Sector Needs & Challenges
Qualitative Study
July 2023

This is an edited version of the full report where insights and comments related specifically to perceptions of SMS/RCMG have been removed. The Literature Review has been provided as a word document appendix.
Introduction

Courtney Consulting was commissioned by the School of Museum Studies (SMS) and Research Centre for Museums and Galleries (RCMG) at the University of Leicester in March 2023 to deliver:

- A literature review of post pandemic existing research and reports focusing on challenges for the sector and needs for skills development and training

- A qualitative led insights report addressing:
  - External perceptions of SMS Programmes and courses and the relevance, utility and applicability of research at the SMS
  - Future skills and knowledge required by the Sector, including the potential for teaching, training and research partnerships with the sector
  - Challenges and priorities for the sector, including developing a diverse and inclusive profession
  - Barriers to engaging with Higher Education and the development of academic programmes of study and research relevant to the sector
  - Future curriculum and/or teaching approaches for university Museum and Gallery courses
  - Future areas of interest for university-led Museum and Gallery research
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With huge thanks to the 35 sector leaders we had one to one consultations with:

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- Chris Breward
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- Américo Castilla
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  Fundación TyPA (Buenos Aires)

- Dr Errol Francis
  Artistic Director and CEO
  Culture&

- Jon Finch
  Head of Culture and Visitor Economy
  Barnsley Council

- Camilla Hampshire
  Museums Manager & Cultural Lead
  Exeter City Council

- Rowan Brown
  Chief Executive Officer
  Museums Northumberland

- Kathryn Simpson
  Policy and Projects Manager
  National Museum Directors’ Council

- Kim Streets
  Chief Executive
  Sheffield Museums

- Paul Sapwell
  Chief Executive Officer
  Hampshire Cultural Trust

- Zak Mensah
  Co-CEO
  Birmingham Museums Trust

- Clara Åhlvik
  Director of Exhibitions
  Nobel Prize Museum
Key Insights
Sector Needs & Challenges
Finance was the first thought on everyone’s minds. For museums of all shapes and sizes, but particularly for Civic Museum leaders, the sector is in serious crisis from a financial sustainability perspective. The publicly funded business model is failing. The sector is not making the case for investment and doesn’t have the evidence base, language or narrative to convince either public or private sector partners of their value – at every level.

The biggest problem is resource and the staff to deliver. Our financial situation and vulnerability…funding... cost of living... post pandemic impact. This is the biggest challenge right now and I can’t see that changing any time soon.

The last round of ACE funding showed the biggest issue is funding and money. Everything on our risk register could be resolved with money.

When I’m talking to the leader of the Council or being challenged by some of my trustees about why we can’t sell something – my language and frame is quite weak in response because I’m in an echo chamber of ‘museums are good’ lots of the time.
Sector Needs & Challenges

Who cares?

Relevancy was repeated again and again as a major concern threatening the future of the sector. Being relevant to communities and society is front of mind for sector leaders and something they feel the sector as a whole (with some notable exceptions) is failing at.

The biggest challenge for Museums is being relevant to the public, I see that above financial sustainability because it's at the root of being relevant. The case for sustained funding needs to be supported by the public and communities.

Museums have lost relevancy. They have failing leadership because it doesn’t know how to create relevance. Museums are about specialist knowledge, it's subjective not objective. It doesn’t offer a space for diversity of perspectives and voices. You must reflect the community. Scientists don’t proclaim they can listen but museums people do but they only really listen to their own voice.

Relevancy is our biggest challenge. The things we collect and way we collect them needs to speak to our communities.
Consultees told us that collections management, acquisitions and disposal policies are not fit for purpose in a world facing a climate emergency.

We are absolutely walking, most of us backwards, into the impacts of climate and biodiversity crises and actually we still, as a sector, we care more about our stuff more than our planet. Where is the modelling of thinking around looking at other models for what our work might look like? And that can be anything from bins, lightbulbs, environmental conditions, to how we choose to build relationships internationally to, you know, what contemporary collecting looks like in this particular context. It can be all of it. And I see very little work in that field. I don’t see anywhere near as much around really equipping the workforce to understand that bigger context that they work within. I think that is really, really important. So, that’s a big one.

There’s a core question we’re not addressing is the number of objects we have and the relationship with the public. Dynamic collections management is about acquiring and proactively disposing which isn’t palatable in public perceptions so we don’t do it enough – have we got a sustainable museum ecology? Have we got too many museums? Have we got too much stuff?
Decolonisation and restitution, climate change and diversity and inclusion questions are important and pressing questions for sector leaders but a minefield to navigate. Getting this right for both staff and audiences is a priority but the risk of getting it wrong can paralyse decision making.

Decolonisation, different narratives being told and the culture wars thing is real. We need to use our collections and assets to tell the story on the climate emergency. Industrial capitalism was born here. And it depends upon the exploitation of nature and people. That’s a starting point that’s different from the ‘unique British genius and industrial heroes’ approach which has been the norm to date. There are some much more exciting and relevant narratives around the industrial revolution.

Increasingly we’re being pushed and asked, particularly by young people to take a stand. This is hard for big institutions who are naturally conversative linked to their funding models. Culture wars, national identity and what national institutions are for, representation – at this particular political moment – museums and museums professionals feeling that that is an increasingly fraught space with huge risks associated with any decision. We don’t know how to navigate that yet.

Are museums the new Zoos? A few decades ago people started to feel uncomfortable about Zoos and they had to reinvent themselves as centres for conservation.
Sector Needs & Challenges

Jobs Scarcity

There are serious concerns on whether there’s enough jobs for graduates in the sector and consultees believe there aren’t enough jobs or career progression to satisfy / justify the numbers coming through. There are also concerns that ‘graduate idealists’ aren’t equipped with the skills needed to sustain the sector of the future.

I hear UK Directors saying all the time that we’ve an oversupply of graduates and they’re not practical and need to be retrained in reality.

One of our challenges is we increasingly have young staff wanting things to happen right away some of which is totally right but some is naive and impossible.

Fundamentally, there is a massive issue round pipelines into the sector linked to pay, progression, lack of progression and the sustainability of that.

I have a lot of young people arriving with those qualifications who end up in jobs they didn’t expect to be in. Half of my front of house staff have museum qualifications but it’s the only way they can get into the museums world. Career development paths within the organisations don’t match the graduates experience. You can’t come in and move up in most museums.
Diversity & Inclusion
The issue of low salaries in the sector is seen as a critical issue to attracting and retaining the talent needed to enable the sector to survive and thrive. Only people who can ‘afford’ to be on a low salary and do unpaid internships etc can enter the profession and this impacts diversity in a big way.

Graduate employment and the ability to recruit at competitive salaries is a real issue. We’re falling behind as a sector in competitive salaries, graduates just won’t be able to afford working in the sector.

I had an interesting chat with someone at Teesside teaching on the MA and apprenticeship in curating and that struck me as an interesting and different model. It starts earlier than that though – getting people to value the humanities at school level. Getting schools to see the career pathway as valid. We don’t pay enough in the sector to keep people. When people can’t pay rent how are we ever going to be representative?
Diversity & Inclusion

Left-wing bias & barriers

There is a concern from consultees that the museums world exists in a left-wing echo chamber that doesn’t want to listen, understand and engage with any views outside of a left-wing bubble – thus making it inaccessible and irrelevant to a lot of people and communities who don’t share these views. Linked to this was a concern around the lack of diversity of thought within institutions as well as the more obvious workforce diversity challenges.

Museum people can’t talk to right wing people. That’s a problem. The people at the top making decisions on funding are often conservative and right wing.

We have graduate idealists now. I don’t see diversity of thought in the sector. People just agree with each other and we need to recognise the rest of the country doesn’t agree with that view. The empathy for why others might have different views is lacking.

Race, identity, power and equality are high in the public imagination but are unmoored from the mainstream visitor going to the museum. We must meet the mainstream too but no one wants to talk about that.
Diversity & Inclusion

Authentic leadership inspires action

There was a consensus that unless diversity and inclusion is valued, prioritised and evidenced within senior leadership including boards it won’t happen at a meaningful level. Best practice examples cited by consultees all evidenced leaders who took diversity seriously and proactively made change happen.

The Governing bodies need to be diverse – there has to be civic reach at that level.

Change needs to come from the top. When a director such as V&A East or in Manchester decides it’s a priority it starts to change things.

If leadership makes it a priority then it will be a priority. If they don’t buy in, it won’t happen. The issue of gender through all levels has been addressed here as a result.

Everything that happens, all change comes from how much leaders care. Change means work for leadership.
All leaders that we spoke to considered the recruitment process as absolutely essential to meaningful diversification of the workforce and having an MA is not a priority consideration or filtering criteria anymore. Those leaders with the most diverse workforces evidenced serious investment and change into how recruitment has been approached.

I think we need to be far more radical. You need to put money behind it. So we’ve massively shifted our curatorial team at the museum ...essentially we’ve just gone and rewritten all the job descriptions. Our South Asia gallery curator has never worked in a museum and she doesn't have collections based experience, but she's surrounded by people with collections experience and she has spent the last 30 years working on community heritage. I think she's good at creating conditions for heritage to be explored...I would love to see us doing some really ambitious secondments with leaders in other sectors, teachers, whoever they may be, and then us looking at how we really equip them to do museum work and build those skills. Because we know how to do that bit, we’re able to do that bit...

Start with skills when assessing young people, it’s not about qualifications, are they a climate activist for example? That’s relevant.
Sector Skills Gaps
The most commonly cited missing skills for the future workforce if the sector is to survive and thrive are leadership, entrepreneurial and fundraising and business skills. Critical thinking, being able to think on your feet and adapt, flexibility and resilience were also commonly brought up throughout the consultation as essential traits for today’s and tomorrow’s workforce.

I have a background in museum studies but as a museum director, most of my work is around those practical issues. It's around fundraising, it's around capital developments. It's around advocacy skills with stakeholders. Training and development of the current staff and, you know, the next cohort of people through mentoring and so on.

Leadership and business skills are the principal things lacking in the sector, having a whole organisational view.

They need to know their numbers and be able to build a business case.

Something around entrepreneurialism and partnership with the full stakeholder ecology.
Another very strong thread throughout every conversation was the need for the next generation of the workforce to have relationship building skills across the full stakeholder ecology. ‘Managing up’ in terms of being able to effect change within organisations where career progression may be slow was discussed by many consultees as something to be considered. Being able to influence at political and political levels was a key skill mentioned lots. Most importantly for consultees was a workforce that understands, values and proactively builds relationships with audiences and communities.

From being able to talk to philanthropists to understanding digital to how to put on a show – where are the cultural economists? Like it or not – we need to be able to talk in Green Book terms to talk to the treasury and influence policy.

People who work in museums need to be able to talk to people – the collections are the raison d'être but without people you can’t do them justice. It’s that focus on people skills that’s hard to teach but critical. Networking and advocacy at all levels. Humility is needed, we’re not the fountain of all knowledge, we bring expertise to the table but we need to respect audience’s knowledge equally or centre them.
Storytelling was another repeated skill set from consultees that they feel is currently lacking but fundamental to the success of the sector at every level going forward.

They need to be able to tell a business story and be more of a novelist than writing a manual in business plans and applications.

Storytelling and writing for audiences – that’s not in the curatorial mindset. Something that bridges interpretation and curating will increase trust.

I think there is a massive, massive job to do around our ability to be really powerful storytellers and advocates for our work. Sadly, it’s still too few of us. So how we work with what we’ve got to really powerfully tell stories and engage people. I'm always amazed at how many people can write brilliant essays, can do fantastic curatorial work, on paper, but actually their ability to communicate that still to a room of people who know nothing about it, it never ceases to amaze me just what a mixed bag that is. So I think those broader communications, I think us really valuing and understanding that work a lot more is going to be really critical.
From a digital skills perspective there was as much discussion around digital infrastructure and systems requirements as skills required in order to have a fit for purpose 21st century workforce. AI was a specific digital innovation that was mentioned relatively often as expected to have a significant impact on museums in the near future.

What do museums actually need around digital? We had National museums in Covid who didn’t have enough laptops between them. IT systems are rubbish. Digital infrastructures would enable us to understand audiences so much better. I wouldn’t want to assume one size fits all with digital needs.

The bit in the middle between buying in expertise for things like AR and then knowing basic databases is being an intelligent customer - asking the right questions re how technology works and the value for money and what it will do.

The application of AI is coming. That can be as easy as helping you find a database more quickly or it could transform your visitor experience. We need to be clued up about this.
Sector Skills Gaps

Jacks and Jills of all trades

Consultees noted that the days of being able to sustain a career on very specialist skill sets are over. They want staff who can turn their hands to a range of tasks and have a more generalist ‘T shaped’ skill set.

Museum leaders need to be jack of all trades.

Universities train people to be curators, traditional museum roles. Those skills though are best learnt on the job, you can’t learn them in a year through books. I need people to understand CRM systems and databases, film makers, fundraising, marketing, advocacy. You’re going to need to be able to do a bit of everything.

We need T shaped skills – people who specialize but are adaptable. You could be waiting for a curatorial job for 15 years, they have to be generalist too.

Deep knowledge of the disciplines is still really important but staff need to be comfortable as generalists too.
Barriers to engaging with Universities
There is a common consensus that graduates across the UK university sector are not getting the necessary skills to make them fit for purpose for the now and future the sector is facing. As a result some feel an academic qualification such as an MA is redundant and part of the diversity problem with many moving recruitment policies away from a need to have a degree at all.

The role (of academic institutions) is equipping students who might go into the sector with a critical understanding but pragmatic understanding too. There is a disconnect between what's taught at MA level and what happens in actual roles.

They're both very left-wing sectors [HE & Heritage] and many don't want to see the hard truth that probably a majority of the UK don't think that way. If they don't respect those people why should those people care about them? A wholesale change in attitude is needed.

An academic career has a very subject focused specialised bubble but reality is very different.

It all feels peer to peer for academics rather than for the sector.
Conflicting Priorities

A number of consultees felt that the drivers behind academic research together with the need to satisfy the bigger university strategy was a conflict in terms of the type of practical public and sector research to deliver actual real-life impact required.

There's a turkey voting for Christmas element there. There's an argument that few jobs should require masters qualifications.

So work on some of the theoretical aspects of museums, museum history etc. It's all very good academic work and very interesting and useful, but it's not of much practical use to the sector itself. I'm not saying it's useless but its purpose is not to serve the needs of the museum community, its purpose is to serve the needs of the academic museological community internationally. And those two things are by no means the same and quite often they diverge quite significantly. All the reward systems for a university are things that could cause them to do things that are not particularly of use to the sector, because it's not there to serve the sector, it's to serve higher education.
Barriers to engaging with universities

Limited capacity and high costs

Many consultees felt that working with universities and academics required a significant amount of their time and resource with not nearly enough return on that investment.

We’ve had a relationship with the museums studies course over many years taking their placement MA students. We struggle to have the capacity to take and mentor people.

The big museums have their own research investments and departments – what value could they add? We’ve developed our own relationships with AHRC for example.

Sometimes I’ve found in the past, we can agree to research projects, and then it actually ends up taking a load of our staff time, which isn't planned for. So, I think full recognition of the opportunity costs and the actual costs to the organisation in participating in the research project is needed by academics.
New ways of working
New ways of working

Spotlight on ‘the Business of Heritage’

All consultees felt very strongly that the future workforce, and by proxy very existence of the sector, rests on a workforce with strong business and leadership skills.

Museums are an ecosystem – understanding museums as a business is really important.

Policy rationales are missing. We need to make a better case for Government. They need better metrics and language and compelling arguments.

Leicester is good at supporting the activism but I’d like it to be supporting the organisations who are managing this generation of workers to help these workers really deeply understand operations and organisational wide context.
New ways of working

Strategic Cross Dept Alliances

Cross disciplinary working and the access a university has to other specialist departments from climate and sustainability to business and digital content was mentioned many times as a real source of added value that could be tapped into and promoted as a unique selling point to a university course or research.

Universities need to address multi disciplinarity. They need to form relationships with their sustainability unit, if they do that would be a huge resource.

International relations and museums in a new world, these sorts of issues are cross disciplinary – Leicester could really harness this. Working across departments would bring real value.
Apprenticeships were discussed at length as potentially game changing for sector survival and promoting the widest possible diversity and inclusion. Sector leaders were very supportive and open to the ways they might engage with a university led apprentice programme.

We’re thinking about giving bursaries to local A level students around here who wouldn’t normally think about going to university to go and then do an internship here in the summer.

I don’t think frankly the answer [to workforce diversity] is in a post graduate programme. By the time you’re looking at post graduates there’s been so much filtering that it’s difficult to get a diverse range of candidates, let alone accepting them. I think the answer has to lie in other means of recruitment to the museum profession through apprenticeships, through work experience, through bursaries etc. And being liberal about our minimum criteria of acceptance, so we’ve had a much wider of people who nevertheless have appropriate stuff. I’m not sure any of them have done a museum course but I’d rather get people who have got potential. That’s not very good news for Leicester, unless Leicester really starts employing the same thing and taking people on who haven’t perhaps had traditional routes in.
New ways of working

Sector Led Solutions

Working much more closely with the sector when developing and delivering both course and research was something consultees felt would provide a win win outcome.

Essentially, capacity is never going to meet ambition and the things that hold us back are that it is never, ever straightforward for us to build the capacity and have the direct relationship with whoever may be able to build the capacity. You're on endless short cycles for research projects and funding projects. To actually think collectively as a sector about what could we do that's enduring that isn't about 2 year, 3 year or even a 5 year cycle, but actually a massive difference, systemically, that we could make within 10 years. We aren't, any of us, able to do that. It's where things, like, Leicester's really, really interesting because they potentially could do that, but to do that, it would have to be much more explicit and clear than it is at the moment. And much more focused on that need.

If I had a conversation every year facilitated by them and convened with sector leaders – that would be so useful. A safe space where people could be there outside of their institutions and really be honest.
Research Sector Leaders Want
Research Sector Leaders Want

1. New business and funding models
2. New career pathways into the sector
3. Civic museums
4. The role (and relevancy) of Museums in Society
5. Disposals
6. Devolution and other geopolitical questions
7. Climate change at organisational and building and collection level
8. Climate change and digital
9. Longitudinal studies including post Covid sector impact and workforce diversity
10. Interpretation
11. Decolonisation and the impact of existing initiatives
12. Digital skills sector deep dive
13. Culture and Soft Power
14. Cultural Regeneration
15. Economic impacts of societal benefit
16. Wellbeing
17. Social justice
18. Signposting best practice
19. An ongoing sector research digest summarising all research of note
Other Insights
Other Insights

The elephant in the ‘National’ collection

A number of consultees referenced ‘Towards a National Collection’ with concern in relation to unpacking what ‘National’ means in this context. They felt this has not been considered and is a huge thing to get right which might benefit from academic support.

A national collection – what does that even mean?

What is the relationship between the national collection? (everything held for the nation) and the cost benefit analysis of keeping it in perpetuity – a university can take a less political, long-term view to answer questions like these and if we need a different contract with the public about what happens around it all.
A number of consultees talked about a serious lack of innovation within the sector—and a serious need for it in order to solve some of the current existential challenges. Some felt this would be a useful area for academics to support and partner with.

The public funding model isn’t working and the business model isn’t working and we’re under acute financial crisis. Innovation and fresh thinking is needed, but attracting the best people is increasingly hard on just the moral argument and low salaries. We don’t invest in R&D, creative innovation needs bounce, the list goes on.

I think the other thing for me is where is the energy coming from within our museums? And I think it’s about the relationships those museums have. So, we’re talking about risk and innovation, that can look like lots and lots of things. Very often it gets so aligned with tech, I slightly lose the will to live. There’s so much risk and innovation related to co-curation, health, inequality, social justice, you know, there are all these different places where risk and innovation sits where we don’t automatically consider it as well.
Other Insights

Removing language barriers to learning

One of the international leaders observed how translating their research project with the university had massively widened access to an audience who would not otherwise have been able to engage. The accessibility of ‘academic language’ was also questioned. Moving forward they felt this could be an important way to diversify the sector and promote true cultural capital and inclusion.

Language that’s used is powerful and often communicated in quite academized language in those reports and that is alienating for people who would otherwise be interested in the research.

It’s impossible to pay graduate fees and travel to Europe from Latin America so being able to do this virtually for a Spanish community has been brilliant. I would like the university to go beyond the limit of the English language. They do the masters in Hong Kong but it’s all in English. They could do short courses and longer form in Spanish and reach much wider audiences and it would be so welcome and needed. There’s a huge Spanish speaking audience globally.
Facilitating courageous thinking and action

We often heard that sector leaders really struggle to find the time to think really strategically and collaboratively. A significant number of consultees felt that the various sector bodies were not meeting their needs or making change actually happen and that Leicester could play a unique and important convening role to facilitate meaningful discussion and actual change.

People are skint and conferences are expensive – speaking at the MA conference isn’t inclusive of the wider sector.

We're very, very risk adverse. It's no surprise, we have funding dangled over us. It's like Hunger Games every time we have to go for new funding. I think this is really relevant for Leicester actually because I think, places like Leicester, they are the places that can cut through that a little bit. They can have a very different tack, and they can be genuinely useful to all of us who are actually mid-Hunger Games, trying to secure our future, to draw on that research, that expertise, those perspectives. There's a bit of a, 'Who's doing the thinking within our sector and what does that thinking look like?' Are we creating the conditions for our institutions to be able to do more of that thinking? That feels a really important role actually. I think it moves us beyond the initial and day to day risk, which we all desperately need to do at the moment.