

Volunteering in Museums and Cultural Heritage: A European Overview

Research Report by the European project Volunteers for Cultural Heritage (VoCH)
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Table of Contents

1.	VoCH Research Report – Introduction	3.
2.	Volunteering for Cultural Heritage: European Overview	7.
3.	Volunteering in Italy	22.
4.	Volunteering in the United Kingdom	43.
5.	Volunteering in Austria	62.
6.	Volunteering in Slovenia	72.
7.	Volunteering in Europe: Selected country profiles	78.
8.	Conclusions	114.
9.	Appendices	116.

Introduction

What is VoCH?

Volunteers for Cultural Heritage (VoCH) is a European project, funded by the European Commission as part of the Grundtvig lifelong learning programme. The project starts out by acknowledging the increasing importance of volunteers and volunteering for preserving cultural heritage and running cultural institutions, such as museums.

The project is exploring this phenomenon at European level, identifying different types of voluntary work and the areas of activity in which cultural volunteers are engaged. VoCH takes the position that institutions involving volunteers must offer adequate training, not only to provide skills necessary to carry out what may be very specialised tasks, but also to contribute to the volunteers' growth as individuals, as members of a community, and as European citizens. One of the objectives of the project, therefore, is designing training addressed both to volunteers themselves and to those people responsible for volunteer programmes within cultural organisations. The project takes place from November 2007 until October 2009

Project context

Cultural heritage is a strategic area for European Community policy-makers, supporting the integration of different European components through the recognition of the differences and similarities which characterise local and national cultures and traditions.

The conservation and valorisation of cultural assets require more resources – both financial and human – than the public sector can provide. In some European countries these roles are equally shared between the public and the private sector, often on a voluntary basis, to ensure that places, monuments, sites, and objects of cultural and historical value are passed on unharmed and, where possible, enhanced, to future generations, contributing to the understanding of a shared past and the strengthening of ties among European citizens.

Project activities and outputs will include

- Europe-wide research on volunteers in the cultural heritage sector
- Identification of good practice case studies
- Design, development and delivery of short training modules both for volunteers and coordinators
- Development and publishing of guidelines for good practice when working with volunteers
- Dissemination of project outcomes through conferences and information days

The VoCH partner institutions are:

- Slovenian Museums Association (Project leader), Slovenia
- Amitié, Italy
- ECCOM, European Centre for Cultural Organisation and Management, Italy
- Istituto Beni Culturali della Regione Emilia-Romagna, Italy
- Museo del Tessuto di Prato, Italy
- MUSIS, Association for supporting museums and private collections in Styria, Austria
- EMF, The European Museum Forum Trust, United Kingdom
- Manchester Museum, Manchester, United Kingdom

Partner contact details are listed in **Appendix 1**.

Purpose and methodology

The purpose of this report is to present an overview of volunteering in the cultural sector in both Partner and other European countries in order to identify current trends in volunteering, develop targeted training to address areas of need, and identify areas to be investigated further within the VoCH Handbook, due to be published in autumn, 2009.

In order to give a broad context for cultural volunteering, general information about volunteering has also been included. Much of this has been drawn from the excellent work of the European Volunteer Centre (CEV). A more comprehensive picture is given of the partner countries and of countries where partners had strong connections. We have also included quick overviews of other European countries, in order to round out our survey. Brief case study examples provide ‘real life’ stories of volunteering.

The methodology employed included desk research, visits to museums and interviews with museum professionals and volunteers, discussion amongst project partners (all of whom are senior museum professionals), and devising and sending out one of three questionnaires – to umbrella organisations, institutions or volunteer coordinators, or volunteers themselves. The questionnaires, included as Appendix 2, were also used for face-to-face or telephone interviews with museum professionals, including volunteer coordinators.

The research was carried out by all of the project partners, led by ECCOM and EMF.

VoCH project: next steps

Training courses for volunteers and volunteer coordinators have been devised based on the findings of this report and will take place in Austria and Slovenia during 2008 and 2009. European project conferences will take place in Bologna (March 2009), in Manchester, UK (9-13 June 2009), and Prato, Italy, (2-3 October 2009). A handbook for museum and cultural heritage professionals will be published in autumn 2009. The project partners would like to explore the possibility of making an application to the European Commission for funding to support a network of organisations in this field.

Definitions and terminology

Volunteering

Within any European project one must always be aware of the limitations of working in one language – in this case, English. We risk losing nuance and country-specific descriptions or meanings. The VoCH project partners recognise that there will be subtle differences between countries in the translations, meanings and uses of the English words volunteer, volunteering and voluntary. The VoCH project accepts the European Volunteer Centre's definition of volunteering, as an activity undertaken:

- Out of a person's free will, choice and motivation
- Without concern for financial gain (non-remunerated)
- In an organized setting (within NGO's, volunteer centres, more or less organized groups, etc.)
- With the aim to benefit to someone other than the volunteer and to society at large contributing to values of general interest (although it is recognised that volunteering brings significant benefit equally to the volunteer)¹

¹ *Manifesto for Volunteering in Europe 2006* (http://www.cev.be/Documents/CEVManifesto_EN_IT_NL.pdf).

Voluntary Sector

We would also like to draw attention to the term ‘voluntary sector’ which often comes up in the same context as volunteering. The UK government definition is, ‘bodies, other than public authorities or local authorities, that carry out activities otherwise than for profit.’

Wikipedia gives a fuller definition:

The voluntary sector (also non-profit sector) is the sphere of social activity undertaken by organizations that are non-profit and non-governmental. This sector is also called the third sector, in reference to the public sector and the private sector. Civic sector is another term for the sector, emphasizing the sector's relationship to civil society.

What constitutes the voluntary sector may be interpreted widely or narrowly, and may include such diverse groups as advocacy/interest groups, think tanks, social movements, political parties, charitable organizations, volunteer community organizations, and religious organizations. The voluntary sector may be said to comprise organizations with a social purpose, although usually not including those with a primary focus on social enterprise or social entrepreneurship activities.

Although both self help and community organisations are voluntary organisations Voluntary Sector usually describes the network of larger organisations many of whom will have a policy remit. Such organisations often have a strategic or advocacy role. Within the UK, the NCVO describes voluntary organisations that are: formal (have a constitution); independent of government and self-governing; not-for-profit and operate with a meaningful degree of volunteer involvement. <http://www.hcvs.org.uk/en/>

Other terminology

This report will use **museum professional** to indicate a paid member of staff (or paid freelancer) in a museum or cultural heritage organisation. We recognise that many volunteers in museums may have a similar level of education, training or, in the case of retired volunteers, work experience to that of museum professionals, however we will use museum professional to differentiate between paid staff and volunteers. **Volunteer coordinator** means someone within the museum whose role is to run the volunteer programme, recruit volunteers, offer orientation and training, or supervise their work. A volunteer coordinator may be a paid position or a voluntary one.

How to give feedback to this report

Initially, the project partners felt that this report would be for our own information and guidance only, however as the research and case studies have been collected and collated we have realised that the report has a broader appeal. We are therefore publishing it on the project website www.amitie.it/voch. We are aware that it is a project report created for a specific purpose, rather than a piece of academic research, and that there will be many shortcomings and omissions. We would invite comment, correction and addition by our readers. Partner e-mail contacts are available on the project website: www.amitie.it/voch.

Acknowledgements

The project partners wish to thank everyone who responded to our surveys and requests for information and who helped, formally and informally, in compiling this report. Some people have been named within individual sections of the report; we apologise to anyone whose name was inadvertently left out.

Our purpose in writing this report was to undertake original research on volunteering in the cultural sector. In order to gain a broader picture of volunteering as a whole we have relied to a great extent on the evidenced presented by European Volunteer Centre, CEV, and are indebted to their thorough research in this field.

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