

8. Volunteers for Cultural Heritage Research Report: Conclusions

Volunteers for Cultural Heritage (VoCH) is a European project, funded by the European Commission as part of the Grundtvig lifelong learning programme. The project is exploring volunteering within cultural heritage organisations at European level, identifying different types of voluntary work and the areas of activity in which cultural volunteers are engaged.

The purpose of this report has been 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.

Trends and issues which have emerged from the initial research stage include:

- a) **The importance of an infrastructure to support volunteering nationally, regionally or locally.** This is particularly relevant in countries which are beginning to open up to this phenomenon. An infrastructure (especially volunteer centres at national or local level) which promotes the recognition of volunteers and their legal status, provides training opportunities and facilitates the encounter of offer and demand is essential to support the growth and greater understanding of volunteering.
- b) **The need for planning and ongoing support for volunteering within an organisation.** A good volunteer programme doesn't just happen. It requires a number of good practice measures, including a named volunteer coordinator, volunteer policy, and formal procedures for recruitment, induction, training, ongoing support and supervision, grievance, recognition and reward of volunteers.
- c) **Internal advocacy to ensure that museum and heritage professionals and trustees understand the benefits of involving volunteers in their work.** The value of working with volunteers goes beyond the simple achievement of a task. When the organisation includes volunteers they engage key supporters in their vision and mission. Volunteers, in turn, are invaluable advocates for a museum or heritage site, bringing passion and commitment to the way in which they communicate with audiences and potential audiences. Staff and trustees need to have an understanding of this. Our research found that most often it is the curators or conservators who can feel threatened by the presence of volunteers or see them as simply there to do a job.
- d) **Diversification of volunteer workforce.** In some countries museums and cultural heritage organisations, often supported by agencies or umbrella organisations, are actively looking for ways to promote greater diversity within their volunteer workforce, to include groups traditionally less active in the sector. The definition of diversification differs depending on the current make up of the volunteer workforce. It can mean younger people, people from lower socio-economic backgrounds, or people from diverse ethnic, cultural or religious backgrounds (in some cases from minority groups of longstanding within the community; in others from relatively recent immigrant groups). It is hoped that greater diversity within the volunteering sector at all levels will promote intercultural dialogue and diminish cultural barriers.
- e) **Volunteering as a route to employment.** We found this to be especially relevant for young people, especially graduates, who wish to get something useful out of their volunteer experience to prepare for their future career. At the same time, as some case studies have shown, volunteering can be a route into work and participation for

individuals who find themselves on the margins of society and use volunteering as a first step back to social inclusion.

- f) **Different motivations and patters for volunteering.** Some surveys suggest that now more than in the past, people tend to volunteer for specific, short-term projects that interest them, in order to have a good time, do something worthwhile, but not necessarily to make a long-term commitment. Many organisations are, therefore, developing a more active policy towards their volunteers, using management skills and project work to ensure mutual benefit from the experience.
- g) **On-line volunteering.** This refers not only to the encounter of offer and demand via websites and databases, but also to the increasing tendency of volunteers to offer on-line services and perform their tasks using the Internet (documentation, data entry, and all that can be done at a distance).
- h) **Corporate volunteering.** In some countries large companies are “lending” employees and piloting employee involvement schemes to support organisations in their activities. This support, however, very seldom seems to result in longer term structural partnerships with volunteer centres or the voluntary sector.

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.

In the course of this research and first training and dissemination events the VoCH project has raised considerable interest among peers. One long term aim is to establish a network of institutions interested in the subject. A contact list of more than 180 people has been compiled to date and will continue to grow throughout the project. Through the first VoCH newsletter, these contacts will be alerted about the existence of the present report and invited to comment, integrate or add information. The website <http://www.amitie.it/voch> will therefore function both as a collector of information about the project (dissemination events, links to useful sources, etc), and as a tool to build links to further develop the existing contacts and guarantee the sustainability of the project in the future.

Postscript – New Grundtvig Senior Volunteering Project

Since compiling this report, the project partners have become aware of the new Grundtvig Senior Volunteering Project, launched in 2008. Grundtvig Senior Volunteering is a new action that supports volunteering projects between organisations in two different countries. It will enable senior volunteers (ages 50 and over) to work for an organisation in another European country for any kind of non-profit activity on any topic, for example history, cooking, language, arts and culture. At the same time the organisations sending or hosting volunteers will create lasting European cooperation through the project. Any organisation in adult education is eligible for the programme. The deadline for applications is 31st March 2009. Further information is available from national agency websites or the Europa site http://ec.europa.eu/education/grundtvig/doc986_en.htm.