

Introduction

The context of initiating the partnerships

Never the Twain Shall Meet

Never the Twain Shall Meet: Overcoming entrenched attitudes and practices to achieve successful partnership working.

Since 2005 Staffordshire University has been working with a range of UK partners in the museum and heritage sector in response to criticisms of universities' lack of understanding of the changing needs in museum related employment, and universities' requirements to diversify and widen participation in Higher Education. Collaborative partners include: Ironbridge Gorge Museum; Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery (BMAG); the Museums, Libraries and Archives Council (MLA); the Institute of Conservation (ICON) and the National Trust.

The initial focus of Staffordshire University's engagement with museum partners was in the development of a Foundation degree in Heritage and Culture (*FdA: Heritage and Culture*) that was to be delivered in regional Further Education colleges in partnership with local museums. Foundation degrees were introduced in 2001 with the intention of offering access to Higher Education in areas of skills-gaps to non-traditional learners including adult returners, those in employment seeking appropriate qualifications to further their careers and career changers. In keeping with this philosophy, the *FdA: Heritage and Culture* was designed for front-of-house staff including volunteers, to gain skills suited to moving across as well as up the workforce.

This case study will describe the evolution of the partnerships through initial and ongoing difficulties towards a successful working relationship that continues to develop and grow. The study will encompass how practical engagement in the development of a Foundation degree exposed prejudices and entrenched restrictive practices, different perspectives and pressures, and led to a series of failures and partial successes. The profile will go on to show how partners were able to reflect and consider working in new ways, allowing them to move forward with innovative and exciting educational collaborations.

In a keynote speech of a conference entitled *Effective Learning in Heritage: bridging the gap between academia and industry* at the University of Gloucester in 2006, Paul Boniface of the National Trust lamented the lack of relevant skills of recruits to the sector. He described a dislocation of university courses and current industry requirements. Sector research into skills development echoed the points he made: applicants to posts with poor understanding of customer relations; no knowledge of financial planning and fund seeking skills; poor leadership, teamwork and management know-how, visual illiteracy and inadequate communication skills. The 2006 *Leitch Review of Skills* emphasised the need to foster portable skills - the very skills the heritage sector was identifying as lacking - and more serious involvement of employers in supporting the training of employees. By 2009 these ideas were intrinsic to sector strategies, including the MLA's *Leading Museums*, the Creative and Cultural Industry Sector Skills Council's *Creative Blueprint*, and English Heritage's *Heritage Counts*.

During the same period there was recognition of the need to widen the profile of employees and volunteers (as well as visitors) to reflect more accurately our multicultural and diverse society. With traditional entry routes to employment in the sector requiring a degree and a higher degree, often combined with an element of voluntary work, recruitment has been from a stratum of society with financial support that enables abstinence from paid employment over a period of time, and an ability to relocate to follow employment opportunities. The resultant profile of

Academia versus heritage

What if we train them and they leave? What if we don't and they stay?

employees in museums and heritage venues is one that is biased towards white middle-class professionals, with a complementary front-of-house staff more representative of the local community who are unable to move into more senior roles due to lack of relevant training locally. Even within the locally sourced front-of-house volunteer and paid workforce, diverse representation is poor.

Staffordshire University has strong links with Further Education Colleges across the West Midlands, an area with many cultural venues. In 2005 the Faculty of Arts Media and Design at the University appointed a Foundation Degree Coordinator, whose first task was to investigate potential Foundation degree development. One of the University's partner colleges already delivered NVQs in collaboration with a local museum: other colleges had evidence of interest from adult learners in history and heritage related study and offers of collaboration with local heritage venues. In an area with a very poor uptake of higher education, and with relationships already in place for partnership working with a range of museums, the atmosphere seemed ripe for the development of a Foundation degree in collaboration with the museums sector.

One of the key requirements in the development of a Foundation degree is the involvement of the relevant industry sector in the writing of the programme. There were some key players, including Ironbridge Gorge Museum, Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery, the Museum of Cannock Chase, and many more, who supplied information such as skills deficiency audits, job descriptions and criteria, and existing training provision. Whilst meetings with these partners were constructive and productive, other attempts to initiate collaborations were difficult, with the discovery of some entrenched views on the recruitment and development of staff. Attitudes were occasionally challenging on both sides of what at the time was a divide between academia and industry, and progress was sometimes stop-start or non-collaboratively unilateral.

There were stumbling blocks for academics during the course of the many meetings with industry staff, including those with responsibility for museums workforce development. Initially there was a suspicion of academia and its ability to have any insight into what was actually required for employees: this was often accompanied by a lack of recognition of the ad-hoc nature of industry training provision and how it might be enhanced by partnership working and the potential for university accreditation. There was a lack of insight into the need to widen participation, what this might mean, how it could be embraced and progress measured – something that educational institutions have been managing for many years.

According to *Heritage Counts* (English Heritage, 2009) there are well over 400,000 adults regularly volunteering in historic environments. Training managers expressed concern about paid employees losing work to volunteers who had gained qualifications, that it was unnecessary to help volunteers to gain qualifications since they were prepared to do the work anyway and for nothing, and that volunteers were simply not interested in gaining qualifications as they were beyond requiring them. Suggestions that volunteers might be more valuable and enjoy their work more if it were structured with the potential for them to gain skills suited to applying for jobs within and outside the heritage environment were met with a lack of comprehension. To take this a step further, as happens in other sectors, by planning a programme of work with the specific intention of recruiting volunteers to undertake study alongside projects was beyond most of the participants' imaginings.



Undertaking a risk assessment as part of a study session at Manchester Museum

Ivory towers?

Academics learn too - time to reflect

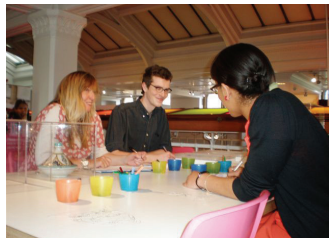
From the museums' point of view it was clear that some academic processes were difficult or restrictive, and terminology obscure. The feeling that only politeness prevented the rolling of eyes heavenwards at the introduction of some academic requirements was sometimes pervasive. What is the difference between a Foundation Year and a Foundation degree (and why does *degree* not start with a capital letter in Foundation *degree*)? Why do universities insist on an academic year and semesters that bear no relation to industry requirements and cycles? What is the difference between part-time and full-time study, and why is one mode of study eligible for a student loan but the other not? Why does it take so long to get a Foundation degree through the validation process so that it can be up-and-running? Why, on a course that is supposedly work-based, is the assessment submission date the same for each student, regardless of their work commitments and opportunities?

One fundamental and key problem for the success of the collaboration between the University and the museum partners was the restrictions on funding relating to the development of suitable training. Under Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) regulations colleges are only eligible for funding for full Higher Education qualifications. Short courses or other training at Higher level are only funded at Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). Furthermore, student loans are only available for those in full-time study, and part-time grants are means-tested and under Local Education Authority regulations. The funding regulations and sources are so complex that except for traditional full-time degrees only an expert can know what is possible and who is entitled to funding for fees or maintenance. As the Staffordshire University Regional Federation colleges hosted the initial *Foundation degree: Heritage and Culture* with their local museums, the option of offering appropriately timed and funded training was already in question.

The *FdA: Heritage and Culture* was validated to run in the summer of 2006, and offered at 3 colleges across the region. Only two colleges recruited, and the numbers were low: a decision to share teaching with another validated award which had some common modules allowed the *FdA* to run from September 2006. In line with the philosophy of Foundation degrees the cohort of students comprised a mixture of career change mature learners and those working in museums who wished to enhance their career prospects.

There were many problems with the initial Foundation degree, and lessons have been learned. Staff changes in the colleges left a gap in the teaching resources; connection with one museum was lost and placement opportunities did not materialise. The length of time required to replace college tutors, and the philosophy of the new staffing not only made students lose confidence in the course, but changed the nature of the award completely. New tutors who had not been involved in the validation process were not connected with the museums, nor were they conversant with the nature of Foundation degrees: they were also under pressure to market a course that would recruit full-time students and secure more revenue for the college.

Employee students struggled to understand academic requirements such as reflective learning, an aspect of the course that was dismissed by some as an irrelevance. A reluctance to engage with evaluative processes or to articulate ideas and arguments affected their studies and their relationship with other students and tutors. Some students could not comprehend the need to be visually literate, and in one case a student led a classroom rebellion against the teaching, taking charge of the session during the brief absence of



Discussing outcomes of the Risk Assessment at Manchester Museum

Out of the ashes - new strategies for collaboration

Lessons learned – what did we need to do differently?

This is what we did

the tutor. The lack of direct involvement in the teaching by museum experts was also a contributing consideration.

In the normal cycle of events the award was monitored and evaluated, feedback from students/museum workers taken into consideration, and options discussed amongst academic and industry partners. It was clear that the award had diverged from its original intention, and that reflection on both sides was urgently needed.

Although the initial Foundation degree was not the success hoped for, collaboration between Staffordshire University and the museum sector had grown, with University representation on the Renaissance West Midlands Workforce Development Group and liaison across the country in similar networks and with organisations such as ICON and the MLA. Foundation Degree Forward were also supporting developments in the sector, and hosting strategy meetings in which the University was a key player. It was also clear that the industry was beginning to recognise the need to act on training provision, just as other educational institutions were closing relevant training courses due to the lack of viable numbers studying their awards.

By the end of 2007 the Coordinator at Staffordshire University had initiated a course of action to provide a constructive platform from which to develop relevant and sustainable training. There were three elements to the strategy: gain funding to support a dedicated person to carry out the development work; involve the heritage sector in the design and delivery of the awards, and investigate more flexible delivery including short courses and in-situ teaching. By summer 2008 funding had been found through the Lifelong Learning Network for a course developer with Widening Participation expertise and collaboration with industry was enhanced, leading to the piloting of short courses delivered in heritage venues and new Foundation degree development.

For successful collaboration it is absolutely critical for all parties to reflect on their own practice. Museums are not simply grand repositories that students may access. Academic institutions are not providers of work-ready employees trained at others' expense only to be criticised for having done a poor job. The heritage sector has a duty to support the development of its workforce at all levels, including front-of-house staff and volunteers, and widen that workforce to reflect society in general. As with charity, learning begins at home, and collaboration will be enhanced if museums look to their own employees to engage in Higher Education.

Academic institutions need to listen to what the heritage sector actually wants, and endeavour to find a way through the labyrinthine complexities of funding and modes of delivery. They need to be able to respond more flexibly and with training that is relevant and responsive to changing needs. Tuition needs to be taken to the employee/student, designed with the requirements of the sector always in mind and not in academic isolation.

True partnerships draw upon the best in both sectors – in simple terms this means the development of intellectual skills such as analysis and evaluation suited to enhancing learning, combined with specialist skills from practising experts. This needs support from both sectors through the investment of time and money.

In the autumn of 2009 Staffordshire University validated three individual modules, adapted from the original Foundation degree and in the light of insights gained. These were to run as short courses in different museums, delivered jointly by University tutors and sector trainers. The taught sessions were paced at intervals so learning



A taught session at Manchester Museum investigates the value of case studies

What happens now?

could be applied in the workplace alongside the accumulation of evidence towards assessments. Viable cohorts were achieved by support from museum managers, bringing learners together from diverse venues.

Modules already validated as stand-alone are now part of a new Foundation degree entitled *Heritage Practice: Collections and Venues* due to start in September 2010. This award is aimed at front-of-house staff including volunteers, and will use the same method of delivery. Students who have already passed modules will be able to achieve a Foundation degree by completing the remainder of the award. Key aspects are taken from sector strategies, enabling training to keep pace with changes such as museums Accreditation requirements.

News of these developments has spread through national heritage networks, and approaches from potential new partners are sitting in the wings awaiting decisions regarding future collaborations. In April 2010 Staffordshire University's HEFCE funding allocation was increased in recognition of its flexible Higher Education, and whilst other HEIs are reducing partnerships, Staffordshire University is strengthening its links.

With the closure of conservation courses across the country due to problems with funding and viable cohort sizes there is a clear need for collaboration to draw together expertise and offer in-situ training in specialist conservation areas. The model is now in place for future development of a Foundation degree in Heritage Conservation. Some key players need to be persuaded that working in partnership is the only way to ensure the continuation of particular conservation skills – this is our next challenge, and we are ready to rise to it.

Motivating factors for participants

Research relating to the wider Creative and Cultural Industries identifies opportunities for networking as a crucial element of successful employment. Feedback from participants in *The Working Environment* CPD Module cited the opportunity to meet others from the sector as a major contributing factor in their enjoyment of and continuation on the course.

Delivering sessions in museum venues combines academic expectations with environments that are familiar to participants, some of whom are nervous about undertaking formal study. Visiting others in different sector venues was regarded by student/employees as a valued aspect of undertaking HE study as part of CPD. Offering an appropriate and relevant context for the theoretical aspects of the award gave meaning to the formal requirements whilst allowing access to extensive resources.

Author

Rowena Beighton-Dykes
Foundation Degree Coordinator, Faculty of Arts, Media and Design,
Staffordshire University,
r.j.beighton-dykes@steffs.ac.uk

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