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NatSCA News

Title: How Museums can Support Higher Education: Engaging Universities with Museums

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Source: Ashby, J. (2012). How Museums can Support Higher Education: Engaging Universities with Museums. *NatSCA News, Issue 23*, 21 - 24.

URL: <http://www.natsca.org/article/91>

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How Museums can Support Higher Education: Engaging Universities with Museums

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Abstract

Building on the experience of working in a university museum, here I discuss what is currently happening in universities that may provide opportunities for museums to build links and provide services. There can be many benefits for non-university museums to engage in such work, from tapping into to sources of income to the increased profile to be generated from being involved in ground-breaking research. Instead of focusing on museum collections as the resource to be shared, most of the activities described instead highlight the value of sharing spaces and expertise with universities. Museums stand to gain by collaborating with universities in these areas of their work: excellence in teaching, impact and public engagement, innovation, the student experience and Outreach / Access / Widening Participation.

Background

Like institutions the world over, UCL Museums have been working hard to limit the effects of current financial hardships. University museums are effectively being squeezed from both sides – the Higher Education sector has less money, and the museum sector has less money. In short, this means that university museum managers should never forget that at any given moment someone in a university's senior management could well be wondering whether the value added by its museums is worth more than the actual tangible income that could be generated if they converted all the museum spaces to medical research labs.

With pressures on university resources growing, university museums must do all they can to prove their worth to their governing institutions. With this in mind, I aim to explain a selection of the strategies and programmes that we at the Grant Museum have put in place to try and meet the needs of our institution, UCL, with a hope of being considered a key part in delivering the University's varied agendas. What I hope to communicate is that the agendas that we are working towards could be met by non-university museums.

It has always been known that natural sciences museum collections can be used by academic researchers, mostly zoologists and palaeontologists wanting access for morphometric analysis or to understand population changes over recent history. This kind of academic access is commonplace in many museums and will not be the focus of this paper – there are already strong relationships between museum staff and academics in this field. Most would consider it the bread and butter of academic-museum interactions, agreeing that procedures should be in place to make access as easy as possible, and as efficiently as they can.

Instead of discussing specimen-based research, I will be highlighting some of the issues that are extremely big business at universities at present which with varying degrees of imagination can easily be delivered by museums. Where necessary, I will try to explain exactly why a museum might want to help universities to deliver their strategies, if the overlap with museum agendas isn't obvious.

The strength and value of museum collections does not need to be highlighted. However, while it's easy to rely on objects as being at the centre of any offer for collaboration, it's crucial to remember that the professional expertise of museum staff is normally very different to the expertise of potential partners. It is certainly not just the spaces and collections themselves that should be considered in an audit of value, but also the staff. For example, museum staff are experts in how to run events, develop audiences, design exhibitions, and teach with objects, as well as curation, which can be all highly valued by modern universities.

Excellence in Teaching

UCL Museums have been gathering data which show what students get out of learning with objects. Key

findings have been that 67% of students think object-based learning is a more effective way of learning than listening to a lecture or talk. Students emphasised the way object based learning improved their understanding of subject-specific knowledge; was interactive, hands-on and visual; and was an engaging and inspiring way of learning (Hannan, 2012).

University Museums are not as common as they once were. For example over the past thirty years other London universities disbanded their zoology collections, and they came under the care of the Grant Museum. We are now the last university zoology museum in London. Universities local to other museums may well not have their own teaching collections. It is easy to make the argument that zoology can't be properly taught without access to specimens – and museums can certainly contact lecturers and offer access.

Real value is to be had in looking beyond the obvious academic links. “Key Skills” or “Transferable Skills” are a big part of the modern university agenda, in equipping graduates for a life in employment after university, and object-based learning is an excellent way of delivering them. Communication, observation and team-working skills were consistently identified as having been developed through object based learning (Hannan, 2012).

In the Grant Museum, as well as teaching biologists and geologists we look well beyond these obvious links and have considered which other disciplines could make use of our collections, expertise and spaces. We have built strong links with art schools in London and huge proportions of our Higher Education classes are in art. We've also attracted classes who study jewellery making – they look at the metal mounts our specimens are built on; architects who look at the structural complexities of animal skeletons and dancers from the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art to understand from real skeletons how to make playing the role of an animal more realistic with respect to how they actually move. The key message is don't be restricted to scientists when thinking about how to generate teaching bookings.

Impact and Public Engagement

When academics bid to research councils for money to do research, today they have to demonstrate that their work has some implications beyond academia. For some this is very easy – for those researching new drugs the “impact” is that x many lives are saved each year. Others may influence industry and result in reducing costs for a particular sector or generate income from patents or licences. Where museums come in is that one pathway to impact is “cultural enrichment, including improved public engagement with science and research” (National Co-ordinating Centre for Public Engagement, 2009).

This means that there are thousands of academics out there looking for a way to engage the public with their work, and with a limited idea of how to do so. If museums latch on to this, they can provide a way for their visitors to experience cutting-edge research, potentially play a role in shaping it, and get content for free for exhibitions and events. Museums are already successful at drawing people in. Everyday visitors, event participants and schools can be shared with colleagues across our universities.

Given that public engagement and the impact agenda are of such a high priority today, actual guaranteed access to an established audience should not be forgotten lightly, nor should how it is achieved. Museums can provide this access to academic colleagues.

In addition to hands-on object-based themed events for families in holidays and at weekends, the Grant Museum runs one of the largest programmes of informal natural history events for adults in London. These take place in the evenings at least once a fortnight and are delivered in a range of formats. Each term all events revolve around a single theme, which facilitates their marketing as a package. For example spring 2012 term was “Humanimals Season” – exploring the ways in which human and animal worlds interact. Other successful themes have included Cryptozoology Season and Naughty Nature Season.

Around these topics a variety of events are programmed, which range in format from traditional lecture-style presentations, panel discussions, balloon debates, treasure hunts, panel-games, object-based workshops and film nights. All of these events rely on academics coming in as speakers or panellists. We train them up and get the top-level experts for our audiences, in return they get access to our audiences for their impact requirements, and they don't expect to be paid. Beyond UCL, research academics speaking at events at Wellcome Collection have used the events as evidence of impact-related activities for their funding councils (Jopsom, 2012). Likewise public engagement staff at the Natural History Museum work with scientists

to tailor their pathways to impact to their research and how that might best be communicated to different audiences, including inclusion in their Nature Live programme of scientist-led events (Modinou, 2012).

Aside from events, the main area of impact the Grant Museum works heavily with is exhibitions. All of our temporary exhibitions are co-curated by university academics aiming to deliver impact. In spring 2012 *Art by Animals* was an installation of paintings by gorillas, chimps, orangs and elephants, co-curated with art academics, which doubled our visitor figures. What the university gets out of it is a platform for its academics to engage with an established public audience, and a reputation for high quality accessible events, managed and marketed by experts in event programming and science communication.

To make the events and exhibitions a success we must ensure high attendance, and this is done by ensuring themes have a wide appeal – not just biologically-minded people. Whilst all of our themes have their basis in the life sciences, particularly natural history, we tackle the topics from many angles, bringing in academics from across the disciplines, including the history of science, engineering, astrophysics, geography and the arts.

An example from outside of UCL is the Manchester Museum's recent *Breed: The British & their Dogs* exhibition, which was developed with academics in the University of Manchester's Centre for the History of Science, Technology and Medicine, with AHRC funding (University of Manchester, 2012).

Generating income from Impact activities

Museums must ensure that their costs – in terms of staff time and materials, which for exhibitions can be huge – are costed into the research funding bid at the earliest stage. It's hard if the academics contact the museum having secured their research money with little forethought for the actual costs. UCL Museums have produced a document which acts as a guide for academics considering funding bids. It outlines the kinds of activities which the museums can support, and the approximate associated costs the museums seek funding for (UCL Museums, 2012).

Innovation – excellence in research

Here I will discuss the way museums can be involved in research aside from traditional specimen-based research. Instead of considering the objects to be the asset in use, we consider the museum venue and its visitors as something to sell to academics.

As with impact, many researchers need a public to test things on. We at UCL Museums have built strong links with academics in the field of digital humanities, both at UCL and beyond. Our partnerships involve the academics conceiving of an innovative method of audience engagement, and they need somewhere to test it as an experiment. We provide the museum expertise and the Petrie dish – we put experimental products in our galleries so that academics can test them on our willing visitors.

To these ends we have embraced a philosophy of being a venue for experimental practices and innovation for universities (see MacDonald and Ashby, 2011). As an example how we have treated the museum as a research venue, we have in gallery a ground-breaking method of public engagement that was developed with dual goals. For us – to allow our visitors to contribute their opinions to how museums like ours should practice, and the role of science in society today; for our partners – the UCL Centre for Advanced Spatial Analysis and UCL Centre for Digital Humanities – the chance to run a research programme concerning how museum visitors engage with digital social interactives and how audiences behave around such technology.

To these ends, we are only the second museum in my knowledge to employ iPads permanently in displays. Each iPad asks visitors to answer questions to which we want to know their thoughts. These change periodically. At present, our questions include “Should human and animal remains be treated differently in museums like ours”, “Should scientists shy away from studying differences between the races” and “What makes an animal British”. Visitors can respond on the iPads themselves, on their own smart phones by scanning a QR code, or at home on their computers. Evaluation is still underway, but anecdotally the project seems to be a great success and has been shortlisted for a number of awards. It is called QRator.

On similar lines The Science Museum, with funding from the Wellcome Trust, used visitors to their *Lotto-lab* as subjects in experiments into human perception, providing the researchers with scientific data at the same time as engaging their visitors in active research (Science Museum, 2011).

Involvement in such enterprises can raise income from research councils in the same way as Impact-related work, but the benefits go far beyond this. The chief of these include an enhanced experience for visitors, and an improved profile in the sector. The *New Media Consortium Horizon Report: 2011 Museum Edition* (Johnson, Adams and Witchey, 2011) cited QRator as being four to five years ahead of “the adoption horizon” for the sector as a whole, which has generated a great deal of interest for the Museum.

Student experience

Since tuition fees became significant, and even more so since the £9000 fees were on the table, universities have working very hard to ensure that students are happy and feel they are getting good value for money. The Grant Museum links to this agenda in many ways, particularly in making sure that the teaching is excellent by pushing object-based learning, and attracting students to our events, but a big way for other museums to tap into this, and get a lot out of it, is through volunteering.

Many museums will rely on volunteers to fulfil their needs to some degree. If they chose to work with university students it is worth noting that every university is likely to have a volunteering services unit which supports its students in finding and completing volunteering opportunities. The Grant Museum uses a lot of volunteers in our learning and curatorial work, and they all come from university. If other museums are looking for subject-enthusiasts or keen events volunteers then it is worth contacting the local university volunteering services staff, as they will have great infrastructure in place to provide support. There are drawbacks of working student volunteers – largely their lack of availability in exam and holiday time, but the Grant Museum has benefitted from their work a great deal.

Outreach / Access

As part of an agenda variously known as Outreach, Access or Widening Participation, all universities have to put a lot of effort – running into the millions of pounds – into attracting students from non-traditional higher education families. Museums can play a major role in fulfilling this goal. It is likely that each university will have a major programme in place – called the Access Agreement since the £9000 tuition fees were introduced – which museums could take advantage of.

The programmes may include Saturday schools and summer schools for 14 to 17 year olds – an audience that is tricky to get into museums – that will be looking for things to do with their students. The Grant Museum provides workshops for things like this, and there is money available to do so. There is potential growing for museums to tap into this, taking advantage of the universities’ growing expertise in recruiting such audiences, and being paid as part of the arrangement.

Summary

In summary I hope I have conveyed that, aside from traditional collections-based teaching and research, the other standard practices of modern museums – from events and exhibitions to volunteering, schools and interactive displays, can be tweaked to be of benefit to universities. I doubt it will be the main kind of interaction or partnership in most museums, but it can be a very beneficial area of work, and one that both generates income and fulfils shared agendas from both sectors.

Acknowledgements

Many thanks to colleagues in other museums who communicated with me regarding initiatives in their institutions - Ivett Modinou, Hayley Kruger and Jenny Jopsom. Thank you to the anonymous reviewers who gave useful guidance on this paper.

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