

Arranging Successful Student Placements & Internships

This short guide aims to provide museum professionals and university academics with a framework for arranging successful student internships. It considers the wide range of student placements currently hosted by the museums sector and also the ways in which museums and universities can gain the most mutual benefit out of this work.

1. The benefits of offering internship opportunities

Student volunteering, internships, work, and project placements, currently represent a major area of collaborative work between museums and universities. As graduates encounter a deeply competitive job market, demand for universities to facilitate opportunities for students to improve their employability is ever rising. Likewise, in a time of funding cuts, museums can build capacity through the strategic use of student volunteers.

For museums, small and large, student interns or volunteers can provide a much needed injection of energy into either a particular project or the day-to-day management of museum activities. Although students are still learning, they are capable of bringing valuable skills and knowledge to a work environment. If carefully managed, students can fit in with existing staffing and increase capacity by giving attention to overlooked areas or by developing new activities that enhance the museum's offer to its visitors. Some students come with a very specific agenda – such as developing conservation skills. Others may be open to suggestions and, therefore, it can be helpful for museums to keep a list of small projects that could be given to student volunteers as and when they appear.



Conservation intern, Brooklyn Museum

Whilst some university courses have always included an element of work experience (for example archaeology field trips), this has not traditionally been a main focus of undergraduate and postgraduate degree programmes. However, increasingly, universities see that they have an important role to play in improving student employability as well as furnishing them with the requisite training to pass their

qualification. In fact, as the range of vocational postgraduate programmes has proliferated, project placements within the museum sector which are offered as part of the degree programme have become more common, especially for courses in Museum or Heritage Studies. Offering prospective students an exciting programme of internship opportunities as part of a degree programme helps universities to recruit the best students.

Needless to say, the other main beneficiary of a well-run student internship programme is the student themselves. Nothing can really replace hands-on experience in a museum if a student wishes to pursue a career in that sector. Moreover, work experience helps students to further develop and apply the skills they have learned on their degree programmes. At the same time as students are being measured up against society's needs of its future employees, so is their research becoming subject to the 'impact agenda'. Current research students are beginning to find that their research will be judged not only against academic criteria, but also in terms of its positive impact on society. For these reasons, the student placement is becoming an increasingly integral part of the university experience and demand for these opportunities will only rise in the coming years.

The other important point to make about student internships is that they appear in all



Museum of London volunteers, LAARC
Manager

shapes and sizes. In fact, there is a variety of terminology employed to describe the different versions of work-place experience that students might encounter. For example, 'volunteering' refers to the fact that the volunteer is not paid for their work, but in fact most work experience placements or internships within museums in the UK are unpaid. An 'internship' implies a more formal and fair arrangement and ideally the student will receive some payment for their

work or, at least, recompense for their expenses. Internship opportunities ought to be publicly advertised and applications assessed against criteria and, conversely, students should not be offered an internship on the basis of their personal contacts. 'Work experience' is a term that covers a wide range of student placements, from the formal to the ad hoc, that tend to be less closely linked to a student's course of study. Sometimes 'project' or 'research placements' are also offered and these describe a more specific piece of work that is undertaken by a student within the museum and which is likely to contribute directly to their academic or vocational development.

Student placements also vary greatly in terms of the amount of time committed and the ways in which that time is distributed. For example, some volunteering might consist of spending a day a week in a museum over several months, whereas others denote a chunk of time in which the student works full-time in the museum. At the moment, museums and universities are both engaged in facilitating a whole spectrum of student placements, from the highly casual to the formally agreed. Whilst ad hoc volunteering will probably always form part of this landscape, there is an argument in favour of formalising relationships between museums (or groups of museums) and universities in order to streamline the process of matching university students to appropriate placements within the museums sector. And whilst paid internships, awarded on the basis of merit, represent the most desirable kind of student placement, the current norm is based on the exchange of time, skills and experience in kind.

2. Making student internships work

The key to a successful placement is getting the right match between the student (their skills, level and interests) and the type of placement. For example, many students want to experience a range of different activities – getting a feel for working life within a museum; whereas others need to be engaged with a specific task or project – something they can name on their CV and to which they can devote more sustained time and energy. The suitability of a particular placement does, of course, depend quite strongly on the student's level and course of study.

Achieving the right match of student to museum can be done in a number of ways. As a museum, it is a good idea to draw up a list of possible student projects or types of placement you can offer and then either wait for a student to approach you, or actively contact relevant course coordinators in universities. In each case it is important to make sure that the activity is both meaningful to the student and also beneficial to achieving the museum's aims. A more proactive approach, whereby a relationship is established with a university department or course, is most likely to lead to satisfactory and capacity-building placements.

Universities can also play a significant role in initiating more sustainable relationships between courses and museums to fulfil demand for student internship opportunities. It could be that establishing a very strong partnership with one museum (with sufficient capacity) could be the answer to the needs of a particular university course. On the other hand, an academic might wish to establish connections with a network of smaller

museums, who – together – are able to host enough placements to meet the needs of each cohort of students. Once arrangements of this kind are in motion, time can be saved in brokering new arrangements and ploughed back into sustaining current working relationships.

So, the take home message is this: to reap the full rewards of student placements within museums it is advisable to establish a stable partnership between the two or more organisations, so that the arrangement can be relied upon in the medium term, contributing to capacity-building and strategic forward planning of both institutions.

3. What is an *ethical internship*?¹

The first problem we face when considering how to offer ethical ‘internships’ is that the vast majority of student placements within museums do not meet the basic criteria of an internship, according to best practice. But it is worth looking at the ideal scenario in order to assess how current practice measures up and can be improved in the future.

As described above, the language used to describe student experience within museums varies, but the distinctions are not meaningless. For example, the term ‘internship’ can have a legal status (if the employment status of the intern is defined), whereas ‘work placements’ or ‘work experience’ have no legal status of their own and are not, therefore subject to employment law. A more formally defined internship might class the intern as a volunteer, a worker, or an employee. Whilst most volunteers do not have a contract of employment and, therefore, do not have employee rights, they are often offered a volunteer agreement, which should explain the level of supervision they will receive, the training that is open to them, health and safety concerns and whether they are covered by public liability insurance, and whether the museum will cover their expenses.² Such an agreement is not essential, but it is desirable if organisations are to avoid the exploitation of student volunteers.³ Meanwhile, those interns that are classed as either a worker or an

¹ This conceptualisation of an ethical internship draws on existing guidelines, developed by several organisations, for ethical internships. For example, the Interns Network: <http://www.internsnetwork.org.uk/> ; Kingston University’s Placement Learning Policy: <http://www.kingston.ac.uk/aboutkingstonuniversity/howtheuniversityworks/policiesandregulations/documents/placement-learning-policy.pdf>

² See UK Government guidelines at: <https://www.gov.uk/volunteering>.

³ The National Council for Voluntary Organisations provides information on volunteers’ legal status at: <http://www.ncvo-vol.org.uk/>.

employee are entitled to significant legal rights associated with employment law.⁴ So, internships should only really be unpaid under the following conditions:

- If the intern is working for a registered charity
- If the intern is not working, but 'work-shadowing'
- If the internship forms part of a course of study⁵

If you are interested in establishing an internship programme that works between a university and one or more museums, then the following guidelines will help ensure that it meets the needs of all parties in an ethical way.⁶

Achieve optimum value

- Interns should be given appropriate workspace, resources and time with staff to ensure that they can achieve their goals as part of the museum team
- Interns should be offered as many opportunities as possible to learn about the museum – through reading websites and publications, asking questions of their colleagues and taking part in the professional life of the museum
- Interns should be offered an opportunity at the end of their placement to discuss their progress and to give their feedback

Work transparently

- Museums and universities should be transparent about forthcoming internship opportunities and should avoid raising expectations that cannot be met
- Interns should be fully appraised of their responsibilities but in such a way as to retain a flexible working arrangement between museum and student
- Internships should be publicly advertised and students should be recruited through an open competition
- Methods should be in place to gather feedback (negative and positive) from student interns, university staff and museum placement providers throughout the internship process and this ought to inform the delivery of future internship opportunities

Be fair

⁴ See UK Government guidelines for workers here: <https://www.gov.uk/employment-status/worker> and for employees here: <https://www.gov.uk/employment-status/employee>.

⁵ See <http://unfairinternships.wordpress.com/resources/#unitedkingdom>.

⁶ These guidelines are based on advice drawn up by the Interns Network to guide organisations wishing to advertise internship opportunities.

- Interns should receive reasonable expenses (travel and lunch costs) and museums should try to ensure that internships are available to all, irrespective of background or ability to support oneself
- Museums should be sensitive to the pressures of working for free and, where possible, allow flexible and part-time working conditions to accommodate interns' need to take paid employment elsewhere

Tips for museums seeking academics

Tips for academics seeking museums

Do take the time to match students and placements carefully

Do keep a list of potential student projects that are useful to your museum

Do keep your entry on the Share Academy museum directory up to date and use the site to promote placement opportunities

Do not use the term 'internship' unless the opportunity conforms to ethical guidelines

Do explore ways of improving the transparency and fairness of your student placement programme

Do take the time to match students and placements carefully

Do actively maintain your contacts within museums so as to facilitate the placement of students on a regular basis

Do use the Share Academy website to search for museums offering placement opportunities and also to put out a call for new student placement hosts

Do not use the term 'internship' unless the opportunity conforms to ethical guidelines

Do explore ways of improving the transparency and fairness of your student placement programme