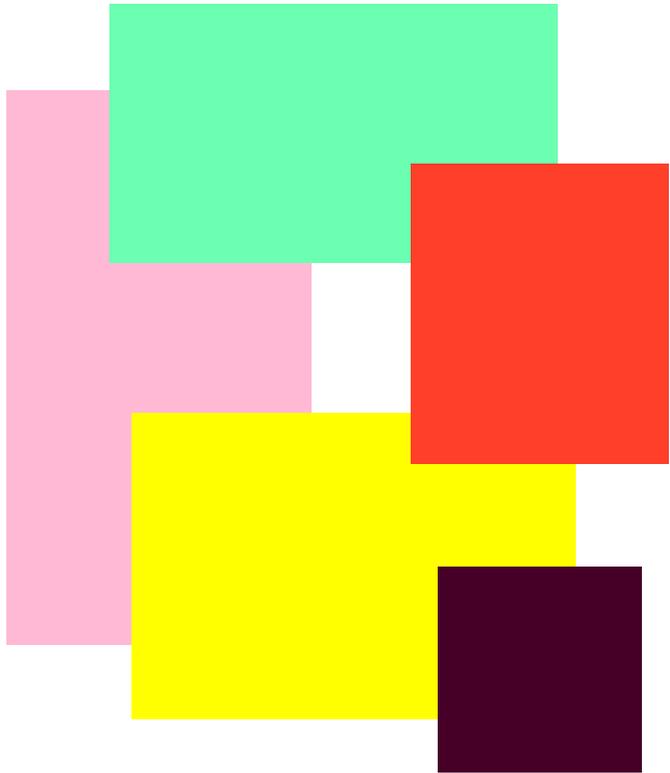


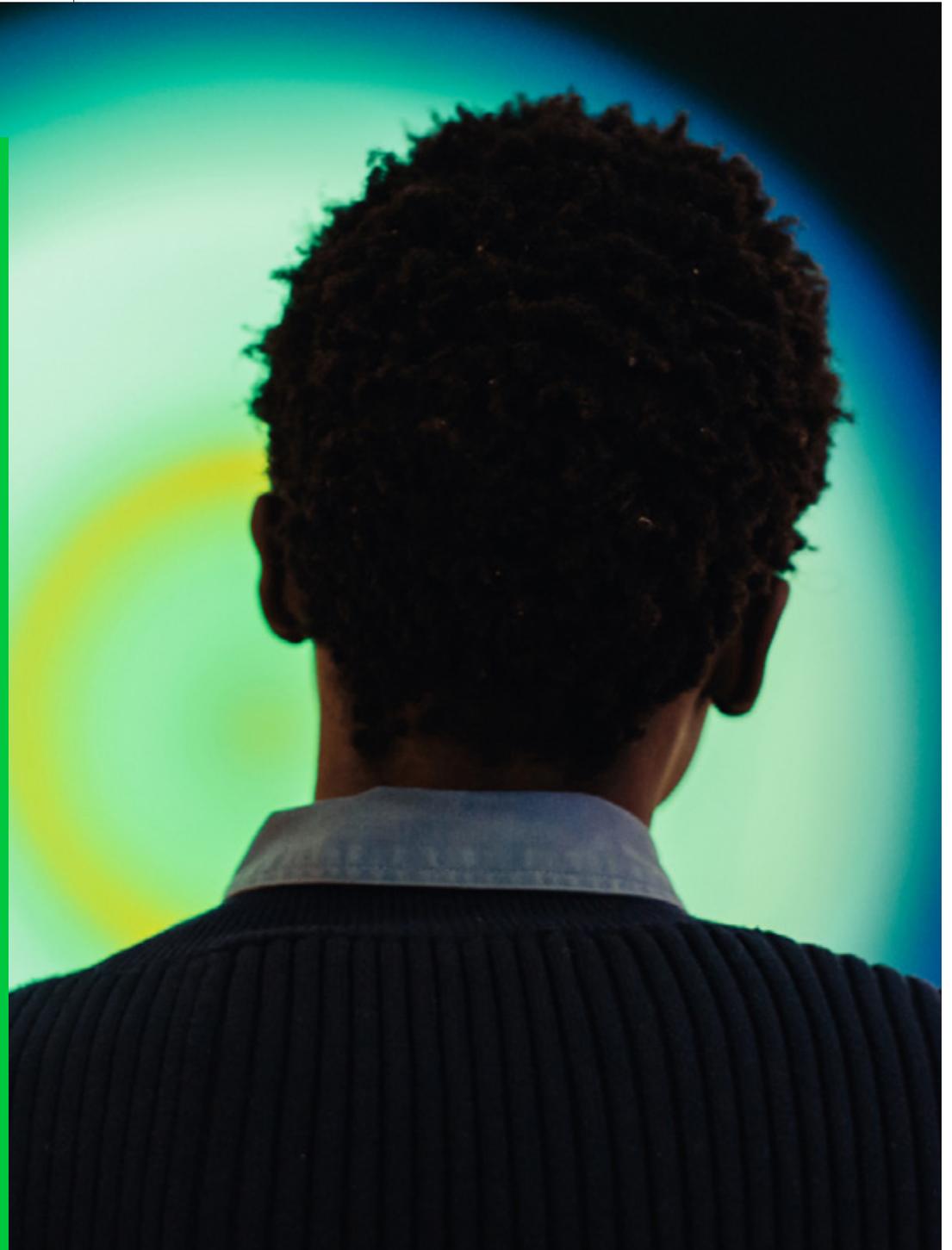
The 21st-century curator

*A report into the evolving role
of the UK museum curator,
and their needs for the future*



Who is the 21st-century curator?

Scholar, storyteller,
entrepreneur, fundraiser,
facilitator... the job spec
for today's museum curator
is getting bigger all the time.



The last 15 years have seen huge changes in the operating landscape for UK museums and galleries. From fluctuating budgets to advances in technology and evolving audience expectations, today's curators face a number of changes and challenges – as well as opportunities that didn't exist previously.

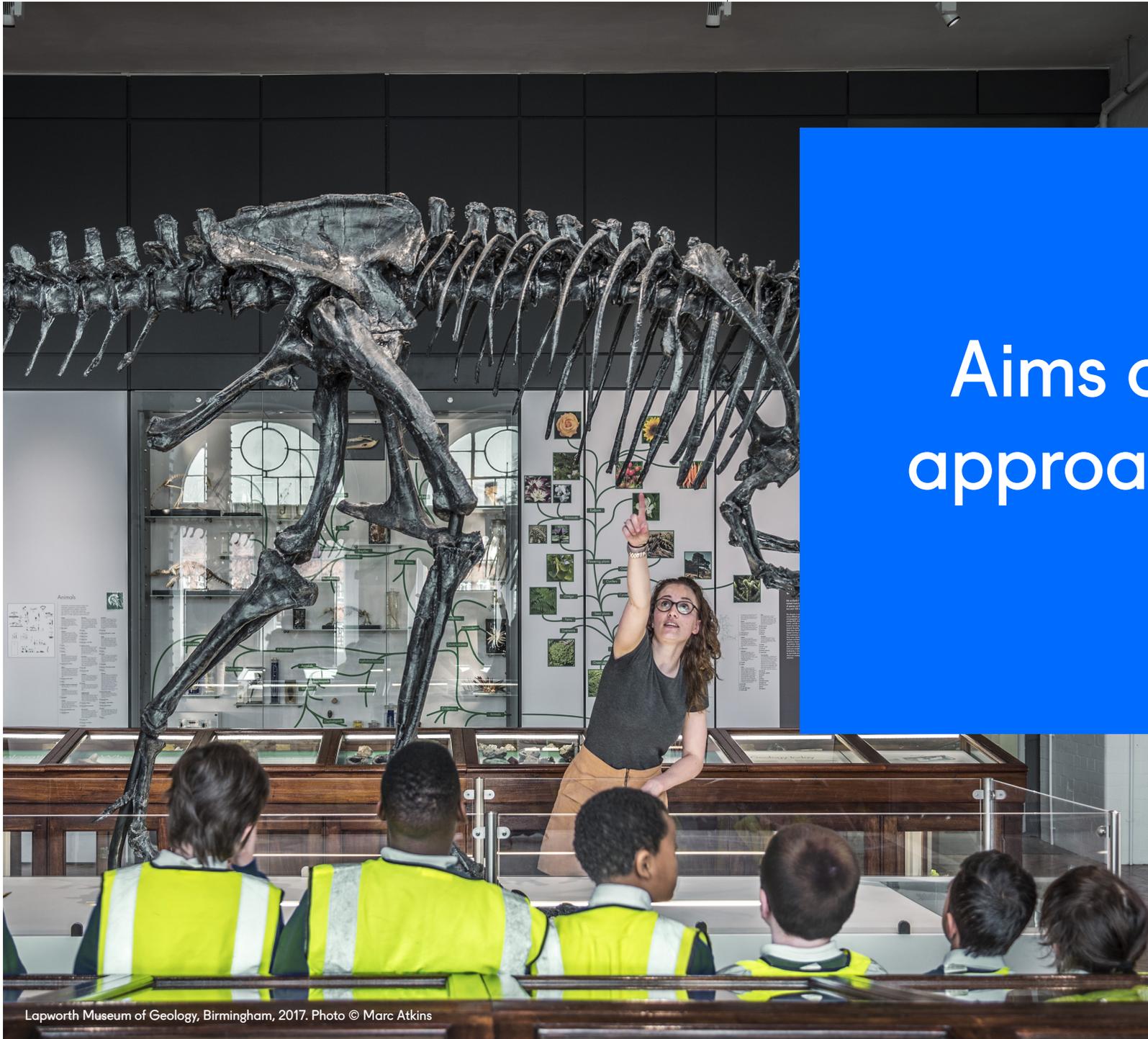


The Hepworth Wakefield, 2017. Photo © Andy Smith

Broadly, the role of the curator continues to expand. It's not just about being an expert, taking care of collections and making exhibitions which encompass audience collaboration and participation. It's also increasingly about improving accessibility and creating new narratives in both the physical and virtual world.

But as many curators evolve from being keepers of objects and specialist knowledge towards this broader hybrid, we need to be mindful of what may be lost in the process and also more attentive to the development needs of the professionals concerned. Meanwhile, funding cuts – especially at local authority level – mean the pool of expert curators is in danger of diminishing.

In 2016 we commissioned research into this changing environment in order to understand the challenges curators face, but also to identify creative new approaches they are taking in their work, and opportunities for the future.



Lapworth Museum of Geology, Birmingham, 2017. Photo © Marc Atkins

Aims and approaches

Our aim: To understand and offer greater support to the 21st-century curator

Our research was designed to offer an authoritative overview of the state of curatorship and a sound basis for planning future support for curators and museums.

We set out to:

- Understand the impact of the changing policy and financial landscape of recent years on curatorial practice, and the impact of sector programmes and initiatives on this area of museum activity
- Gain a better understanding of the current responsibilities of those working in curatorial roles and how these may evolve
- Explore possible approaches to strengthening curatorial practice in the future



Our approach

The research encompassed quantitative and qualitative investigation. Over 550 people contributed their views on the current and future state of curatorship.



Glasgow School of Art, 2017. Photo © Chris Close 2017

The initial research phase included:

- Desk research into the policy and operating environment 2000-15
- Quantitative data collection on the number of curators working in a cross-section of museums across the UK, using the Museums Association Museums & Galleries Yearbook to track and record numbers and roles of staff
- Phone interviews with 20 people working in curatorial or senior management roles. Interviewees included people at different stages of their careers, working in a range of different museums and collections specialisms

After analysis of these research elements the emerging findings were tested out more widely through:

- An online survey of over 520 people working in, or supporting people working in, curatorial roles

Interviewees and online survey participants were assured of anonymity to encourage frank and honest feedback.

Context and considerations



Tate Modern, London, 2016. Photo © Janie Airey

Today's curator has emerged from a changing landscape

The period 2000-15 saw a shift in the operating environment for museums and galleries.

While a complex picture emerges, generally speaking over the first decade of the century there was considerable central investment in resources to support museums, the Labour government of the time taking an interventionist approach to funding culture with a particular focus on outcomes related to social inclusion and learning.

One of the most impactful programmes of this period was the Museums, Libraries and Archives Council's Renaissance in the Regions (2001-08), which funded 188 new curatorial posts

in regional museums and funnelled an estimated £31m into collections-related areas. Alongside this activity was the work of the Heritage Lottery Fund, which by 2005 had invested more than £1bn in museums.

However, this period of rapid growth was curtailed by the banking crisis of 2008, after which public funding fell and the local authority museum sector saw an overall reduction in its expenditure of 8% during the period 2008/9 to 2013/14.

These political and financial factors aside, during this 15-year period audience expectations evolved. Visitors came to enjoy and demand an interactive, participatory experience, and some evidence has emerged of a generational shift: while older museum visitors were seen to be looking for learning and knowledge, younger visitors emphasised experience and sociability.

These developments and more present both opportunities and challenges for today's museums and curators.



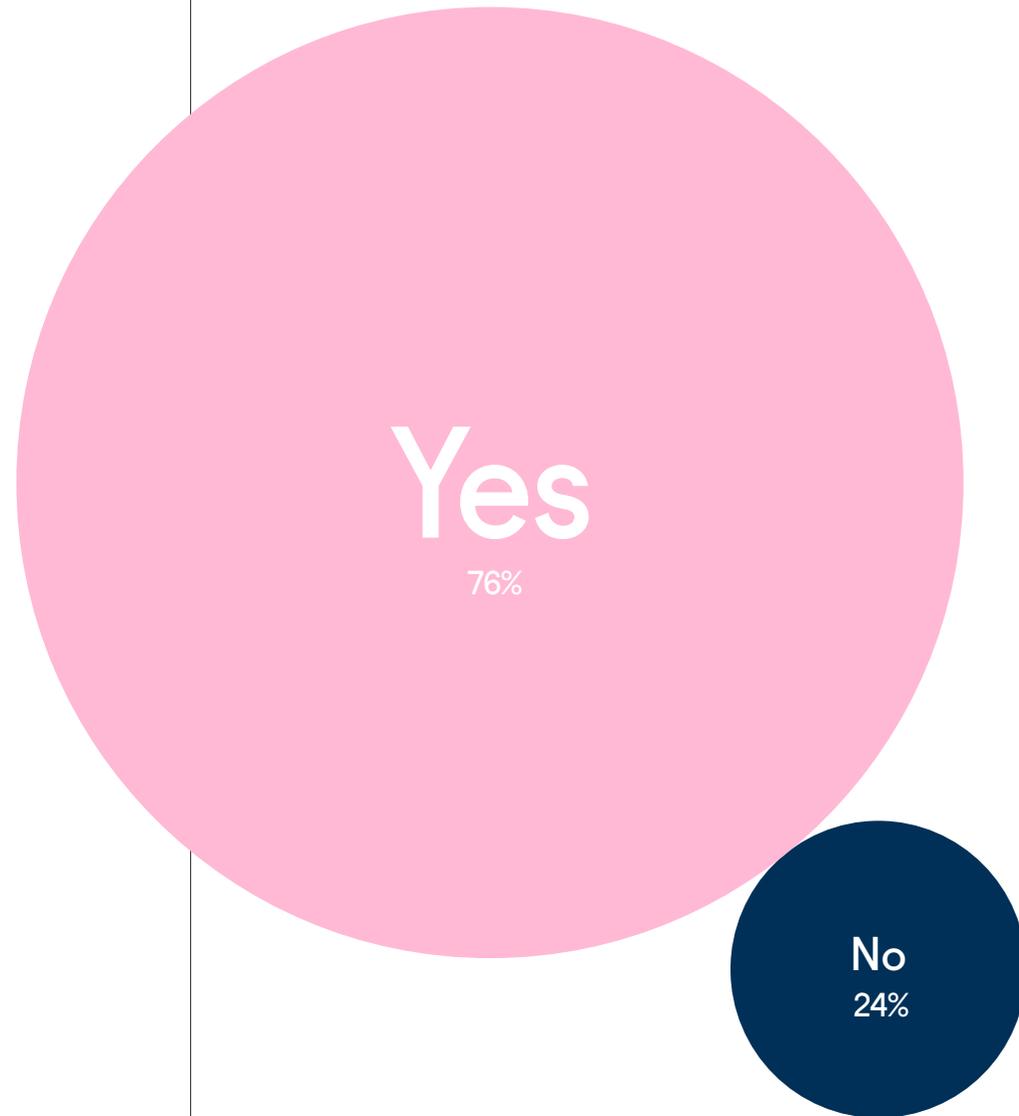
Insights and observations

The outcomes of our research offer a complex picture, with interviewees and survey respondents acknowledging both the opportunities and challenges present in the current environment for museum curatorship.

Positive developments include:

- Curators feel their work is more innovative
- Digital technology has transformed relationships
- There is a greater sense of co-operation
- Risk-taking is encouraged
- The working day of the curator is increasingly varied

We asked: Do you have the knowledge in-house to work with the majority of your collection?



Curators feel their work is more innovative

Over 60% of survey respondents feel that curatorial work is now more innovative than it was 10 years ago.

Insights and observations

One of the ways in which this is apparent is an increased collaboration with audiences.

'Curators are more aware and engaged with their audience, doing exhibitions that are popular and engaging, that are accessible. There is a democratisation happening.'

Phone interviewee

Respondents and interviewees talk about the 'democratisation' of knowledge, noting a shift from curators retaining knowledge to the involvement of the public in shaping narratives. The focus of the last 15 years on visitor engagement and outreach has led to more accessible, ambitious and diverse sharing of collections.

In many museums research itself has become more outward-facing and inclusive. Co-curation with local or hard-to-reach communities is increasingly commonplace, enabling

We asked: What attitudes and behaviours do you think will be important for curators to have in the future?



Insights and observations

the public to contribute to the development and interpretation of collections and those collections to become more relevant to their audiences.

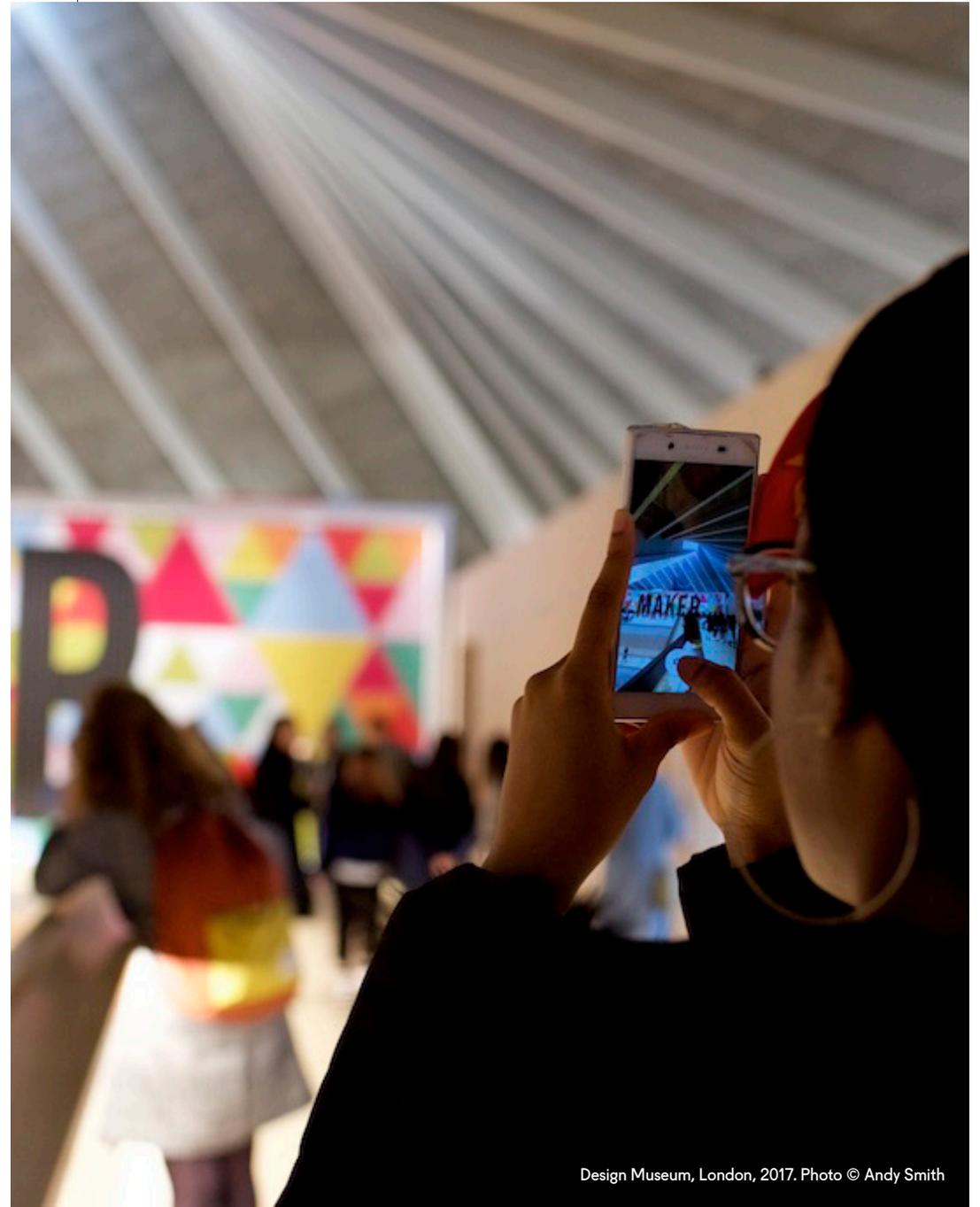
This much more open approach encourages audiences to share their own views and experiences.

Digital technology has transformed relationships

New technologies and social media have changed the dynamic between curator and visitor.

Curators can now share knowledge more easily and quickly, both with the public and between colleagues and institutions.

Survey respondents note that the expansion in digital encourages innovation, and that social media and the internet allow the opportunity to highlight and improve access to collections.



There is a greater sense of co-operation

Collaboration is not only happening with audiences; it is happening more often between organisations and individuals.

Museum professionals observe a sense of community and an 'integrated' way of working: they are sharing skills and knowledge, embarking on cross-disciplinary projects and curating across departments, with members of the wider team feeling confident in working with artists. Strikingly our research found that in general people don't find it difficult to seek out the skills and knowledge they need; only 14% of survey respondents find it difficult to source external expertise.

For information and advice they are likely to look to their friends and colleagues (85% of respondents), closely followed by directly approaching a museum with a relevant collection (73%).

'We have professionalised the role, putting on paper a lot of the procedures that used to be passed on by word of mouth within small groups. We have also acted more jointly at national level and even internationally.'

Survey respondent



The Hepworth Wakefield, 2017. Photo © Andy Smith

Respondents note this greater sense of collaboration includes larger organisations providing smaller galleries with invaluable support. And as well as informal collaboration, many respondents perceive an increased professionalism within curatorial practice, noting improvements in training and development and a greater awareness of ethical issues affecting the work of curators.

They cite greater availability of advice and more

opportunities for networking, and see the growth of and investment in Subject Specialist Networks (specialist groups for curators) as particularly positive. Between 2005 and 2012 around £775,000 was invested in SSNs and there are now over 40 in existence.

'When I have found knowledge and skills hard to gain I turn to [the SSN]. It's also a really good way to get to know people in different areas of the country.'

Phone interviewee

Risk-taking is encouraged

Curators feel able to make bold choices.

When asked whether they feel able to take risks with the content or subject matter of exhibitions, the majority of survey respondents (52%) said they do, with 22% stating they are encouraged to do so. Only around 20% of respondents felt they were discouraged or prevented from taking risks.

Respondents working in independent museums seem to feel less able to take risks, with 40% feeling discouraged or prevented from doing so compared to 26% of respondents from nationals and 13% from local authority museums.

The working day of the curator is increasingly varied

Curators' work is now more project-led.

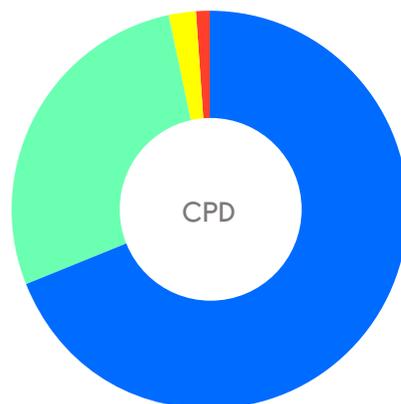
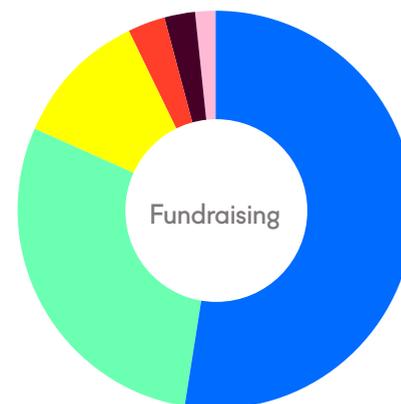
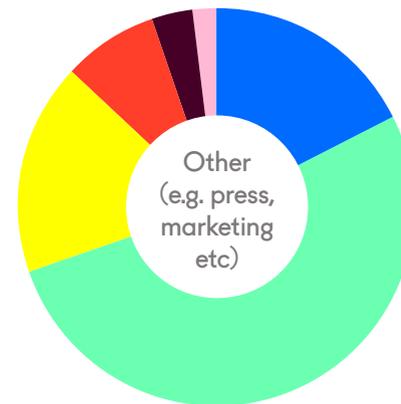
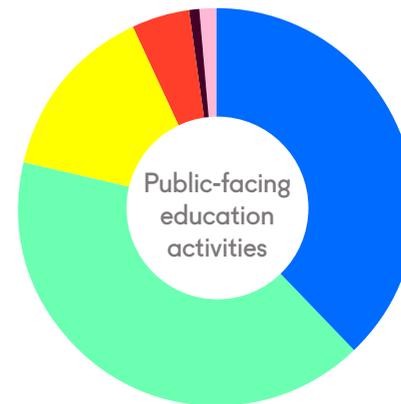
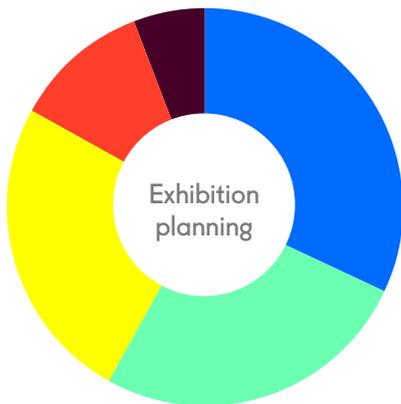
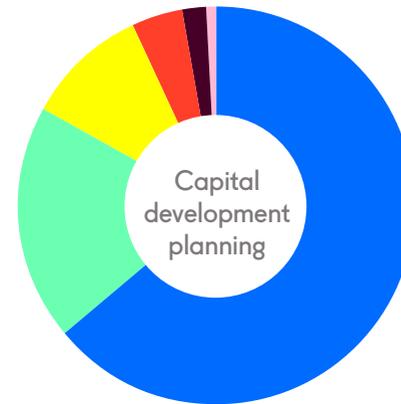
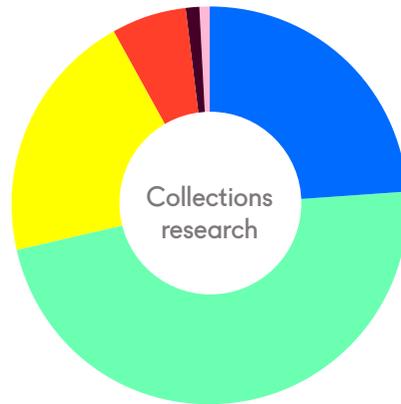
While curators are still to a large extent spending the majority of their time on 'curatorial' tasks – collections development, care, research and interpretation – this work is now less focused on the day-to-day care of collections and more driven by exhibition programmes and other projects with a focus on public-facing outcomes.

'On areas like collections management, it's not that we don't care for the collection but we spend less time on that element than on audience engagement, on more outward-facing work.'

Phone interviewee

We asked: What are curators spending their time working on?

Insights and observations



- None
- 15% or less
- Up to 25%
- Up to 50%
- Up to 75%
- More than 75%

Insights and observations

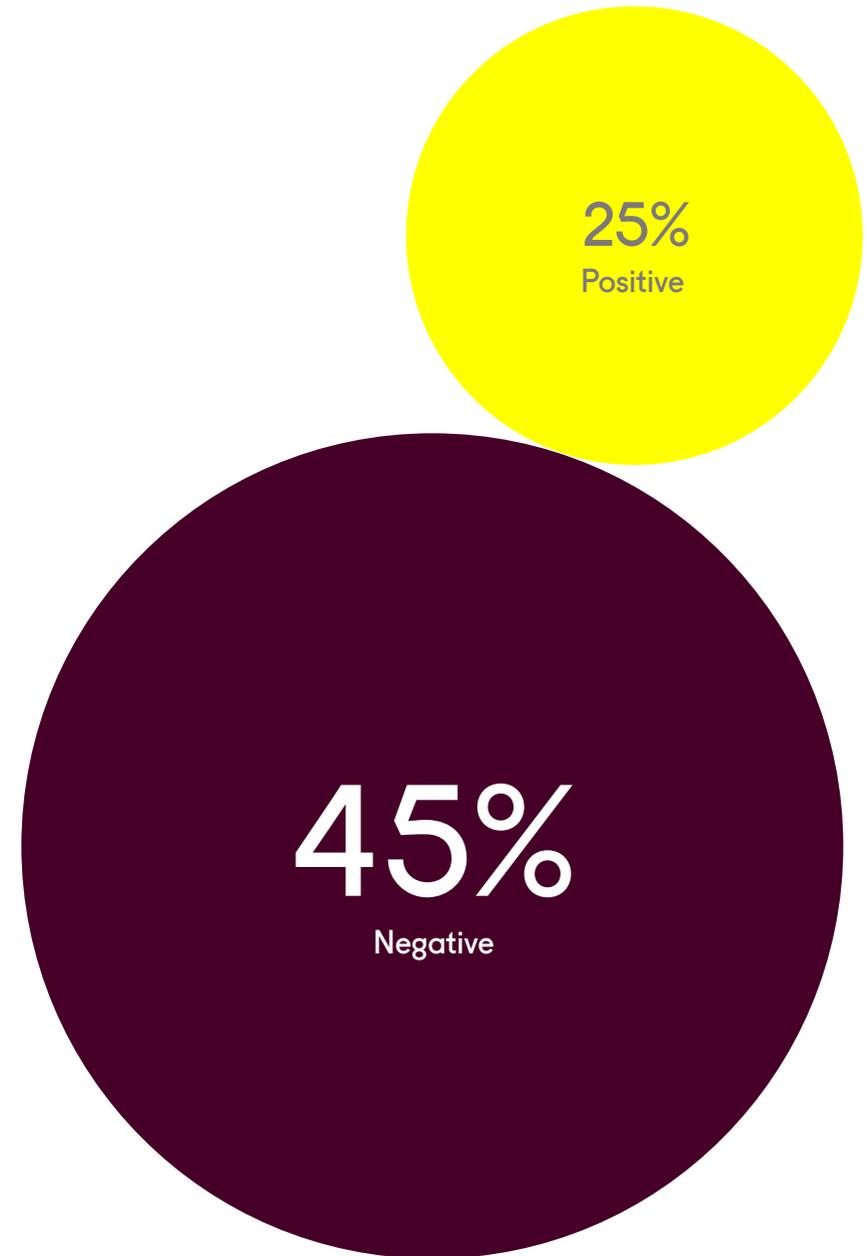
44% of survey respondents say they are spending up to 25-50% of their time on exhibition-related work, and 45% identify exhibition development as the biggest driver for curatorial work in their organisation – which reflects the movement towards a greater and deeper engagement with audiences. Relatively little time is spent on fundraising, capital planning or Continuing Professional Development (CPD).

However, these largely positive developments are balanced by some real concerns around what might accompany this shifting landscape.

Over 45% of survey respondents feel negative about the current state of museum curatorship, compared to around 25% who feel positive.

This feeling of negativity can in part be attributed to a number of specific challenges and issues identified by those who contributed to the research:

- The number of curatorial posts is decreasing
- The decline in specialist knowledge is a worry
- Curators' responsibilities are being extended
- The 'generalist' curator is on the rise



The number of curatorial posts is decreasing

Our research indicates that there has been a decline in the number of curatorial and subject-specialist posts in UK museums over the past decade.

Over 70% of survey respondents reported anecdotally that curatorial resources have been reduced in their museum or gallery in the last 10 years, and over 60% of respondents felt that curatorial skills and knowledge were being lost in their organisation. A higher proportion of respondents from national museums (91%) identified reductions in curatorial resources compared to 80% of local authority museum respondents and 70% of independents.

A number of respondents, particularly those working in local authority museums, claimed to have seen numbers of curators reduce significantly.

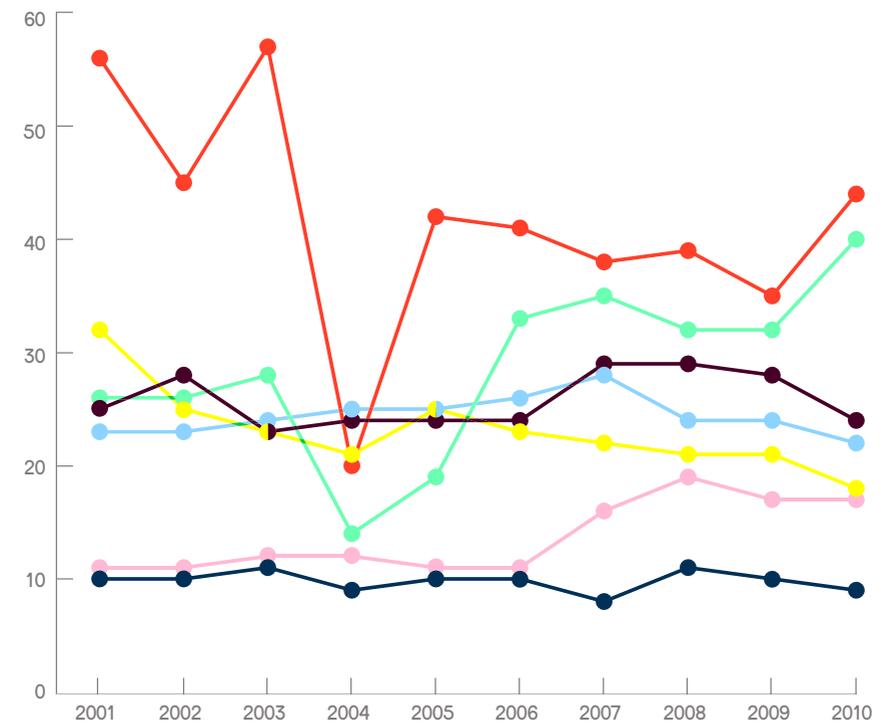
'When I joined the service they had already lost one post but still had four curatorial posts dealing with different art specialisms, but now those days are long gone. There are now fewer colleagues, covering more.'

Phone interviewee

In terms of hard evidence this is trickier to pin down. In our research we looked at the actual decline in number of posts across seven museum services between 2000 and 2010. Although this was a period

of growth for many museums until the financial instability of the end of the decade, only two museum services in the sample saw a significant growth in the number of curators employed over this period as a whole.

The number of curators at 7 different UK museum services over a 10-year period (2000-10)



The decline in specialist knowledge is a worry

There is strong recognition of the current and potential loss of specialist or collections knowledge with the departure of experienced staff, either through retirement or redundancy.

While this has long been anticipated and is often linked to poor succession planning or a reliance on fixed or short-term contracts, the recent loss of actual curatorial posts has exacerbated anxiety over the issue. To this end 62% of survey respondents feel that curatorial skills and knowledge are being lost within their organisation.

However, when asked directly if they felt they had

the knowledge and skills in-house to work with the majority of their collection, 75% of respondents said they did – a figure at odds with concerns about knowledge loss.

The challenge for the sector is how to ensure that subject-specialist knowledge is harnessed, tracked and made available for the long-term benefit of collections and the public alike. A number of people

see national museums and universities as being the main source of expertise in the future – which allows exciting possibilities for dynamic collaboration.

'There is a real issue with people taking their collections knowledge with them, people don't write things down or capture their knowledge – people who might have worked on a collection for 30 years. People do spend time doing this type of work but it's always the first thing that gets dropped when people are busy. Succession planning is a big issue.'

Phone interviewee



Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery, 2015. Photo © Nick Turpin 2015

Curators' responsibilities are being extended

Many interviewees and survey respondents speak of 'doing more with less'; there is a perception that fewer staff are having to do more with fewer resources.

Inevitably the financial pressure affecting the museum sector is to some extent shaping curators' work. There is an increased need for curatorial staff, as well as staff working across services, to be more commercially and fiscally minded.

The need to fundraise and focus on income generation within their role is a reasonably constant theme among interviewees, and the majority of respondents

indicate that their roles involve some form of fundraising or income generation.

Curators recognise the need to actively contribute to fundraising: over 90% of survey respondents feel that curators should contribute to income-generating activities. However, in reality 80% of respondents say they spend none or less than 15% of their time in this area of work and over

40% of respondents identify income generation as being the least important driver for their work.

Curators' jobs are perceived to be broadening out to include responsibilities that may be considered by some 'non-curatorial'. (Meanwhile, others' roles contain 'curatorial' elements, but they are not called curators.) Some take a pragmatic view however, accepting that this is likely the future way of working so the focus should be on how to be effective within these new parameters. They acknowledge the need for curators – as for most roles in museums – to be more flexible, and are alive to the benefits this can bring.

'Curators are under a lot of pressure to be inspiring storytellers, to do community engagement, they are stretched too far. They work incredibly hard covering too many bases.'

Phone interviewee

'Today people need to be very flexible, I have an enormously dedicated team of staff, they are prepared to do more and that is the way it needs to be. It would be difficult to accommodate someone who only wanted to just focus on the collection.'

Phone interviewee

The 'generalist' curator is on the rise

Many curators are now responsible for numerous different subject specialisms, and outside of national museums there is a growing trend in replacing subject-specialist curators with generalists who have responsibility for multiple collection disciplines.



Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery, 2015. Photo © Nick Turpin 2015

Those in national museums tend to have a narrower focus in their roles, with a greater emphasis on research and developing knowledge of collections, whereas those in other museums have much broader roles with a greater range of collections-related tasks and other responsibilities.

On the one hand there are some concerns about a decline in specialist collections expertise in regional museums; one long-serving curator observes a real change in the new generation of curators coming into their museum service and is unsettled by the lack of a formal grounding in art history. Others note that challenges around the depth of collections knowledge are not a new phenomenon, and that the sector has the potential to adapt and thrive.

'We need to make sure we are not dumbing down, to recognise the role of the curator. There is a real danger that I will have to manage a collection I know nothing about.' Phone interviewee

'People worry that things are being dumbed down but that's not the case. We need creative people who can make connections and make the most of collections and stories. A long time ago you could come into museum work to escape the world. That is no longer the case.'

Phone interviewee

Summary and recommendations

Ways the 21st-century curator can be better understood and given greater support



The 21st-century curator wants:

1. To be co-operative and work collaboratively with colleagues, partners and visitors
2. An openness to new ideas and a willingness to cater for emerging and diverse audience needs
3. Storytelling skills and the capacity to be a facilitator of learning for the public and knowledge exchange with colleagues
4. To engage with digital technology and new communication platforms, and harness them in sharing collections and knowledge
5. To think creatively around income generation and develop skills in fundraising
6. To take risks, and be encouraged and given the room to do so
7. Support from cultural leaders both within and outside of the sector, championing what curators do
8. To develop advocacy and leadership skills in order to defend and steer curatorial practice
9. Continued and greater investment in networks including SSNs
10. To be better supported in preparing for the future, especially re: succession planning

Act as an advocate for what they do

Curators need champions for their work.

Survey respondents and interviewees believe there is a lack of understanding of curatorial work both within museums and beyond. 45% of respondents feel their work is not well understood within their organisation and 77% feel their work is not well understood outside the sector. Those working in local authority museums seem to feel particularly anxious about their work not being well understood.

Curators need funders and cultural leaders to advocate for the importance of curatorial skills and for the role of those who care for collections – especially as it evolves in the future.

'A lot comes down to advocacy – to make the case for what curators do. It's about raising the profile of the work we do, improving the reputation of curators.'

Phone interviewee

Foster storytelling and communications skills

Curators need support and training in order to meet new and diverse audience expectations.

The 21st-century curator brings a widening range of skills to their role. They combine passion and knowledge of collections with expertise in audience engagement and partnership working.

The ability to be a storyteller and a facilitator for knowledge-sharing and development is seen as key.

'We need a person who is a catalyst, someone who can enthuse people about collections. The primary skill of a curator is a storyteller.'

Phone interviewee

89% of survey respondents agree that these attributes will be essential for the curator of tomorrow, with the increasing focus on audience engagement and innovation requiring experience in communications and project management.

Skills in digital, education and outreach are also seen as important.

Facilitate networks and increase the role of and investment in SSNs

Support networks are crucial to curatorial practice.

Curators value their networks both for professional development and a sense of community. Nearly 85% of survey respondents see networks as being important.

Subject Specialist Networks (SSNs) in particular are well-valued, with around 55% of respondents saying they use them when looking for specialist advice and 63% saying that SSNs should be supported to play a greater role in the development and maintenance of collections knowledge in the sector. The option of SSNs assuming a larger and more formalised role should be explored.

SSNs could do more if they were co-ordinated and better funded. Funders should continue to invest in their development, but given the shift from subject-specialist curators to generalist curators, there should also be more clarity and consistency about the role of SSNs to support non-specialists who are responsible for specialist collections.

SSNs themselves could work with sector bodies to see how the development of curatorial knowledge can be better supported through professional qualifications, in particular to support the growing numbers of generalist curators.



Victoria and Albert Museum, London, 2017. Photo © Katura Jensen

Our research also found that curators display a great commitment to professional development, with many undertaking it in their own time or at their own expense, and this could be better facilitated. Funders need to make efforts to understand where curators go for support in order to identify where future investment might be most useful.

'The role of the curator will continue on the same trajectory, less about academic research and more about being a facilitator, developing partnerships. The role is increasingly about sponsorship, relationship building, media relations, about being able to talk to people – a facilitator and a communicator.'

Phone interviewee

Encourage knowledge exchange and succession planning

Museums and their supporters need to find ways to ensure knowledge is not lost.

Over 60% of survey respondents feel that curatorial skills and knowledge are being lost within their organisation. Few interviewees identified specific areas – with the exception of acquiring art and collections research – but the question elicited a lot of discussion around succession planning.

With the departure of experienced staff through retirement or redundancy – and with the rise of the ‘generalist’ curator – museums need to develop effective mechanisms both to record knowledge on a continuous basis, and to

capture the unrecorded knowledge of staff who are due to leave.

Additionally, all museum staff working in collections-related activities should have some level of responsibility to share knowledge, and to ensure their collections’ profiles are raised and their diverse use better understood.

And while curators need to be better supported in planning for the future, they also need to be supported in developing leadership skills themselves.

Urge the nationals to share research and expertise

National museums should be encouraged to extend to a truly national basis their remit as disseminators of knowledge, resources and support.

As the capacity for regional museums to carry out research decreases in line with the decline of subject-specialist curatorial roles and their replacement with more generalist curators, the nationals are increasingly seen as vital sources of collections knowledge and expertise – and our research found that there is a desire for them to assume a greater and more clearly defined role in sharing this with others.

Similarly, universities are seen as important partners, offering a huge amount of potential to the sector.

‘We need nationals to form regional hubs, to take on a role around specialist knowledge, and be given the resources to do it.’

Phone interviewee

‘A model for moving forward: nationals lend and give knowledge to others. For example, Egyptology collections, you can’t have an Egyptology curator in a local authority museum. You can have a curator who can turn their hand to it, but needs specialist advice from an expert in a national.’

Phone interviewee

About Art Fund

Art Fund is the national charity for art.

We help UK museums and galleries to build and share collections, do more for their visitors and support the curators of the future.

To keep up to date with our initiatives, funding schemes and news, subscribe to our monthly Museum Bulletin at artfund.org/bulletin

artfund.org/supporting-museums

About The Museum Consultancy

A team of museum and gallery consultants able to pool many years' experience in the sector, The Museum Consultancy have worked for museums ranging in size from national institutions to small, volunteer-run museums.

With particular strengths in the development and use of museum collections, workforce development and diversification, policy development and sustainability, The Museum Consultancy have also worked with national and regional organisations including the British Council and East Midlands Museums Service.

museumconsultancy.co.uk

