Introduction to Museums and Museum Accountability in the United Kingdom

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Abstract This article provides an introduction to museums in the United Kingdom, examining their history, finance, and oversight, each of which affects UK museum accountability. The development of the UK museum profession is reviewed, demonstrating the vital importance of employee and volunteer training in museum-specific ethics and accountability.

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Introduction

Britain’s first “modern” museum, Oxford’s Ashmolean Museum, was founded in 1683. Seventy years later, Parliament passed the British Museum Act (1753) founding the British Museum, which opened to the public in 1759. In 1845, Parliament permitted local councils to levy taxes for the purpose of raising funds to build local public museums. These original museums in the United Kingdom differ in “both form and function ... from what a visitor today would expect.” (Siegel 2008, vii) By the First World War, the 400 UK museums’ “place in culture was recognizably close and often identical to the modern one.” (Siegel 2008, vii) The number of UK museums has exploded in recent decades, nearly doubling since the early 1970s. (Johnson and Thomas 1991, 13) The UK Museums Association’s 2014 Museums & Galleries Yearbook contains the most comprehensive catalogue of UK museums, galleries, and historic properties, listing roughly 2,500 organizations.

UK museums receive over 100 million visits each year. More than half of the adult population in England (52%), two thirds of five to ten year olds, and 59% of eleven to fifteen year olds visited a UK museum in 2009. (Museums Association, About/FAQ website) The 350+ museums in Scotland receive twenty-five million annual visits, and contribute over £800m to Scotland’s economy. (Museums Galleries Scotland, MGS Launches Campaign website)
Museums now compete for visitors with diverse attractions, resulting in decreased museum visits in England and Scotland (Burton and Scott 2007).

The Welsh Assembly’s 2007 Spotlight on Museums reports 143 museums in Wales, roughly ninety of which are Accredited. (Welsh Assembly Government 2007, 7) There are seven National Museum Wales sites, eighty-two independent museums, fifty-five local authority museums, and nine National Trust properties. (Welsh Assembly Government 2007, 7) Over 2,640 people work in Welsh museums, 58% of whom are full-time employees. “Volunteers play a significant role in sustaining the museum sector, with 1,150 working in the independent sector, 184 in the local authority sector and 27 working in ... National Museum Wales.” (Welsh Assembly Government 2007, 28) Northern Ireland has the fewest number of museums in the UK: roughly fifty, forty-two of which are Accredited including four National museums, twenty Local Authority museums, ten Independent museums, seven National Trust properties, and one University museum. These museums employ over 650 individuals and 300 volunteers, and receive over one million visits per year. (Northern Ireland Museums Council, Facts and Figures website)

Rhetoric defining UK museums categorizes them by governance type, delineating differences in funding, management, and oversight. The fifty-four National museums, established within a national policy agenda, are funded by the four countries’ central government departments, are exempted charities with boards of trustees, and are accountable not merely to stakeholders, but also report to the National Audit Offices (NAO). The Museums and Galleries Act 1992, replacing the National Gallery and Tate Act (1954), is the latest Act reforming National museum board functions and powers at four institutions: the National Gallery, the National Portrait Gallery, the Wallace Collection, and the Tate, specifically “regulating the duties, responsibilities, power and proceedings of the Trustees.” (Forder 1994, 132) Prior to 1986, Parliament voted annually for continued National museums’ funding. The 1992 Act changed that procedure, making museums more independent through an agreed-upon Financial Memorandum, assigning museum directors to be Financial Accounting Officers, and having museum accounts audited by the NAO’s Comptroller and Auditor General, who presents a final report to Parliament. (Forder 1994, 148) The Accounting Officer’s role is to ensure that the museum board acts in accordance with its Financial Memorandum, which outlines the conditions of the government’s grant money. The Act codifies previously non-statutory items, permitting charging for admission, allowing reasonable remuneration for board expenses, outlining the number of museum board members, and making trustees accountable to the Prime Minister.

Prior to the 1992 Act, these museums’ trustees were personally liable for contractual agreements, including employment contracts. The Act incorporates the Boards, removing that liability. It also stipulates that “[m]oney accruing to a Board as a result of a disposal ... shall be applied by the Board to acquire relevant objects to be added to the collection. In particular it is not to be used to repair crumbling buildings.” (Forder 1994, 144) Specifically, the Tate is required to appoint two practicing contemporary artist-board members. Its board is permitted to acquire works on the museum’s behalf, but has limited powers of disposal.

Local Authority museums, the most common kind of UK museums, are diverse in size and type, yet all are public service departments primarily funded, administered, and governed
directly by local council museum services. “Inconsistencies in [Local Authority museum] accounting systems and the fact that many museum services are part of much larger local authority departments make it difficult to disaggregate the whole ... Expenditure on museums by local authorities ranges from over £20 to less than £1 per inhabitant.” (Lawley 2003, 76) In addition, local councils might not prioritize their museums, might not have a cultural department, and are not required to provide museum staff access to museum governors (Ryder 2002). With political and economic changes, some local authorities have shifted museums outside their control and into a Trust structure.

Independent museums include diverse types of organizations like charities and volunteer-run museums. These museums can apply for government-sponsored grants, but receive most income through admission fees, corporate ventures like a museum café, or from individual, corporate, or foundation giving. As early as the 1980s, Independent museums generated over 40% of income from public grants. (Jackson 1991, 42) British University museums are the oldest type of “modern” museum in the UK. They represent 4% of all UK museums, yet hold 30% of all museum collections. (University Museums Group UK, About UMG website) These museums are owned and administered by the museums’ parent universities, and museum employees are university employees. Additional museum types classified as Other in this study include regimental museums often sponsored by the Ministry of Defense, hospital-based museums monitored by the NHS, and cathedral-based museums overseen by individual religious institutions. English Heritage, a non-departmental public body, and the National Trust and the National Trust for Scotland, both charities, protect UK properties, heritage sites, and monuments. Not all English Heritage or National Trust sites maintain collections, as some are land and nature preserves, including gardens and battlefields. This study’s survey results, discussed below in sections 6-8, utilize the same museum ‘type’ breakdowns as outlined above and as designated by the UK Museums Association.

Through the 1980s, little research was done on UK museums as “organizations” (Griffin 1987) in contrast to research on professional museum standards, training, public value, or employee numbers (Kavanagh 1991). By the twenty-first century, “every aspect of museum operations ha[d] at one point or another been placed under the microscope and examined for its clarity of focus and function relative to furthering the role of the museum as a cultural and educational institution within the greater fabric of society.” (Anderson 2004, 1) This study attempts to complement these examinations, situating museums in the interconnected framework of public, private, and third sector institutions. Public scrutiny has been inherent across these sectors. The public has taken a greater interest in museum administration (Anderson 2004, Weil 2002), evaluating, scrutinizing, and challenging museums’ operations, spending, programming, and professional accountability. Museums have “moved in from the hazy outer penumbra of the nation’s culture; quite suddenly they are exposed for all to see, to comment on and to criticize.” (Cossons 1991, 15) Stakeholders, public oversight bodies, and the general public itself assess museum practice, finance, and governance.

Museum finance has faced challenges from government budget fluctuations since the mid-1970s (Alexander 2007, Jackson 1991). Finding alternate sources of income is arduous, as UK tax policies have not traditionally encouraged individual philanthropy, and taxpayers generally believe their taxes should already cover admission fees, for example (Alexander 2007). As such, “private demand may not fully reflect social demand” for UK museums.
Over time, museums have responded to this social demand by increasing their focus on visitor experience and have added visitor-based decisions to the many other museum concerns like scholarship, conservation, and collection management, rather than completely shifting focus onto visitors (Sandell and Janes 2007). Such change need not sacrifice traditional mission-based museum values (Janes 2007). Utilizing private models and internal controls to manage operations, and strategically governing museums to fulfill those mission-based goals, however, will better aid museums advocating for sustained long-term success.

Museum accountability

The definition of third sector accountability has been under debate since the 1980s, though public accountability is based upon stakeholder expectations (Rentschler and Potter 1996). Managing the perception of accountability and transparency is equally important to the considerations associated with actually executing organizational accountability. Traditionally, accountability indicated that financial statements demonstrated no unusual, inaccurate, or inappropriate transactions, accounting fully for museum finances (Weil, 2007). As the third sector and museums morph due to external expectations, accountability is coming to encompass an organization’s ethics, efficiency, and effectiveness (Swords 1997). In her 2002 keynote address to the INTERCOM Leadership in Museums conference, former director of the Scottish Museums Council Jane Ryder recommended “remov[ing] the legal distinction between profit and not for profit organizations, accepting that they are both operating to produce a return on capital and to account to stakeholders.” (Ryder 2002, Lecture) While the missions of nonprofit institutions form the core of strategic decision making, nonprofits are no less accountable for their decisions and actions than are corporate bodies.

UK museums face public accountability expectations established by central government bodies, local authority councils, grant-making philanthropic groups, the museum community itself, and by individual museums’ internal requirements and expectations. By the 1990s, public accountability was a concern amongst UK museums: “Museums have become public property, arousing the interest of the public at large. The question of who should run museums, and how, has moved ‘from the professional domain to the public stage’ (Cossons 1991b: 186).” (McLean 1997, 31) Twenty years later, public accountability continues to be at the forefront of museum governance and administrative concerns. Governance is no longer only a museum concern, “but is a social and cultural concept.” (Ryder 2002, lecture) Now, accountability addresses more than fiscal transparency. Museum operations, museum-specific policy ethics and internal controls, and concerns like conflict of interest and whistleblower protections are under scrutiny. UK funding bodies, including central and local government, also assess programming or operational performance indicators.

Comprised entirely of volunteer non-executive board members, UK museum boards differ from their for-profit counterparts that include both non-executive and executive directors. As the board is responsible for governance and plays a large role in the organization’s management via executive directors, the corporate structure could be applicable to the museum sector, which has demonstrated trouble balancing executive and non-executive duties. Museum board members occasionally disregard the Museums Association Code of Ethics in their decision-making, a practice with which museum professionals find fault.
With board representation, museum professionals and managers could better guide and help non-executive board members who are not trained in specific nuances or requirements associated with running a museum. Similarly, the private sector has considered limiting the number of non-executive board members permitted to serve due to the position’s demands and responsibilities. “It may well be time to apply this same principle to [museum board] public appointments on the basis that the risks and the obligations are equally demanding and arguably carry even greater responsibility in the accountability for public expenditure.” (Ryder 2002, lecture) While the board’s duty is to shape museum policy within legal and ethical frameworks, board members may lack the professional training or knowledge of sector-wide standards required to do so appropriately. This may be problematic given that “the range of issues and pressures confronting museums in the twenty-first century is equal to that of any sector of organized life.” (Sandell and Janes 2007, 1)

As museum finances face pressures, museum boards are challenged to demonstrate their fiscal accountability and to verify that resources are utilized for the public good. Yet meeting these objectives can betray standard museum practices and ethics. In some instances, local authorities have sold objects from museum collections to cover costs not approved by the Museums Association. Yet even museum sector professionals “who think their institutions might not bear comparisons [with other museums] or meet standards easily, or do not care if they do, might be even less [interested to meet standards]”. (Ames 1991, 59) This finding could have important implications for museum oversight bodies that aspire to raise standards in all museums.

Financial controls are now generally accepted norms across the museum sector, as “the fiduciary duty of trustees and the outward accountability of museums require the demonstration of sound business practice ... and ‘cocoa-tin accounting’ [is] no longer acceptable because museums, whether they like it or not, are ‘in business’.” (Defries 1991, 76) Accountability standards, however, are imposed on UK museums by numerous sources, including diverse funding bodies. These funders have varied requirements and many request proof of internal control standards before donating grant monies. In so doing, “[t]he bodies dictate policy, and individual museums react accordingly to obtain grants and to obtain status as a museum.” (McLean 1997, 31) Due to funders’ varied policy requirements, the challenge for acquiring one-time government grants, and the differences in accountability each funder demands, Janes (2009) recommends forming a centralized museum consortium fund to distribute grants for which “[a]ccountability would be essential, but so would a wide tolerance for mistakes and failures [for meeting grant goals]”. (Janes 2009, 69) Assessing the value of this type of program would require public and government scrutiny.

UK museum-related organizations

i. The Museums Association

The London-based Museums Association (MA) is an independent charity established in 1889 as the professional body responsible for setting professional standards within the UK museum community. It is not a statutory body, but a membership organization that advocates on museums’ behalf, sets ethical standards for museum employees, board members and volunteers, and offers professional development training programs to members. In
The Museums Association offers a breadth of professional development opportunities. Their Associateship of the Museums Association (AMA) is a multi-year professional development program and designation for museum employees and committed volunteers, and includes an ethical problem-solving element. Conferences, training workshops, and courses, including Forward Future: achieving accreditation and Volunteer management and the law, are available to all Museums Association members. Additionally, the MA publishes a monthly Museums Journal concerning UK museum current events, and a quarterly Museum Practice magazine online that discusses new developments and best practices across a spectrum of museum-related issues.

The Code of Ethics for Museums: Ethical principles for all who work for or govern museums in the UK (2015) is the Museums Association’s ethical recommendations handbook representing commonly held views within the museum profession about ethical best practice. It pinpoints the most important ethical issues discussed within the museum community including governance, public service, and performance review. It encapsulates a museum’s idealized reputation in the public eye. Initially adopted in 1977 as the Code of Practice for Museum Authorities, the Code is consistently revised. A new Code amending wording about object deaccessioning was ratified at the 2007 MA Annual General Meeting.

This Code, however, is unenforceable, unless a whistleblower comes forward, misconduct occurs in the public eye to attract Museums Association attention, or museum professionals hold employees accountable to the Code’s standards. Theoretically, the Code is instead a guide aiming to establish professionalism across a diverse sector, permitting museum self-regulation of that professionalism, and permitting the sector to be held publicly accountable (Kavanagh 1991b). Specifically, “[a]n ethical code sets forth conduct that a professional considers essential in order to uphold the integrity of the profession.” (Malaro 1994, 17) As such, the Code can be used for training purposes for museum professionals, and as an official resource for members of the public who question museum ethics. In so doing, the Code is also a risk management tool, particularly legally, as ethical codes typically have higher standards than those required by law.

ii. Other museum oversight bodies

The Department of Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS), established 1997, is the government body responsible for all arts, creative industries, sport (including the 2012 London Olympics) and museums and galleries. It has directly funded the museum regulatory body the Museums, Libraries and Archives Council (MLA), sponsored the National museums and a selection of non-national museums, funded various museum education programs, and supported the
noteworthy “Renaissance in the Regions” program that improves Britain’s regional museums’ standards. Due in part to the poor international economic climate in the late-2000s, the coalition government elected in 2010 pledged massive reductions in government spending. The DCMS budget is scheduled to lose £300m over four years. In turn, DCMS cut both National museum and Renaissance in the Regions program funding by 15%. (Steel 2010b, DCMS Funding website) Central government cut local authority funding by 7%. As such, 80% of Museum Association members participating in a 2010 survey feared local councils would resort to deaccessioning objects or selling museum real estate to raise funds needed to support local services. (Kendall 2010, MA Poll website) Two MA survey participants reported:

The Council Executive has already approved plans to sell of as much of the art collection as possible in a vain effort to both fill gaping budget holes … and also maximise impact of current cuts for local political reasons. We are prevented from carrying out any kind of advocacy, lobbying or even inform anyone of what is happening.

I work for a small local authority museum in the North-west of England. The building is going to be sold off to raise funds leaving us with a very uncertain future. This will be the third time in as many years we have been reorganised or restructured [by the council]. (Kendall 2010, MA Poll website)

Local councils have previously sold museum assets to bolster their budgets. In 2006 Bury Council sold works without Museums Association approval. In response the MLA revoked Bury’s Accreditation and the MA barred them from membership. Legally, local councils are permitted to sell museum objects, yet this can contradict museum standards and best practices. In response, some museums have considered forming a trust, or becoming a completely volunteer-run museum service (Steele 2009).

Cuts to Northern Ireland’s Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure (DCAL) similarly affect national museums in that country. DCAL funds the Northern Ireland Museums Council (NIMC). Established 1993, NIMC offers training courses, publishes research reports, and lobbies on behalf of the sector. None of NIMC’s 2010-2011 training programs, however, address governance or accountability. Scottish museums rely on Museums Galleries Scotland (MGS) for government grants and other services. “Museums Galleries Scotland is the main conduit for Scottish Government funding to the sector.” (Museums Galleries Scotland, Working website) MGS also provides professional development training for museum professionals, though no conferences or courses offered between June 2010 - June 2011 directly addressed museum governance or accountability. Museums working toward Accreditation do receive advice if needed. In addition, MGS publishes Scottish museums data and research, and lobbies the Scottish government on museum-related issues.

DCMS funds the MLA, the regulatory body responsible for promoting best practice across the museum sector and for running the UK Accreditation scheme. Started in 1988 as “Museum Registration”, Accreditation sets the basic bar for UK museum standards across all museum disciplines, from collections management and visitor services to facilities and governance. It encourages museums to continually assess and improve services, and to demonstrate
accountability through transparency. This in turn engenders internal professional confidence and external assurance to stakeholders and funders making qualitative judgments. The Accreditation program does not standardize museums, but standardizes their basic professional tenets of conduct. Nearly 1,800 museums are either Accredited or Provisionally Accredited in the UK. (Museums Libraries and Archives, Accreditation website) No sanction exists for museums that are not Accredited, though many funding bodies require this standard in their grant making cycle. Ironically, the MLA does not make Accreditation records publicly available, though the Accreditation process is intended to ensure public accountability (Boyd 2004). While MLA Accreditation is respected in the museum community, the public knows little about Accreditation standards or reputation. (Kendall 2010b, MLA Unveils website)

DCMS announced its intention to cease funding and oversight for non-national museums as of April 2011, giving the responsibility to do so to local and regional organisations and communities. In lieu of sponsorship, DCMS is formulating an £80m scheme to encourage individual philanthropy. This plan coincides with DCMS’s July 2010 proposal to eliminate the MLA altogether. In response, MA Director Mark Taylor lobbied for museums, stating “It is important that we have a strategic body with museums as one of its principal functions, rather than a minor department in another quango.” (Steele 2010, MA Responds website) Instead, MLA duties will be transferred to the Arts Council England (ACE) by March 2012, and ACE will received £46m of increased funding annually to do so. (Heal 2010, ACE Takes Over website) Museum representatives from Wales, Scotland, and the Museums Association worried any new scheme could “strand” their disparate countries’ museums, “fragmenting” the UK museum sector. (Steele 2010, Wales website) Critics fear ACE is not suitably equipped to manage the grant-making decisions and functions MLA previously administered, and “has been handed too much responsibility.” (Atkinson 2010, Vaizey website) The evolution of museum oversight is underway in the UK, but conclusions cannot yet be drawn about the success of proposed measures in relation to museum sustainability.

The museum profession

i. Professionalism, training, and management

A profession and professionalism develop when like-minded individuals and groups are motivated to adhere to agreed-upon performance standards, skills, and values (Boyd 2004, Kavanagh 1991). Barber (1963) established four tenets of professionalism: subject knowledge, community-based interest rather than self-interest, a reward system like a salary, and a self-imposed code of ethics developed by the profession itself. This code represents “a system of principles and rules ... peculiar to [the profession]”, an ideal system that typically exhibits a higher standard of duty than legal regulations require. (Alexander and Alexander 2008, 309) Specifically, the museum profession “must [have] a generally acceptable standard of conduct for all museums since the actions of a few can affect all.” (Boyd 2004, 352) While Boyd was speaking specifically of museums themselves, late museum director Joseph Veach Noble broadens museum professionalism’s importance stating, “Ours is one of the few professions which is charged with being relevant both for today’s people and for those who will come after us. We stand as a link between the past and the future, and it is our duty to be a strong link.” (Alexander and Alexander 2008, 305) Despite this responsibility,
museum profession was little researched until the early-1990s, as the profession developed intermittently in the UK (Kavanagh 1991b).

When the Museums Association was established in the nineteenth century, UK museum staff consisted of academics, interested amateurs, and curators working in the spirit of public service (Kavanagh 1991b). The profession developed in the 1930s, and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and its subsidiary body the International Council of Museums set international standards when founded in 1946. Over time, the UK museum sector professionalized in response to ICOM and Museums Association standards, adopting codes of ethics, publishing journals reporting on best practice, establishing training courses and seminars, promoting museum Accreditation and internships, and forming additional guidance and support bodies like the Association of Independent Museums and the National Museum Directors Conference.

By the 1970s, the number of museums and museum employees in the UK had increased significantly, and the museum profession was a central question at the 1977 UK Museums Association annual conference in Bradford, UK. Basil Greenhill, Director of the National Maritime Museum, presented a paper entitled “New Patterns in Museum Management” that encouraged the museum community to apply “general management practices”:

There are fewer and fewer parallels with the traditional, academic field and more and more with the executive functions of industrial management, though the educational objectives are very different ... Of course, it is already obvious that we are not really talking about a new concept per se, but about the application of general management practices in a museum context ... If specialized management is taken as a museum function at least as important as curatorial expertise, what then is the role of the trustee, the governor, the committee member of the governing body, if there is one? (Greenhill 1977, 123 and 125)

Museums are also not isolated from the public or private sectors, complicating the profession. The museum sector requires diverse professional skills and specialties, ranging from security to conservation, each of which has disparate objectives. Public expectations and accountability requirements have also affected and increased demands upon museum professionalism. The sector has done well to establish accepted standards for most of these areas, and offers museum employees opportunities to gain knowledge and tools in diverse fields. However, museum professionals have been slow to adopt all recommended norms, particularly with regard to governance and management.

As museums professionalize, more is required from museum volunteers, which will be discussed below. Due to the sector’s high standards, specific ethical requirements, and extensive training, museum staff members can have greater expertise than the non-professional board members who are responsible for museum governance and oversight. “With the growing professionalism of museum staff do volunteer boards of directors provide the best oversight for ‘the public good’ for museums?” (Alexander and Alexander 2008, 319)

Museum professionalism does not only refer to accountability and ethical codes, but also to
the execution of professional duties as Greenhill stated in 1977. This concept presupposes that museums are complex institutions with common goals, unique concerns, and challenges that require generally accepted industrial management.

Prior to the 1970s, museum managers did not receive management training, and were not necessarily management specialists. The 1987 Hale Report on museum training identified necessary training improvements across museum departments, including financial accountability (Museums and Galleries Commission 1987). It noted the slow changeover from curator-managed museums to the implementation of training programs like the Museums Training Institute that enabled non-managerial museum staff members to take on management roles, in addition to the hiring of management staff from outside the museum sector. Yet through the 1990s, and in numerous small or volunteer-run museums in the twentieth century, “management training and the resulting techniques [were deemed] inappropriate to museums and, as such, are irrelevant to the museum profession.” (Fopp 1997, 1) As has been demonstrated, museums fit squarely in the third sector, which requires no less management or governance care than the private sector. Museums differ from other organizations in mission and have different stakeholders but to fulfill those missions and satisfy stakeholders, sound management and governance practices are required. Museum training geared toward volunteers, in-house training, induction training, and continuous professional development are still absent in many UK museums.

Museum training is primarily two-fold: specialty-based and ethics-based. The Museums Association and other oversight groups provide training in both areas, yet do not offer much specific management, governance, or ethics training. An ethics requirement does exist for museum professionals acquiring the MA Associateship qualification. Two primary critiques have arisen. Malaro (1994) noted that most board training is “generic” and widely-applicable, yet not necessarily museum-related. While boards may be well-versed in running a charity, they may lack the nuanced point of view required to govern a museum with diverse stakeholders, unique needs, and specific ethical norms. Board member expertise typically lies outside of museums, and “many of the governing authorities responsible for these museums are also beginning to resemble corporate entities, with board members being chosen for their business experience.” (Sandell and Janes 2007, 2) Yet, oftentimes these board members do not implement or expect the same professional standards from museums they govern as from businesses with which they are associated (Chait and Taylor 1989). This may be particularly salient for volunteer-run museums.

Ultimately, how the sector is perceived depends on the quality of governance demonstrated by individual boards as they guide their respective organizations. But board members usually ... [have] little training ... Accordingly, it is unrealistic to assume that these board members are prepared to govern well, and, when in fact they fail, the tendency is to look the other way because of their volunteer status ... the sensible solution is to focus on board education and then require more thoughtful governance. (Malaro 1994, 35)

While this does sound like a sensible solution, Wood and Rentschler (2003) noted the disparity in individuals’ ethics despite common goals: “To assume that written statements and
museum pronouncements from directors will suffice is underestimating the complexity of the [ethics] issue ... if ethics are not part of the strategic planning and the strategic fit of the organisation, then ethics statements can become hollow rhetoric.” (Wood and Rentschler 2003, 533) They assert museum-wide training as a means to implement ethical consistency geared towards institutional stability.

Professional development requires institutional investment: time away from regular duties, time away from the museum, and financial costs to attend training courses. Continual training, however, will help the museum reach its full potential and fulfill its goals. Balking at training programs, best practice schemes, or standards of practice prevents opportunities for improvement. The indifference of museums to changing public expectations, an aversion to update working practices (Moore 1994, Middleton 1990), and hesitation to source knowledge outside the museum sector (Janes 2009) in the face of shifting requirements is shortsighted. As of 2004, “[a]cceptance of the need to change may well [have been] the biggest barrier [for museums] to overcome. Without acceptance of the need to change, individuals or groups can become obstacles to advancing a new agenda and will dramatically slow progress.” (Anderson 2004, 3) Critics have noted UK museums' hesitation at implementing management objectives over the last two decades (Sandell and Janes 2007, Kavanagh 1991b). In the early 1990s, “many attitudes to museum management [were] deeply set and some of them [were] staggeringly out of date.” (Kavanagh 1991, 6) Museum management was spurned in comparison to collection management, scholarship, and exhibitions (Sandell and Janes 2007).

Due to increased calls for accountability, increasingly limited government financing, and expanding stakeholder demands, this attitude has changed, and management is now integral to museum effectiveness. Griffin and Abraham's 1999 study (Griffin and Abraham 2007) is notable for determining that Local Authority museums are typically less effective due to government oversight and finance concerns, which require processes that do not comprise best business practices. “Broadly there is agreement between the characteristics of effectiveness in museums and the features of effective commercial or forprofit organisations.” (Griffin and Abraham 2007, 105) Yet Sandell and Janes (2007) fear some museum managers now expect corporate practices to be a panacea for museum financial concerns:

It is ... not useful [for museum professionals] to bemoan the abandonment of traditional museum practices in the face of very real economic and social imperatives. To do this is as naïve as insisting that museums must become profit-driven enterprises if they are to survive in the contemporary world. In short, neither the business nor the non-profit sector holds the exclusive keys to a secure future. (Sandell and Janes 2007, 9)

UK museums must now adapt to assume increased responsibilities, meet opportunities, and re-assess managing internal controls as a means to an end to remain sustainable. Rather than ignoring interconnected multi-sector concepts, museums can embrace change to improve governance and accountability. Identifying selected best practice techniques to do so is a task UK museums are currently undertaking.
Assessing museum goals and results with consistent internal and external evaluation is both a qualitative and quantitative best practice device. Ethics-based standards are also now considered amongst best practice mechanisms. Standing board Ethics Committees, whistleblower protections, and conflict of interest assessments, for example can focus attention towards museum standards exhibited in the Museums Association Code of Ethics. Wood and Rentschler (2003) advocate implementing ethics audits for individuals and processes. Such procedures can affirm the museum sector’s integrity and reputation. “The next step is to link the values in the traditional museum approach to a vision that includes corporate reputation.” (Wood and Rentschler 2003, 529)

The organizational ethics of UK museums have been little studied (Wood and Rentschler 2003), while topics like object repatriation and deaccessioning have been heavily researched and discussed. Overall, academics find the success of corporate ethics relies upon executives backing ethical measures (Sims 1991, Gellerman 1989, Stoner 1989, Serpa 1985). This holds for the museum sector. The museum director and governing body establish a museum’s ethical nature through applicable codes, training, and expectations applicable to all museum employees and volunteers. Ethics implemented as a statement of values integral to a museum’s strategic plan, as stated above, can improve governance. These values representing integrity and quality can solidify a museum’s reputation. “The effectiveness of a [museum] is directly related to the public’s perception of the integrity of the organization.” (Malaro 1994, 19) Reputation based on integrity is a vital asset. Museum size or income do not determine a museum’s reputation (Sandell and Janes 2007), but museums of all types and sizes can impact stakeholders’ public perception, and hence museums’ reputations, through ethical channels. In so doing, museums will be prepared to manage varied conflicts and questions within established, agreed upon standards.

ii. Museum volunteers

The influx of UK museums through the 1980s “at the rate of one a fortnight ... is due mainly to the huge growth in voluntary trusts and ‘all volunteer’ museums.” (Millar 1991, 1) Two decades later, nearly all UK museums (92%) utilize volunteers, and many museums continue to be entirely volunteer-run (Resource 2002). In 2001, there were twice as many full- and part-time volunteers (25,000) in UK museums as paid employees (12,500) (Creigh-Tyte and Thomas 2001). The field of volunteering has also professionalized in the UK since the 1980s and early1990s (Holmes 2007, British Association of Friends of Museums 1999, Institute of Volunteering Research 1998, Mattingly 1984), and mirrors volunteering models in Canada and the United States (Holmes 2007). “The move to a more professional approach to volunteer management mirrors moves towards professionalisation within the UK museums profession.” (Holmes 2007, 224) Typically, museum volunteers are well-educated professionals pursuing careers in other disciplines (Mattingly 1984) who currently fill assorted roles in the museum: trustees, administrators, fundraisers, money handlers, in visitor services, documentation, collections, and finance.

Museums are expected to have volunteer policies and guidelines, staff members should learn how to manage volunteers, and museum insurance policies should cover volunteer activities (Goodland and McIvor 1998). These expectations were not yet in place in UK museums by the
mid-1980s (Mattingly 1984). “Lack of management of volunteers in the past has often been based on the false assumption that volunteer time is unlimited and free. In fact, it is neither, and therefore needs to be carefully managed.” (Goodland and McIvor 1998, 85) If museums can better harness volunteer time, the volunteering experience can be mutually beneficial for the museum and for the volunteer.

Holmes’ article “Volunteers in the Heritage Sector: A neglected audience?” (2007) outlines the current state of museum volunteering in the United Kingdom. Museum volunteers are academically assessed either for their economic benefits as an unpaid and potentially unreliable and unprofessional workforce (Hooper-Greenhill and Chadwick 1985), or to determine their motivations in order for organizations to better manage volunteering hours. While various internal and external factors have affected volunteer professionalism as unpaid staff members, Holmes looks to the root of volunteers’ interests to best assess how museums can utilize their work hours. Mirroring Goodland and McIvor (1998), Holmes questions whether most volunteers participate in museums as a “leisure activity”, or as active visitors: “[volunteers] were trained and deployed as staff, but their motivations to work and perceived benefits were found to be more akin to those of visitors.” (Holmes 2007, 225) Volunteers are a specific type of committed client, making the volunteer program, then, part of a museum’s educational and outreach mission (Goodland and McIvor 1998). These volunteers, however, are museum “insiders” who view themselves as part of the museum team.

Individuals volunteer in museums for diverse reasons like social interaction or interest in the subject matter. Holmes notes that, while representing a small number of museum volunteers, numerous museum employees themselves began as museum volunteers or interns attempting to gain work experience. These employees presumably approached their volunteer duties differently than volunteers engaged for other purposes. This may lead those employees to expect a professional demeanor from the volunteers they manage, but overlooking volunteer motivations can affect volunteer “recruitment and retention”. (Holmes 2007, 233) As such, re-casting volunteers as active visitors as opposed to unpaid staff will enable museum administrators to better manage and better align the museum’s needs with the volunteers’ desires (Goodland and McIvor 1998). A challenge arises, then, to motivate volunteers to perform at professional levels and to understand the need for implementing basic standards. A divide continues to exist between professional museum practitioners and volunteer trustees whose work experience has not prepared them for museum work, a specialized discipline (Sandell and Janes 2007).

Summary

Museums in the United Kingdom are at a crossroads. A disparity exists between museum professionals who have received museum-specific training, and those that have not. Challenges associated with museum training impact the state of museum-specific ethics in the workplace. Volunteers, including board members, work for the best interest of their organizations, but may not be aware of how best to achieve accountability and preserve the public trust. To determine the widespread nature of accountability across the UK museum sector it is necessary to examine the implementation of conflict of interest policies and other specific best practices on a regular basis. A study was conducted between 2008-11 that analyzed this issue (Groninger, 2011). Five years have passed, and the UK museum sector is
due for an updated analysis in order to construct an accurate picture of current UK museum accountability.

References


