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CHARTERED CURATORS?

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(The Education Committee of the Museums Association Council convened a 'Think Tank' in February to discuss the qualifications for museum curators).

The meeting was held at Coventry on 13/14 February, 1976 and was attended by about 30 delegates. The membership was by invitation, and selection was made to include a cross-section of persons interested in the training required for qualifications in museum practice. Thus there were representatives of the various specialist disciplinary groups, of MAG, of large and small provincial museums, national museums, private museums and area councils.

In general the discussion centred upon an examination of each of the three existing phases of qualifying as a professional curator viz, the Qualifying Examination stage, the Final Diploma stage and the Fellowship stage.

Dealing with the Qualifying Examination firstly, there was unanimous approval that this should be discontinued, subject to approval by members at the next Annual General Meeting of the Association. The reasons for this were the relatively few candidates coming forward, compared with a large amount of administrative procedure involved, the difficulty in examining in academic subjects and the inappropriateness that the Association be involved in this responsibility. It was felt that few professional curators had the correct background or experience for examining specialist disciplines, whereas the one thing that they should be concerned with was the collection of studies unique to the museum profession and directly related to a responsibility for material objects.

It appeared that over 90% of the annual intake of students registering as Diploma candidates was gaining exemption from the qualifying examination and it was thought that of the remainder, those holding 'non-relevant' degrees might be trained for the final examination in some manner.

Removal of the qualifying examination was not considered as a step towards an all-graduate entry. It was thought that qualification for registration might be 'a degree or equivalent status', which would be a loophole for mature students with a wealth of suitable background experience.

The members considered that a young non-graduate anxious to enter the profession had many alternatives for getting degree status - a situation quite different from when the Diploma training scheme was first developed.

Discussion next covered the training for the Diploma, or an equivalent qualification in curatorial responsibility. Matters considered included the nature of training required, especially the choice between concentrating on training in the curatorial responsibility for specialist disciplines; general curatorial training, picking out the features common to all disciplines; the organisation and philosophy side of professional training, and advanced management training. A primary objective was to try and find a formula which would provide greater encouragement for curators in museums to seek a qualification of professional competence, especially one that would merit recognition by all local authorities, the Civil Service Department and the D.E.S. The suggestion was advanced that the Council of the Association, through its Institutional Representatives, should ensure a widespread, if not universal, acceptance by all local authorities of a qualification in professional curatorship as a pre-requisite for all appointments above a certain level of responsibility - say from Assistant Keeper upwards.

Various views were expressed about the existing Diploma scheme, the main criticisms being the inequality of standards between disciplines, the lack of efficiency and understanding among many tutors, the overlapping detail of many courses and omissions from some of them, and the failure of the Association to keep absolute control over the progress of students towards the final examination.

The nature of the syllabus for a new type of course was also discussed. Although some held the view that the subject matter should be almost entirely based upon an administrative function, the idea which was most generally approved was that the whole training should be related to 'stuff'. This term was accepted by all as a well-meaning abbreviated piece of slang to express the overall nature of material objects, in infinitely variable form and number, constituting collections. Responsibility for 'stuff', directly or indirectly, was the special feature of museum curatorship and gave to it a greater need for ethical control than is required even by librarianship. To be based upon training for the responsibilities of handling 'stuff' would make a qualification of professional curatorship different from other qualifications that might be thought appropriate; more than that, such a qualification should be as near mandatory as possible.

Various training schemes were aired, but eventually there was universal agreement for a scheme, the product of which would be a Chartered Curator. This would presuppose that the Museums Association should acquire a Royal Charter and this could be explored as a realistic possibility.

The training would commence with registration of candidates working in museums and such candidates would be required to show a) that they had an adequate academic background b) preferably that they had an aptitude for the work they proposed to do - there might be a preliminary course in which aptitude could be assessed.

The whole training period would be supervised by the Museums Association, which would stipulate a range of experiences through which a student should pass. Each experience would have to be certified and some assessment made. This reflects the credit accumulating process.

Training should take three years, the first of which would be in a museum, but perhaps there would be a need for short-term secondment(s) if a student's own museum could not provide all of the experiences expected during this initial phase.

The second year preferably, or under certain conditions the third year, would be on secondment to a training institution. Experience showed that the cost of this to a local authority would be less than the series of detachments necessary with the present training scheme. The training institution would be either a university with a Department of Museum Studies, or a Training Museum. Delegates present from the Leicester and Manchester Departments saw no real problem in their fulfilling the function, although other universities might be required to form museum study departments in order to satisfy these requirements at the present rate of student enrolment. Members generally thought that students should have a year in a museum before entering a university department. Both of the departmental directors agreed, but one thought he might be under pressure from heads of faculties to take in graduates direct from the universities where they gained their first degree.

The training year would replace the present courses for the Diploma and would be subject to assessment.

The final training year would be in a museum with strict supervision by a tutor. Tutors would have to certify that students had covered required parts of the training programme, but would also function in an advisory capacity ensuring that their students had the facilities they required. There would be assessment during this period.

When all the training programme had been covered, a student could apply to take the final examination. The form of this was not decided but some part would probably be written and a good deal would be testing practical competence. The previous assessments would be taken into account before an award was made.

All members felt that national museums should be more extensively involved in the training programme and the Director of the Royal Scottish Museum thought that his institution would welcome an opportunity for such involvement.

The use of external examiners was also discussed and an opinion was advanced that this might be an important factor in persuading D.E.S. to give formal recognition to the qualification.

In descriptive terms, members of the 'Think Tank' saw the Chartered status as a 'licence to drive' and it might also provide

a qualification of international status e.g. in any consultation with EEC over the rights to practise of professionals providing a public service. There might come a time when such rights and status could be withheld where a code of professional ethics was infringed.

Discussions did not ignore a need to provide training for ancillary staff such as those concerned with conservation and display; however, it was thought desirable that any of these persons who felt inclined to seek museum directorships, should be expected to arrive at this career phase after going through the training required for a Chartered Curator. That a Director should always have had this professional training was considered essential if the integrity for preserving collections was to be upheld.

(The Institute of Biology is also seeking Chartership so that biologists in this country have equivalent legal status with their European colleagues. The B.C.G. Committee is discussing this matter with the Institute and will report back to members).