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NEWSLETTER

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MTI - its no joke!

Mike Hounsome's personal view of the MTI Research Standards

The following article is adapted from the text of an invited address given to the University Museums Group at the Courtauld Institute on 25th October 1991, in the presence of Simon Roodhouse and David Wears of the MTI. As you may imagine, it stimulated a vigorous debate on the relationship between university museums and the MTI.

I first heard about MTI (Museum Training Institute) more than a year ago, when I received a copy of MTI NEWS. As far as I can remember, it was not April 1st, but I seriously thought that it was a spoof, and I wondered who of my colleagues had the wit and the time to produce such a hilarious take-off of the meaningless management-speak with which managers try to hide their inadequacy. To have produced half a dozen sides of incomprehensible rubbish with the appearance of seriousness was evidence of a considerable talent. So I read it, laughed - and threw it in the bin.

The months passed; then I received a telephone call from the chairman of the MTI Research Functional Group, in which he observed that the seven or eight members of the group did not include a scientist, and how would I like to be the Token Scientist. To be fair, he didn't put it quite like that, and he was seriously concerned about the situation and genuinely wanted to redress the balance.

I agreed to serve on this group, after the chairman had convinced me that it was not a joke, because I thought it vital that there was at least some scientific input. I then discovered the gravity of the situation. It appeared that some people, whom I had never heard of, appointed by people I had never heard of, had appointed more people (whom presumably they had heard of) who were to produce standards for people

who work in museums, to which we - the people doing the work - had to conform. I could discover no point in this chain at which the curators had been consulted. As far as I am aware, neither BCG nor GCG were even asked to nominate members of the various groups and committees. As usual, of course, 'the profession' had been consulted - that is, the elevated MA clique who, for the most part, have no knowledge of biology curatorship. The set-up would have been laughable were it not for the fact that it had governmental backing (possibly even instigation), and would be imposed on museums whether they agreed or not.

Some people have seen the whole thing as a part of a Thatcherite plan to break the professions as she has broken the unions. According to this supposed plan, no profession should be self-regulating, as this produces cosy closed-shops. Law and Medicine are the big targets here, and the museum so-called profession is just a 'starter'. This theory seems far-fetched, and is impossible to prove or refute, but the fact is that MTI's plans would take training out of the MA's hands (and who can defend the MA's record on this?) and make it part of the quasi-governmental National Council for Vocational Qualifications (NCVQ). A degree in biology would no longer qualify one to carry out biological research in a museum - one would have to have the appropriate NCVQ.

Now, I expect that few of us would claim that a biology degree fully equipped one to be a museum curator. Until now, museums operated a kind of apprenticeship scheme. After graduating, one obtained a junior appointment and learned 'on the job' until one felt able to apply for a more senior post. Many also undertook training under the MA, and some attended post-graduate courses. It may well be that these methods of learning the museum aspects of biology were haphazard and inadequate, and that some new, structured, approach was required. The very successful BCG courses are a recognition of the inadequacy of current training, and of the demand for better.

So, one might argue for better **avocational** (rather than **professional**¹) training in museum curatorship. The vital questions to ask are: who sets the curriculum and standards; who does the training; who assesses the trainees; and who pays for it all? The answer to the last three questions appears to be 'the museums themselves', and that has enormous implications for budgets and manpower; but what concerns me here is the answer to the first question, which seems to be - the MTI, using the (paid) services of training consultants (PTS) in consultation with self-appointed (unpaid) museum people, of which I am one. Even after twenty-eight years in museums I'm not sure I have the ability, arrogance or the time to tell other professionals how to carry out their research. Nevertheless, I thought it my duty to make some kind of contribution to the Research Functional Group.

The group has deliberated long and hard over the last year, and some of the more privileged of you may have seen the resulting Draft Standards documents (I certainly did not get a copy) and you may even have been asked to comment on them - within a month of receiving them. Incidentally, it would be interesting to know how the privileged people who received copies of the draft standards were chosen, if serving on one of the functional groups was not a qualification. At the meeting of the University Museums Group only one (Manchester's director) had received a copy, and he had to ask for it. As the only biologist in the group I should make some comments about this document to members of BCG.

[Redacted]

¹A vocation is what one feels called to do (eg. zoology); a **profession** is what one is qualified to do (eg Chartered Biologist, bound by the conditions of the Institute of Biology's Royal Charter), and an **avocation** is the job one actually does (eg Keeper of Zoology in a university museum).

All documents like this must start somewhere - committees must have some initial document to discuss. The first draft by PTS was just what you would expect from people whose (quote) "nearest previous experience of museum research was the drawing up of the standards for Garage Mechanics and Dry-Cleaning Operatives". They had clearly done their best, and were, they said, quite prepared to be shot down and to start again. This is just what the group recommended. We had many suggestions to make, and our chairman sent PTS details of the required changes. This pattern was repeated at each subsequent meeting, but each time the document came back it had incorporated only a few of our recommendations. The final document does contain most of our recommendations, but the general **feel** of the thing is still, in my opinion, wrong. If BCG members have objections to this document I beg them to consider what it was like before we got to work on it!

There were, of course, disagreements between members of the group, and this must have been difficult for PTS to accommodate. But I was surprised at how few, and how trivial, were most of these differences. Most of all, I was surprised at how little difference there was between me (the Token Scientist) and the representatives of the humanities. The basic principles of research seem to be universal; it is only the particulars that vary. The largest difference was between the 'museologists' and the rest of us. Research into museums themselves and their collections seems to run along somewhat different lines from mainstream research, and uses a different vocabulary. Nevertheless, this is a perfectly respectable line of research and had to be accommodated into the general scheme. This may explain some of the more unfamiliar terms and concepts in the Draft Standards. But most of the puzzlement induced in biology curators will be due to the peculiar management-speak that PTS insisted we had to use. It is not only the 'functions', 'units', 'elements of competence', and the 'performance criteria' that are difficult to come to terms with (particularly in research), but the general approach.

This, to my mind, is what is essentially wrong with the Draft Standards as presented. The whole thing is shot through with management ways of thinking rather than research ways of thinking, and it is strongly institutionally oriented. It offers precious little advice on how one carries out research, but is full of words such as *policy, monitor, priority, budget, deficient performance, targets, publicity* - all of which may have their place in museum management but are not what we normally think of

when we consider undertaking research. Only six of the thirty-three performance criteria actually refer to doing the research. The planning and communication of the research is important, but not four or five times as important, as indicated by their appearance in the Draft Standards.

The document goes wrong right from the start, where the Key Purpose relates all museum functions to 'people and the environment'. As any biologist could have told them, there is no such thing as 'the environment' - it has to be qualified by a possessive pronoun, eg 'a bird's environment', with a possible extension to 'the world environment'. What is clearly implied in the Key Purpose is 'people and **their** environment'; in other words this was thought up by people who consider the natural world only in so far as it affects human interests. This is perfectly acceptable in the study of the humanities, but it is not the way biologist think.

Furthermore, the function of research is defined as: to 'extend and disseminate knowledge and understanding of the material evidence held by the institution or relating to the material evidence held by the institution'. What's all this about 'material evidence'? What has research to do with 'the institution'. Both these concepts are the province of the institution itself. If your institution wants to confine your research in this way, then it may be perfectly at liberty to do so (but BCG members would be the first to argue against any such restriction), but it is not the function of MTI to require it to do so. The first clause alone is sufficient to define research: to 'extend and disseminate knowledge and understanding'.

I hope that this article has given you some idea of the background to the Draft Standards for Research. I have had no involvement in any of the other Functional Groups so I cannot comment on their results, but casting my eye over some of them demonstrates that some of my conclusions are generally applicable. And do you think the 'master plan' at the beginning of each booklet includes **all** the functions of a museum? I cannot find any reference to identifications for the public or statutory organisations, and this is a major part of biology curator's work. It may well be that the NCVQ approach is the correct one for, say, receptionists, administrators, shop workers or porters; but is it right for curators or researchers?

Most of the anxiety about MTI has been concerned with the receipt of training, but there is, of course, another side to training - its provision. At the

University Museums Group meeting in October, MTI were anxious to point out to the audience that they were possibly in the best position to **supply** training. They, after all, existed in an educational environment, and they certainly had considerable expertise in research. This echoed the concern about who was going to sell the training, and who was going to pay for it. Simon Roodhouse was not slow in pointing out that the university museums could, if they choose, be financial beneficiaries of these moves to impose a training structure on museums.

It looks as though we have no choice but to go along with MTI, so it is up to us to make sure they don't get away with steam-rolling through unsatisfactory standards. Get hold of copies of the draft standards and write to MTI with your comments. Like all these organisations, they know where they are going, and they don't want to be deflected by so-called consultation. Yes, they have held over a hundred workshops, but I wonder how many BCG members have attended them; and if the answer to that question is 'not many', then is it our fault or MTI's? If we don't comment, then they will be able to say that the profession approves of what they have done. We might well approve, but we must let them know one way of the other.

As for the Draft Standards for Research - it's not as bad as it could have been, but one is left wondering about the whole idea of training in museum research. Is it desirable? Is it possible? Is this the way to do it? Is the whole scheme daft, and does nobody have the courage to point out that the emperor has no clothes?

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Response to Mike Hounsome's article from Simon Roodhouse, Director of the Museum Training Institute

It is interesting to read the account of Mike Hounsome's involvement in the qualifications development programme principally because it does demonstrate very clearly how difficult it is to be 'on the inside' when major and fundamental changes are taking place within a profession.

The programme of work to which MTI is committed has its roots, as the article suggests, not only in recent government initiatives but also in the Museum and Galleries Commission report, 'Museum Professional