior academics, there may be little interest or knowledge about specific learning issues and no authority to introduce change.

b) The role of host institutions

- Large institutions may be unable to meet the growing number of requests for placements while smaller institutions may have difficulty attracting

any interns at all. This does not meet the sector's needs as a whole, and negatively influences students' understanding of the breadth of the sector.

- There is an assumption that at every host institution the intern will receive a learning experience equivalent to his or her other coursework. Despite goodwill and a trust in professional competence, this leads to potentially inadequate quality assurance.

c) Indicators of performance, assessment and evaluation

- Host institution supervisors do not always have experience in tertiary teaching standards, yet universities may be asking them to assess students, including those at Masters level, and then officially endorsing this assessment.
- Feedback to students and official assessment may be influenced more by a host institution's gratitude at having its needs met than by objective standards of a student's learning (e.g., an intern who has helped catch up on backlogs may be greatly appreciated regardless of the nature or outcomes of the student's learning).

d) Economic and workplace productivity

- Universities may be seen as cashing in on museums as free outsourced teaching resources, and failing to resource interns academically (intern placement and support is often seen as a role for non-academics).
- Logistical and budgetary constraints on host institutions may affect their commitment of resources to support internships, but these constraints may not always be apparent to the educational institutions, which face their own demands to develop accountable and rewarding relationships with industry.
- The interns themselves see a financial paradox: they are required to pay course fees and often give up paid work or take recreational leave to essentially do 'unpaid' labour for (generally public sector) collecting institutions, in effect paying for the privilege of working for free.
- Host institutions are often ambivalent: while interns may be characterised as a cheap source of labour, they also take up precious time for museums and their staff.
- Where the would-be interns are people already employed in the sector—enhancing their

qualifications with their employer's support—internship placements may act as extended job interviews or 'head-hunting' opportunities. Museums may thus worry about losing a staff member permanently to another host institution if they allow cross-institutional internships.

It is clear that understanding the realities and interplay of all these factors and pressures is crucial for long-term healthy relationships in the sector, yet there is little formal discussion of these, let alone of internship curriculum and assessment (Simpson 2003). Without knowing what constitutes good/best internship practice, we cannot know how to balance the educational goals of higher education with the day-to-day realities of host collecting and cultural institutions.

Conclusion: a plan for the future

Patrick *et al* (2009) argue that sustainable work-integrated experiences in higher education require sector-wide initiatives, but this has not occurred in the museum industry. We argue that engagement by all stakeholders – students, universities, host institutions as well as professional associations – will benefit the entire sector. Taking a holistic view will not only lead to a greater understanding, but also strengthen relationships within and between the higher education and the museum sectors. In order to facilitate this culture change, we have initiated a collaborative project that will develop a formal cross-sector investigation of museum and heritage internships. The importance of the project's aims is indicated by the widespread support and interest already expressed from the sector. Involved in the research are seven universities (ANU, Charles Sturt University, Macquarie University, University of Melbourne, University of Sydney, University of Queensland and University of South Australia), with committed support already expressed by many museums and the professional associations (including Museums Australia and Interpretation Australia). Through a systematic and inclusive approach, with significant geographical and institutional cross sector representation, our project aims to collect a broad range of data, and to initiate debate and disseminate our findings.⁴³ The

⁴³ We would like to acknowledge and thank the people who we have consulted with and who have provided information, feedback and support, both within Australia and internationally (from the United Kingdom, United States of America, and New Zealand).

project's overall aim will be to describe intern, museum and university experiences in an innovative format that supports the needs of all stakeholders, including host institution, education providers, and – most importantly, interns themselves.

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