

## **Education in museums worldwide – preliminary report**

*Dr. Alexandra Zbucnea<sup>1</sup>, Dr. Cristina Leovaridis*

National School of Political and Administrative Studies

Bucharest, Romania

### *Research background*

The museum's role changed in time, from supporter of national development, to scientist, to educator, to political activist, to community advocate, to entertainer etc. In fact all these functions are still present, and will probably always be part of the public philosophy and activity of any museum. The educational function never ceased to be one of the most important, no matter the type of museum or the richness of its collections. One of the main goals of any museum is to educate its public, the community it serves, especially in topics related to the nature of its collections. Although dedicated to this goal, museums are not restricted to it. The increasing importance of the educational role of the museum, as well as the diversification of the means used to reach it, are primarily reflected in the various activities of museums (i.e. increased number and complexity of educational or public programs for various audiences, related to all the museum's exhibitions, permanent or temporary).

The status of education in museums varies from country to country, depending on its history, political situation, cultural traditions, economic development etc. For instance, in ex-communist countries of Eastern Europe the education in museum has had a special status. Officially / politically, education has always been considered the priority for museums. Before 1990, they had to teach especially children and youngsters to be proud citizens of "communist multi-developed societies". Despite the official position, the educational programs offered by museums in Eastern Europe before 1990 were just a few, very little elaborated and much less diverse compared to those offered by museums in Western Europe or in the United States. The situation radically changed in the last decade. Immediately after the anticommunist revolutions in Eastern Europe, young museum professionals tried to open up museums, to better respond to their visitors' interests and desires, to offer diverse educational and other public programs to attract different audiences. Unfortunately, change was slow because of internal inertial and complete lack of resources. The administrative organization of museums had not stimulated change, until educational departments were established.

The museums in Western Europe, Australia and the United States have large and diverse experiences in organizing educational programs and possess a well developed infrastructure. Museums from Africa, Asia and South America seem to be less developed in terms of education management and of public offer, if considered their websites and presence in international journals. They seem to follow the examples proposed by large museums, especially those in the United States or the United Kingdom, but they face all sorts of problems: financial, lack of experience etc.

### *Methodology*

The present investigation aims to understand the various approaches existing all over the world regarding museum education – both in terms of management and content. The survey looks into the educational departments of museums, to their staff and activities.

---

<sup>1</sup> [alexandra.zbucnea@comunicare.ro](mailto:alexandra.zbucnea@comunicare.ro)

The results may point out problems encountered by museums worldwide, as well as successful practices related to the researched topic. Five aspects are investigated: how the educational departments in museums worldwide are organized, the personnel employed in museum education, the dynamics and nature of educational programs, the practices regarding the participants' studies, and the opinions of people working in museum education on the topic.

The investigation instrument used is the online survey addressed to educational departments in museums worldwide. The questionnaire includes 31 questions. Almost all questions are close-ended, in order to make it easier to fill in. Just one representative for each museum should answer to the questionnaire. The survey is addressed to the person who is in charge with education in the museum because that person is the most familiar one with the educational activities in that museum.

The questionnaire was sent to around 2000 valid email addresses all over the world. The online survey also reached museums worldwide through the national museum associations and ICOM national representatives. Nevertheless, due to the limits of the online survey and the partial access to the museum email addresses, the investigation relates more to the situation of relatively large museums and of more dynamic ones. This is also proved by the large percentage of museums affiliated to professional organizations (92% of the respondents) and museums which are either accredited or in the process of being accredited according to the regulations of the country (more than 95% of the respondents). The results can not be generalized. They reveal good practices in each country rather than the common situation. The answers show a more homogenous situation than expected, when taking into consideration the practices in small vs. large museums, or museums in different countries.

### *Respondents*

We have 487 respondents, but just 325 completed questionnaires. The respondents represent 48 countries (27 countries from Europe, 9 from Asia, 5 from Africa, 2 from North America, 4 countries from Latin America and Australia). In terms of museums, we register the following situation: 173 European museums, 93 museums from North America, 20 Asian museums, 13 African Museums, 9 museums from Latin America and 8 Australian Museums. The top of the best represented countries is as follows: 88 museums from the US, 28 museums from Romania, 27 museums from the UK, 18 museums from the Netherlands, 14 Spanish museums, 11 museums from Latvia, 9 museums from Israel, and 8 museums from South Africa and Australia each.

The distribution of museums taking into consideration the demographics is balanced: almost 25% in cities of more than 1 million inhabitants, 27% in towns having between 300.000 and 1 million inhabitants, more than 28% being placed in towns of 50.000 – 300.000 inhabitants, while around 20% are located in small towns and rural area. Generally the respondents represent large museums, since the average number of employees at the main location is of 63 persons. One third of the museums has at least another location, with an average number of employees of 52. Nevertheless, small museums also responded. There are 60 museums with less than 10 employees. These museums are located on all the continents in all sorts of communities, not necessary small towns or rural areas (for instance 11 of them are located in cities of more than 1 million inhabitants). 144 museums have between 10 and 50 employees at the main location. 43 museums have between 51 and 100 people. 56 museums (2 of them are in rural areas) have more than 100 employees. The largest responding museums have 600 (a Dutch museum), 550 (a museum in Taiwan) and respectively 400 employees (a museum in the Netherlands and one in the UK).

Two thirds of the responding museums are public. Taking into consideration the collections, more than 35% are art museums, more than 20% are history museums and almost 15% are general or mixed, with several types of collections. All the others are natural history museums, science museums, ethnographic museums, or other types of specialized museums.

### *Results*

#### The educational department:

There is a general interest in education proved by the existence of an educational section either as an independent department or part of a wider public programs department. Half of the museums (54%) have educational departments of their own. In more than 26% of the situations, education is part of a wider department (dedicated to public relations, external affairs, marketing and others). In 15% of the cases there is no educational section in the museum. In most cases there is a manager for education and 2 team coordinators. The answers show that the educational departments are not so big.

The average number of full-time employees in education is 4. The largest number is of 33 at a museum in Taiwan (the one with 550 employees in all), followed by a history museum in the UK with 30 persons, a science museum in China with 23 full-time employees, a natural history museum in Romania with 21 employees, a museum complex of several museums in the Emirates, a science museum in the States and a history museum in the States with 18 persons each. The number of part-time employees in education is a bit smaller. We highlight that these figures may include the staff of a wider department including education, not exclusively the museum educators. The number of museums' employees, other than educators, which are implicated in educational programs is wider – of more than 25 per museum. The number of volunteers involved in education is also high – the average figure is 38 persons. The average number of outside paid specialists is smaller, of almost 7 persons. In general people working in education are young. The average age for full-time employees is 36 years and for part-time employees is 32 years. The volunteers are generally older – they are 41 years old. We stress that, as expected, there are just a few volunteers of 25 to 50 years old. An atypical situation was recorded in the case of outside paid experts, who are rather young – an average age of 27 years. 60% of the volunteers are students. The percentage is almost as high for retired people who are not specialists in the museum's field.

There is a general concern for the professional development of the educators. In just 6% of the cases they do not take part in any development program, either on their own or paid for by the museum. In 33% of cases there is no professional training related with the museum, but most of the employees take independently various development schemes. The interest for training volunteers is equally high, but the percentage of museums where the organization pays outside institutions or experts for this purpose is smaller. In 40% of the museums the training program for volunteers is taking place before they start working for the museum. 52% of the museums provide training while people volunteer. Almost 30% of the museums provide no training program for their volunteers in education.

#### Educational programs:

The number of programs declared to be developed on regular basis is high – 32 offered by each museum. The figure might be higher than the actual number since some museums seem to have counted all their programs, not just those offered periodically. The most frequent programs are: guided tours, school programs, lectures, family programs and self-guided tours. The types of educational programs that many museums have never

provided till now are: online learning programs (almost half of the respondents), discovery rooms and labs (one third), field trips (up to 30%) and shows and theater plays (23%).

The programs provided by museums are addressing mainly children, students, families, teachers, and teenagers. The less “important” audience is that of young professionals (the average rate obtained is of 4.62, where 7 is “extremely important”). In general, museum representatives consider that their programs have good impact (the average mark is 5.4, where 7 refers to extremely good impact and no need for improvement of the programs). Less than 2% consider that their educational programs have extremely weak or no long-term impact. There is also expressed a generally good opinion on the diversity rate of the programs and on the improvement rate (la later is a bit lower – of 5 out of 7). More than two thirds of the respondents consider that the targeted public should be enlarged. Almost 40% of the respondents consider that the educational programs need more interactivity and hands-on activities. 35% recommend more interdisciplinarity for the programs developed in their museums.

In almost 20% of the cases the educational programs are planned with several years in advance and in almost half of the cases there are annual plans. A third of the museums plan the educational programs with just several months or even weeks in advance.

There is a general practice of evaluating the educational programs, according to the respondents. In just 13% of the cases there has never been conducted a participant study. Almost a quarter of the respondents mentioned that in their museums every educational program is evaluated several times every year. In most cases (65%) the participant studies are developed by the educational department. In less than 10% of the cases just outside paid organizations or experts are involved in the process. The participant studies are generally found useful, but not extremely useful (the average mark is 5.4 out of 7 – extremely useful).

### *Conclusions*

There is a strong emphasis on education in museums worldwide, irrespective of their type or location (both in terms of country or town characteristics). It seems to be a slightly stronger weight in the case of science and history museums. Education is considered very important in most museums. Still, respondents consider that in general other departments tend to recognize in a smaller degree the importance of education and even more the importance of the educational department of the museum. Furthermore, respondents consider that in the future the role of education will increase in their museums.

The respondents also consider that educational programs will, more and more be taken out of museums, in open public spaces or online. Other trends mentioned, especially by museums in the UK, consider that the educational programs will address more seniors or special-needs groups. Interactivity and more hands-on activities are also often mentioned, generally. Another trend which is quite frequently considered is the continuous increase in the quality of the staff involved in education, as well as more investment into educators.