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Biology Curators Group Newsletter

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

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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?

Mike Hounsome
Keeper of Zoology, Manchester University Museum

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

Training and Career structure, 1987 (The Hale Report)'. The latter is of course about the needs of the museum world, whereas the former initiatives are concerned with more general but still highly significant changes occurring in education and training throughout the UK. These changes are immense and the museum world is at the forefront of developments. This brings with it advantages and yes, as Mike Hounsome indicates, some difficulties too!

What of the advantages? The museum world has in MTI an organisation that is recognised nationally as both an Industry Lead Body and an Industry Training Organisation. In practical terms this means the Museum Training Institute is working on behalf of museums, to devise and implement a new qualifications framework. In doing this MTI is not alone and there are similar organisations in most professional areas, each engaged on similar projects.

National Vocational Certificates will not therefore be limited to 'receptionists, administrators, shop workers or porters' but will eventually embrace most if not all of the professions. The UK qualification framework being devised by NCVQ is intended to be comprehensive.

NCVQ are charged with introducing this national qualifications framework and consequently it is important that there is a degree of consistency in how the qualifications are developed. All Industry Lead Bodies are using a standard model to devise and develop their respective qualifications. The use of this model and the associated terminology has unfortunately been for some difficult to come to terms with. MTI has always understood these difficulties in coping with the jargon and has attempted to overcome it in a number of ways ranging from newsletters to seminars.

The active involvement of museum professionals in the qualification development programme has been a key feature of our work. This involvement of museum professionals extends from membership of the MTI Board of Directors through to attending practical standards development workshops. On a wider front the 'so-called consultation' programme involved over 12,000 sets of draft standards being circulated nationwide for comment! All of the responses have been recorded and will be evaluated before the standards are redrafted.

A further key element of the consultation programme will be when the standards are field tested in 40 museums. This is not being undertaken for the sake of saying we have consulted with the sector - rather it is a vital and critical part of the qualifications development programme. Each of these 40 museums will be asked to use the standards of competence in assessment situations and again these comments will be listened to. In some instances standards will even be redrafted and field tested again!

One of the more beneficial outcomes from the qualifications development programme is that there has been a resurgence in the level of debate about museum education and training. MTI welcomes this debate and because of its approach actually encourages it.

There are, and will continue to be many opportunities for involvement in the work which MTI is leading on your behalf. Your comments are always welcomed and, where constructive and detailed we can actually incorporate the suggestions into the standards themselves.

Simon Roodhouse, Director, MTI

Newcastle University pursues Tyne and Wear option for Hancock Museum

On January 29th the University of Newcastle issued a press release stating 'Hancock Museum Saved', and proudly claimed the successful negotiation of a tripartite agreement between the Tyne and Wear Museums Service, the Natural History Society of Northumbria and The University. Under this new arrangement, Tyne and Wear would run the Hancock Museum as a Service Level Agreement, as it runs museums for the constituent District Council. Unfortunately, neither Tyne and Wear, nor the

Natural History Society (who own the museum and its collections) knew that a press release was imminent - indeed the Natural History Society had never been consulted about the intended arrangement.

A few days later, all Hancock Museum staff received a letter from the University's Personnel Officer intimating that if the agreement was ratified by the University Senate and Council, all staff would effectively be redundant from the end of June 1992.