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One step back, two steps forward – doing the SSN Shimmy

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Introduction

Subject Specialist Networks (SSNs) were a recommendation of the original Renaissance report and their ongoing relevance has been emphasised through the Renaissance Review, Leading Museums and the National Museum Directors' Conference's (NMDC) recently commissioned survey (National Museums working in partnership across the UK). As articulated in both the MLA's Corporate Plan and Leading Museums, the reinvigoration and ongoing development of SSNs will be instrumental in promoting best practice, raising quality, standards and professional confidence and will "contribute to a process in which all museums foster a relationship based on professional respect." (UK Partnerships Compendium, Mapping Exercise, Pg 41)



Grants for Subject Specialist Networks

Renaissance funded a series of Exploratory and Implementation Grants in 05/06, a second round of Exploratory Grants in 06/07 and a further round of Implementation Grants in 07/08. The MLA, since October 2009 has been investing time and resource into reviewing, stabilising and supporting SSNs with a focus, initially, on 20 SSNs which are deemed to support key subject areas. The MLA is now working to deliver the following areas of support to all SSNs.

1. Grants of up to £10,000

Investment to enable networks to undertake activity that may:

- develop capacity;
- enable organisational development;
- deliver further/wider sector impact;
- engage new audiences or use network expertise to engage with regional improvement priorities, or
- deliver against a networks' plans/ambitions

2. Institutional support

Without strong institutional support, sustainability is significantly compromised. An impact assessment framework will be developed which will begin to identify the physical, intellectual, social, human and cultural capital that engagement in SSNs levers back in to the benefit of the institutions and the collections. It is hoped this will be a powerful broker of stronger institutional support and engagement and enable SSNs to better articulate their value.

3. Website offer

SSNs will continue to be offered free website development and hosting through Collections Link. The functionality of these websites is being reviewed to ensure flexibility in design and function.

4. Administration

One of the key challenges for most SSNs is administering their groups and activities. It is hoped that the SSN Connect portal will offer shared functionality such as professional networking and a payment facility (e.g. PayPal).

5. Communication and networking the networks

An e-bulletin is under draft, which will include examples of good practice and featured SSN activity. An SSN conference is being planned for the autumn.

6. Enabling development and exploiting value

There is significant diversity in governance, scope and impact within SSNs – each able to articulate its own value. Furthermore, those SSNs that have developed organically out of a clear need in the sector have, by default and intent, become most sustainable. Whilst the importance of allowing natural development isn't questioned, an SSN charter will be developed which becomes a benchmark for fledgling organisations to work towards. Mapping SSN engagement into CPD will also be explored.

7. Sustainable funding

Very few SSNs exploit external funding opportunities which often limit the scope and impact of their activity – relying mostly on modest subscription and/or membership fees. The feasibility of offering SSNs access to the online funding database 'grantfinder' will be explored with a view to including funding opportunities in the SSN bulletin.

8. Developing a more corporate approach

By definition, most SSNs are managed by Curators and often find the more corporate functions of their group (such as procurement, marketing, publicity) a challenge. Checklists, proformas and guidelines will be developed and shared. The feasibility of developing a skills bank or specific skills networks will also be explored.