

## Museums and the 'New Museology': Theory, Practice and Organizational change

Vikki McCall <sup>a \*</sup> and Clive Gray <sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup>Colin Bell Building University of Stirling, Stirling, FK9 4LN, Scotland; UK; <sup>b</sup>Centre for Cultural Policy Studies, Millburn House, University of Warwick, Coventry, CV4 7HS UK

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*The widening of roles and expectations within cultural policy discourses has been a challenge to museum workers throughout Great Britain (GB). There has been an expectation that museums are changing from an 'old' to a 'new museology' that has shaped museum functions and roles. This paper outlines the limitations of this perceived transition as museum services confront multiple exogenous and endogenous expectations, opportunities, pressures and threats. Findings from 23 publically-funded museum services across England, Scotland and Wales are presented to explore the roles of professional and hierarchical differentiation, and how there were organisational and managerial limitations to the practical application of the 'new museology'. The ambiguity surrounding policy, roles and practice also highlighted that museum workers were key agents in interpreting, using and understanding wide-ranging policy expectations. The practical implementation of the 'new museology' is linked to the values held by museum workers themselves and how they relate it to their activities at the ground level.*

**Key Words:** Museum services; management, cultural policy; 'new museology'; museum workers; implementation

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\* Corresponding author. Email: [Vikki.mccall@stir.ac.uk](mailto:Vikki.mccall@stir.ac.uk)

## **Introduction**

The ‘new museology’ started with the intention of introducing a new philosophy around how museums function and a changed relationship between museums and their societies and communities. This paper uses new empirical evidence to explore the extent to which this has been achieved in practice throughout Great Britain. It begins by outlining the origins and ideas surrounding the ‘new museology’ and exploring the wide expectations currently surrounding museum services. The paper then uses information derived from 112 qualitative interviews with museum staff, using a combination of semi-structured and open-ended interviewing techniques<sup>1</sup> across 23 museum services (and a total of 39 individual museums) in England, Scotland and Wales to examine the extent to which current museum practice meets the expectations of the ‘new museology’. The impact of a range of intervening variables in affecting how change is managed and undertaken demonstrates the partial nature of reform and the reasons why organisational change has been limited.

This paper then explores four factors that limit the implementation of the ‘new museology’. The role of professional differentiation is first explored showing that there is often still a perceived, and real, polarisation of factions within museum services. These are clearly related to museum functions and the negotiation of power relationships within the museum services studied. The hierarchical differentiations within the services are then outlined, which paints a complex picture of working relationships, especially between managerial and collections-based roles. The paper then explores the effect of policy and role ambiguity, as well as what could be considered to be the effective implementation of policy. Overall, key discourses related to the ‘new museology’ were evident, but there were also important restraints on the practical implementation of activities relating to the ‘new museology’ throughout the services studied.

## **The ‘new museology’**

Mairesse and Desvallées (2010) offer five distinct meanings of museology, although they prefer the definition of museology as the entirety of theoretical and critical thinking within the museum field. The ‘new museology’ evolved from the perceived failings of the original museology, and was based on the idea that the role of museums in society needed to change: in 1971 it was claimed that museums were isolated from the modern world, elitist, obsolete

and a waste of public money (Hudson 1977, 15). Traditional ideas around museum practice, which were seen to have contributed to this, were functionally based around collections and held curatorship as being central to the museum enterprise. The original idea of a museum as a collections-focused, building-based, institution prevailed, with the existence of a general public understanding that the museum is a 'cultural authority' -- upholding and communicating truth (Harrison 1993). The consequence of this was perceived to be that the interests of a narrow social grouping dominated how museums operated on the basis of a claimed exclusivity in determining the role of museums (Hooper-Greenhill 2000). This exclusivity was, in turn, linked to claims about cultural status and the idea that the major social role of museums was to 'civilize' and 'discipline' the mass of the population to fit their position within society (Bennett 1995) through differentiating between 'high' and 'elitist' cultural forms which were worthy of preservation, and 'low' or 'mass' ones (Griswold 2008), which were not. Therefore, what could be called the traditional museology was seen to privilege both its collections-based function and its social links to the cultural tastes of particular social groups.

The 'new museology' is a discourse around the social and political roles of museums, encouraging new communication and new styles of expression in contrast to classic, collections-centred museum models (Mairesse and Desvallées 2010). It has become a theoretical and philosophical movement linked to a shift in focus and intention within the museums world, away from the functional idea of museums. Areas that were suggested for reconsideration in the 'new museology' included the position of museums in conservation, the epistemological status of artefacts on display, and the nature and purpose of museum scholarship (Smith 1989, 20-21). The 'new museology' has been broken down to changes in 'value, meaning, control, interpretation, authority and authenticity' within museums. This also includes the redistribution of power within museums and 'curatorial redistribution' (Stam 1993).

The 'new museology' also involves a redefinition of the relationship that museums have with people and their communities. This shift includes a drive for wider access and representation of diverse groups (Stam 1993), as well as a more active role for the public as both visitors and controllers of the curatorial function (Black 2005; Kreps 2009). Museums can also be, and have been seen to take, an active role in tackling discrimination and inequality within

society (Sandell 2007). There is also a perceived shift in the identity of museum professionals from 'legislator' to 'interpreter' and towards a more visitor-orientated ethos (Ross 2004).

These developments can be argued to be part of a shift in focus from objects to ideas within the 'new museology' (Weil 1990), with language and education now argued to have a central position in museums (Hooper-Greenhill 2000; Message 2006). There has also been an introduction of multiple discourses linking museums to terminologies such as 'cultural empowerment', 'social re-definition', 'dialogue' and 'emotion' (Harrison 1993). This progression has come with an awareness of social accountability and social (as well as moral) responsibility in the museum (Heijnen 2010).

The 'new museology' - and a great deal of museological literature - assumes that as a result of this rethinking of the purposes of museums, real change has occurred in both the understanding of museum functions and the activities that museums undertake. The 'new museology' continues to provide a set of principles that it is argued should be enshrined in how these institutions work (*c.f* the recent arguments in Simon 2010). There has, however, been relatively little analysis of actual museum practice to assess the extent to which changes have actually lived up to the assumptions of the 'new museology' across the museums sector as a whole, except in case studies of particular examples of innovative work within individual museums (*c.f* the essays in Guntarik 2010 and MuseumsEtc 2011), Duncan's (1995) analysis of some of the larger European museums highlighted that there had indeed been a change to public consumption within The Louvre and National Gallery of London. The changes that had occurred, however, were more representative of imposing the ideologies of the powerful onto the masses, which would indicate some limitations to what the 'new museology' has actually achieved.

While the 'new museology' as an approach is concerned with increased access and representation, for example, some recent work effectively challenges the extent to which these have been put into practice in many museums (Janes 2009). This is particularly in terms of the continuing demands that the management of heritage should be 'more open, inclusive, representative and creative' (Harrison 2013, 225) - implying that change has not been universally achieved. For example, Stam (1993) discusses the implications of the 'new museology' on museum practice and identifies a range of changes in organisational structure, staffing and management/business practices. Many responses to the 'new museology',

however, have been ‘suspiciously *ad hoc*’ and often at odds with the educational purposes of museums. Furthermore, it is noted that the ‘new museology’ is less useful for praxis – museums have been left to find their own routes to link ideas around the ‘new museology’ to what they are actually doing.

This paper takes the ‘new museology’ as a specific ideology and discourse that has affected expectations around the purpose of museums. The above literature demonstrates that the ‘new museology’ includes a wide range of expectations and beliefs. This paper outlines the extent to which museum workers at the ground level have understood these expectations and linked the ‘new museology’ into their everyday roles. The current paper is not based on a statistically-representative sample of museums and museum services in the UK, and is not intended to provide a definitive statement about the precise extent to which the ‘new museology’ is embedded in individual cases or how individual museums are living up to the principles enshrined within the approach. Instead, it provides a synoptic overview of factors internal to the museums sector as a whole that have affected the extent to which change has occurred, and identifies the manner in which they have contributed to the partial and inconsistent take-up of the principles of the ‘new museology’ within Great Britain.

### **The widening policy expectations around the museum**

In line with the ideas of the ‘new museology’, there has been a widening of expectations about what museums can and should deliver since the 1960s, notwithstanding the considerable political, social and economic changes occurring within society that have, at times, worked counter to these expectations. The New Labour electoral victory in the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland (UK)<sup>II</sup> in 1997 heralded an active incorporation of culture into areas of policy that had previously not been seen as intrinsically related, as well as a fragmentation of governmental responsibility for culture to the component parts of the nation state. The social role of the museum was made much more explicit, with the Department of Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) - the central government Department with responsibility for museums and galleries in England - stating that museums and galleries could, and should, be ‘agents of social change’ (DCMS 2000) -- a claim that can be seen to align quite clearly to aspects of the ‘new museology’.

There has also been a significant change in cultural governance since 1999 when cultural powers were devolved to Scotland and Wales. The Scottish Government states that there should be a greater involvement of cultural providers with the publics that they serve (Scottish Government (SG) 2008, 10), whilst similar expectations have been linked to museums in Wales, with culture being proposed as a mechanism to promote tourism and external markets (Welsh Assembly Government [WAG] 2007). There are, therefore, multiple and often conflicting high-level policy expectations relating to museums that extend far beyond the more traditionally understood collections-based, curatorial idea of museums.

As a consequence of this, museums are expected to develop policies and practices that meet multiple, functional ends. In Scotland's National Strategy for museums and galleries, for example, it is expected that they will connect 'people, places and collections' and create public value while, at the same time, 'inspiring' and 'delighting' the public (Museums Galleries Scotland [MGS] 2012, 8). The Welsh National Strategy has three foci: that museums will have a community focus, will promote 'a fair and just society' and will contribute to lifelong learning (WAG 2010, 6). In England, there were explicit expectations that museums and galleries could function as a means for overcoming social disadvantage through their role as part of a national strategy for social inclusion (DCMS 2000). There was also a focus on the role of museums as generators of 'cultural democracy' (DCMS 2006). The policy strategies for Scotland, England and Wales are therefore instrumental in that they aim to fulfil wider outcomes - social, economic and political - than those that are more traditionally cultural in nature (Gray 2007). This instrumental policy rhetoric is very much in line with the 'new museology', as it explicitly champions the wider role that museums can be expected to fulfil beyond the doors of the museum itself.

The wider role of museums, however, does not stop at the national level. Local authorities across Britain, which are responsible for providing the vast majority of publically-funded, museum services within the country, have their own policy expectations and demands. Some policy expectations and demands fit comfortably within the ideas of the 'new museology' and the various national government frameworks (particularly in terms of involving local people and communities). Other expectations, including everything from ensuring that museums and galleries abide by health and safety at work legislation, to meeting accountability requirements, apparently have little to do with their functional roles, regardless of whether these are instrumental or collections-based. These demands require the integration of

museums into a wider realm of managerial expectations that place multiple demands upon staff within them (Gray 2004). To add to these pressures, there are also the demands of a variety of quangos (semi-public administrative bodies), non-departmental public bodies (NDPB's) and non-government Bodies (NGO's)<sup>III</sup> such as Arts Council England (ACE) and Museums Galleries Scotland (MGS), as well as professional associations (such as the Museums Association) concerning financing and accreditation that have implications for what museums can and do operate.

Alongside these multiple, exogenous pressures, there are also endogenous ones which have implications for what takes place within individual institutions, as well as within the sector as a whole (Gray 2012). Both professional and functional differences between staff members could be expected to have an influence upon their acceptance of their anticipated role and active involvement in the implementation of the multiple exogenous expectations that are placed upon them. So, for example, whether staff have museum qualifications or not, and whether they work as conservators, curators, finance or marketing officers, or in museum shops and cafes, are both anticipated to affect all of these factors. Equally, the existing and often long-standing, formal policies that museums have ranging from acquisitions, to display standards, to disposal, to equal opportunities can, and do, affect how they function in practice. These endogenous factors add to the number of demands that will be in force at any given time in individual museums and galleries, making these organisations ripe for the creation of confusion and competition about their management, including the functions that they will be expected to undertake and the objectives that they will be expected to pursue. In such circumstances, the extent to which the 'new museology' could embed itself within the sector becomes something of a moot point.

## **Methodology**

This paper presents empirical evidence to help identify the extent to which the 'new museology' has become part of the fibre of the museums sector in Great Britain, and how the multiple demands that are placed upon staff within the sector have served to influence and affect the integration of the new ideology into museum practice. The findings present qualitative research across 23 publically-funded museum services, covering national, local authority, university and trust services in England, Scotland and Wales. The findings incorporate interviews with 112 members of staff, as well as 32 days of observation within 17

of these museums. Participants were a mix of workers that often had contact with the public and included managers, retail staff, curators, security guards, customer assistants, conservation workers, volunteers, project workers, outreach, administration and educational officers. Analysis has been conducted by QSR Nvivo, a qualitative computer software package that helped to code and categorise, and a mixture of manual approaches. Qualitative, empirical research is a valid and widely used scientific method and, although it cannot be used in the present case to derive statistical generalisations, it has provided a rich and in-depth picture of the limitations to the effective implementation of the ‘new museology’.

In this paper, we use ‘museum’ as a collective term for a mix of museums, galleries, historic houses and collection centres. ‘Ground-level staff’ is used to refer to those who work within the museums service and have a high level of interaction with visitors and are often called ‘street-level’ workers (Lipsky 2010). We have also kept the information gathered confidential and anonymous to protect participants. The experiences that these museum workers shared with us are used to structure the next part of the paper. Four overriding themes emerged from a cross-examination of the data and include:

- The role of professional differentiation;
- The role of hierarchical differentiation;
- The effect of policy and role ambiguity; and
- The implementation of policy.

The first two of these are concerned with endogenous effects, and the third and fourth with the interplay of both endogenous and exogenous effects within the museums sector.

### **Professional differentiation**

The people who work within museums and galleries can be classified in numerous ways, ranging from whether they are professional or non-professional, full-time or part-time, as well as a division in terms of the differing functional activities - such as conservation, curation, or education. The emphasis in the ‘new museology’ on moving away from a focus



on the traditional role of the ‘curator’ (to provide the intellectual basis for the work that is undertaken within the sector), implies that the differences between members of staff need to be increasingly recognised when attempting to understand how the sector functions. The question of whether museums are still dominated by a centralised power source based upon professional qualifications and experience, or whether, power is more dispersed amongst multiple internal actors representing a range of interests is one that has rarely been empirically examined.

There did not appear to be a distinction between the professional functions of museum workers and a collegial attitude that has developed from changes to patterns of internal management and organisation - at least in some of the museum services. Thus, while the emphasis is upon the skills and knowledge that staff have in terms of their function - whether this be more traditional ideas of curatorship or more recent importations such as marketing - these roles defined by function run alongside ideas of team working across the organisation to create solutions for the issues that confront individual museum services. The consequence of this has been that, as one curator put it, *“they want us to be multi-disciplinary or para-professional these days”* (Museum Worker [MW] Wales), with an increasing emphasis on generic management as something distinct from specific functional expertise. Such developments, however, have tended to be at the level of senior management, with an increasing use of team approaches to management. There is still a major polarisation between professional and ‘other’ - clerical, manual and administrative - staff within the sector. The latter staff groups tend not to be seen as being able to provide any particular knowledge or experience to considerations of how museums could or should function, with these being the preserve of traditional, functionally-based management groupings within the sector.

The empirical evidence highlighted that museum workers recognised elements of polarisation within their services. One outreach worker described this polarisation as the ‘new school’ and the ‘old school’ groups within their museum -- seeing museum workers within their service to be clearly related to these polarised ‘schools’. The ‘new school’ included outreach, learning and “people-centred” functions of the museum, while the ‘old school’ were collections-related curators and people within certain “backwards-looking” departments. Different factions were clearly based on functional differentiation and often it was *“dog eat dog”* in terms of status and the exercise of power (Museum Worker, England). The mirroring of these two schools in the traditional and ‘new’ museology is quite clear and shows that

there may be some kind of transition taking place within the museums sector resulting in negotiation and conflict over the roles of staff and overall museum functions:

*“The fundamentals of the museum is (sic) that it is people-led rather than curators or even typical museum visitors. So above all it’s going to be a space to encourage dialogue and discussions. So that’s been the basis for a lot of community teams working on the community side of it... So what I mean by the old curatorial side I guess the perception is that very much it’s... one person hanging on to their collection and hanging on to knowledge and not sharing information. And pretty much all the decisions of what goes on display and how it is interpreted”. (Museum Worker, England).*

As well as a clear existence of diverse working groups within the museums studied, there was an indication that the thoughts and processes attributed to the ‘new museology’ were limited in practice, often being seen to be operating on a discourse level that did not quite relate to the actual practices of the museums studied. A good example of this is the lack of engagement with user groups. There were some project-based examples of user engagement within some of the services studied, and many more examples of discussions with highly active and engaged volunteers and ‘friends’<sup>IV</sup> groups. These were heralded as successful by the museum workers who were interviewed and often had evaluation, monitoring and funding attached to them. However, these were rare, and many of the museums visited did not have a formal, user-engagement strategy beyond comments books and cards or the occasional visitor survey (because of being expensive to run)

Even when there was a comments card system in place, museum workers reported no follow-up activities after comments were communicated up the managerial hierarchy. Museum workers often discussed the importance of user involvement, but there were few specific examples of where user feedback had any impact on their day-to-day activities. In some cases, users were referred to in derogatory terms, making what were perceived to be unrealistic demands and expecting involvement in activities that were held to be the preserve of professionals and managers alone. Overall, there was evidence of polarisation between staff groups, with there being some engagement with ideas associated with the ‘new museology’, but with this being limited in practice, particularly where the “*old curatorial side*” was seen to dominate ground level activities and museum functions.

Staff often advocated (although not always delivered) a more user-led process within their services. Many museum workers tried to develop a counter-narrative through employing

professional discourses on what is involved in undertaking their role, with this being part of an attempt to control their functions. Museum workers are ‘professionals’ or ‘semi-professionals’ in a broad sense, as museum function and delivery are drawn from both personal ideologies and historically-inherited, professional ideals. This division could also be seen as a source of friction and division in workers’ understandings of museum functions, with the evidence suggesting that the process of polarisation was sometimes “*pushed*”, with many curators reporting the use of defensive activities in response to managerial control mechanisms. Others, however, used more active strategies to manage the managers, either through the control of information or through more individual actions such as “*gentle flirting with older men*” (Museum Worker, England, referring to elected representatives). This leads to a consideration of hierarchical differentiation and potential changes in power distribution within the museum and their relationship to the ‘new museology’.

### **Hierarchical differentiation**

In many of the services studied there was a sense that the role of curators had been “downgraded” within the museum service hierarchy. Curatorial roles had been pushed down the hierarchy and more managerial layers had often been placed between curators and high-level decision makers. In one local authority service, the curators’ titles had been changed to ‘buildings manager’. Indeed, in the majority of services a variety of new labels had been given not only to curators, but also to other professional groups such as conservators and education officers. In a Welsh example, the last curator had left the service a year before and had never been replaced. In one service, — front-of-house staff were constantly moved between twelve different museums within the service often with only a week’s notice. This affected the traditional roles of curators -- first, by directly increasing the administration and management element of the job and second, by often limiting curators to collections care only as wider exhibition planning and design had been placed within the remit of other roles.

*“And now curators tend to be excluded.... So curators don't get involved in exhibition planning at all... Curators have ended up being pushed down and down in the structure. So where curators used to be the second layer of management they are now sixth... there are just far more layers of decision making before you get to a curator who can put in their two pennies worth... the curator might not be involved in the project until it's*

*already quite well advanced in that decision making stage*". (Museum Worker, England).

The key point is that many curators felt that they were fighting a rear-guard action in opposition to higher-ranking managers. This again reinforces the divisive structures and polarisation of workers within some of the museum services studied. In other examples, however, the traditional role of the curator was alive and well, with senior management prepared to allow curators to make all of the exhibition and display choices that they wanted - free from what other curators would see as excessive amounts of top-down, managerial, control.

Many museum staff who worked closely with collections reported a loss of control over museum function and direction, although other staff did not necessarily share this perception. Many curators gave a clear indication of the low importance given to collections and collections policy by senior management. It is important to note, however, that workers were aware of the dichotomy between 'intrinsic' activities within the museum and other expectations as demonstrated, for example, by the 'old school' and 'new school' labels placed on workers. Gibson (2008) also pointed out that this is not a simple black-and-white argument. Curators consistently showed that they agreed with the social aims within their organisations, even if they viewed themselves as collections-focused. The traditional museological view of museums as being collections-focused is certainly still present with many members of museum staff – not only curators and conservators but also education and community outreach staff as well, who see their own actions as being determined as much by the collections as by the dictates of senior management. Managerial conflict and control mechanisms often encouraged the development of defensive strategies around traditional preservation and collections-based roles, in reaction to the perception that management were targeting the decision-making power and professionalism of museum staff (even if this was not the case in every museum service).

Practical implementation of the 'new museology' can thus be hindered by current managerial structures and mechanisms, with many museum workers reporting a perceived fragmentation into polarised groups within museum services. This view encouraged the development of defensive activities over museums and their functions in many cases. Equally, however, the establishment of a clear functional division between 'managers' and museum staff in other cases allowed for the continuation of more traditional, 'professional' views of museums and

their functions. In each scenario, the relationship between workers and management was a key area of discussion and had a fundamental impact on implementation of policy expectations.

Whether the relationship was defensive or functional, workers at the ground level could be seen to try and increase their discretion over museum activities. For Lipsky (2010), the relationship between managers and ground level workers (or what he calls street-level bureaucrats) is a key element in the struggle for effective implementation. He viewed the manager/worker relationship as generally conflictual, with workers in a continuous fight over power and resources. Workers on the ground are able to take advantage of conflictual and ineffective management to increase discretion and power over day-to-day activities. There were certainly elements of this within the defensive strategies employed by museum workers. For example, one curator was told by a senior manager that they were going to do an exhibition on the working class. The curator purposefully subverted what she deemed to be a politically influenced decision and produced a popular exhibition where she explored the role of women in the miners' strikes of the 1970s and 1980s. From her perspective, she fulfilled the managerial mandate using her own discretion and avoided a 'tribute to the unions'. Therefore, power can be seen as being negotiated between different levels of the hierarchy, with control of policy implementation being a vital resource in this process.

Criticism of Lipsky (2010) includes the assertion that managerial relationships are not always conflictual. When talking about their own immediate managers, staff at the ground-level were generally positive. The managers that were critically discussed were often seen as vague and nameless entities higher up the managerial hierarchy, or even outside of the museum service altogether. Evans (2011) also discusses this when studying street-level workers and observed that managers had their own set of professional standards and values that were often sympathetic to ground-level workers. The managers we talked to were usually clear advocates of the museum services studied. Many did not necessarily see themselves as being in conflict with other workers' professional values, but were more concerned with letting these professional values determine what actually took place inside the museum (often leading to conflict with demands from elsewhere within the system). It must also be remembered that many of the curators were managers themselves. Therefore, the hierarchical relationships and differentiation within museums services are anything but clear.

## **Policy and role ambiguity**

The ‘new museology’ encompasses wide and ambiguous discourses such as ‘empowerment’ and ‘social inclusion’ (Harrison 1993). Policy makers (McCall 2010) have also viewed museums as ‘generators of well-being’ and, more recently in Britain, linked them to the idea of ‘the Big Society’<sup>V</sup>. Museum workers are being expected to be all things to all people, with museums and museum staff operating within the multiple demands and pressures that are produced from a variety of policy documents and expectations. These vary between the type of museum service (in the current case, local authority, trust, university and national) and the source of policy demands, whether these are derived from central or local governments, various quasi-autonomous non-governmental organisations (QUANGOs), the general legal requirements that are in force, or from within museums and museum services themselves. Some of these demands are quite specific to individual museums, such as accession policies, whilst others are more general in application, - such as equal opportunities, health and safety and holiday entitlement policies. In addition, there are organisational policies covering, for example, managerial reporting, quality and service assessment that are intended to be applied across organisations regardless of functional area as well other policies and standards that are intended to have universal relevance for all museums and museum services, ranging from conservation standards to spoliation policies and, clearly, these add to even greater complexity to the policy environment that museum staff are working within.

The greatest difficulty with all of these expectations lies in the fact that they are always subject to interpretation by those who have the responsibility for implementing them. Each agent in the policy process has their own professional and personal values and experiences that can influence implementation. The organisational requirement for the production of general policies that will cover most eventualities (rather than the production of specific policies to cover every eventuality which is likely to lead to accusations of bureaucratic red-tape) leads to the production of gaps in coverage which can easily be exploited by implementing staff. The capability of staff within individual museums and museum services to adapt formal policies, either to make them applicable to the particular circumstances that are faced by staff and organisations, or to make them acceptable to the professional requirements that staff have, means that it is difficult for senior managers to control everything that takes place in service delivery (Lipsky 2010). Indeed, line managers, let alone senior ones, can often find problems in ensuring that organisational policies are lived up to.

While this may imply that implementing staff can have free rein when managing policy, adapting or even ignoring it when it suits them, it is more usually the case that staff are much more subtle about manipulating policy so that senior managerial levels can be kept satisfied. Overt diversion of policy to meet the demands of implementing staff is usually accompanied by the presentation of information to management that is designed to demonstrate that the original policy is being met, or by the skewing of information to allow it to appear that policy is being met (Goddard *et al.* 2000; Hood 2006). This is often helped by the low level of monitoring at the ground level of museums and the lack of detailed and specific policy guidance that is available to museum staff (McCall 2012). This makes the museum workers central to the policy process through their control of implementation within their museum services.

The space where museum workers can use their discretion is helped by a gap between high-level policy expectations and ideas of policy at the ground level (McCall 2009). Workers are influenced by high-level policy rhetoric, but because of the ambiguity of key concepts there are multiple interpretations at ground level. McCall (2012) has shown that the idea of policy can bring about a mix of negative emotional reactions from some workers and can have a fundamental role in utilising policy and manipulating the language around museum activities to meet their own ends. Therefore, although policy ambiguity can lead to multiple expectations, the space offered by wide (and often unknown) policy definitions can give ground-level workers the room to pursue their own activities in creative ways. Many workers who were interviewed gave examples of this. The social inclusion agenda, for example, was an opportunity for museums to ‘latch-on’ to funding that was not available to them before. This is an example of clear policy ‘attachment’ (Gray 2002) pursued at the ground level of museum activities. The language and discourses that relate to the ‘new museology’ have been used as opportunities for workers to pursue their own discretion in implementing activities at the ground level. This has obvious constraints and can often backfire on museum services (such as being tied to short-term and disappearing funding streams), but it is an example of museum workers being key agents in utilising policy discourses to implement multiple functions within their museum services.

### *Contextual limitations*

While the ‘new museology’ itself developed within a particular set of social, economic and political contexts, the principles that underpin it have a degree of universality that extend beyond the particular. If, however, contextualisation can be shown to have a direct impact upon how the museum sector functions, this could limit the extent to which the ‘new museology’ can be introduced. Two contexts are discussed here: the policy frameworks that provide guidance for the actions and choices of museum staff, and the roles that staff fulfil within their working environments. In both cases, the level of ambiguity that is endemic within museums services allows for the development of a level of reinterpretation and management of exogenous pressures. This produces a picture of compliance with external demands whilst allowing maintenance of existing patterns of work and control. In this process, the power of staff groups to manage how policies are to be interpreted and put into action, and how jobs are to be undertaken, provides them with a central role in managing the demands that are placed upon them. This relates to how open they are to the principles of the ‘new museology’. The following conversation shows these points clearly:

*“At the moment there is a massive thing on China and our links with China and that is a big political agenda from one year to the next... it can be quite difficult because you might have developed your policy over two or three years and then it just comes from left field and they say right we are just going to do this”.*

RESEARCHER: How do you negotiate that?

*“Not very well. There is not a lot of negotiation. I think for good negotiation we need a very strong leadership team... And we need evidence. Well actually first of all we need a clear policy to say we have been doing this for two or three years and this is what we are doing”.*

RESEARCHER: Is that not something you have?

*“No because policy is an interesting one. With policy... you would normally have been consulted over it and it is developed over a period of time. And renewed and reviewed. But one of the difficulties with such a large service is that I think everybody is just getting the work done. And what happens is policies are not being written, guidelines are not being written, and it’s not been signed off. I mean a lot of our policies have just not been signed off. Formal like ‘this is it now everyone follow this’ - it’s just like work-in-*



*progress. And in the end you can use it to help you, but equally they do not have any robustness to them”.*

RESEARCHER: Sounds interesting

*“It is a challenge and it’s just about getting on with the vast volume of work because people are just getting on with it in practice. And making it up as they go along. Which is a good way of doing it as well actually, putting policy in oneself once you start consulting local people you have to then earmark your position”. (Museum Worker, England).*

This translates into the “widening role” of museum workers, with many feeling that their roles covered a variety of the different functions related to both the new and traditional museology. Many roles were what could be termed interdisciplinary relating to more than one branch of knowledge and/or function. This made it hard to connect to a defined ‘professionalism’, except perhaps through the idea of ‘bureau-professionalism’, where professionalism and bureaucracy are combined to create ‘bureau-professional regimes’ (Mintzberg 1983; Newman and Clarke 1994, 23). Staff are both managed within, and are the managers of public organisations, leading to a shift from a ‘professional’ to a ‘semi-professional’ status (Abbot and Meerabeau 1998, 2). Therefore, the redefinition of the roles and functions of museum workers can be linked to higher organisational and managerial change.

For museums, ‘professional’ includes a wide range of workers and roles. There is a lack of single-purpose roles in general within museums (O’Neil 2008). Being a professional can mean those with a certain skill, white collar workers, or those with particular attributes, power and status (Johnson 1972). In the museums sector, ‘professionalism’ can therefore cover a wide range of roles – even within the same job:

*“[I am a] Museums development officer but not the same as it is in England. Operational, strategic for the County. Works with other museums that are looking for Accreditation. Gives advice for that and helps develop the site. Applying for minimum standards for MLA, Health and Safety, recruitment, general dogs-body, cleaning, marketing. Multitasking”. (Museum Worker, Wales).*

The idea of ‘bureau-professionalism’ seems to reflect the description that workers shared about themselves throughout the museum services studied. Workers often had their professional functions to undertake alongside more generic, managerial functions. The ‘traditional’ roles of museum workers have been perceived to be going through some transition. Curatorial roles, for example, have widened to include less collections-based work and more directly ‘managerial’ and ‘administrative’ activities. The tensions and conflict between staff factions and service managers could therefore be linked to the perceived dilution of traditional professional roles in favour of more general, multi-functional, task-related attributes. This also impacts new museological thought, as the ‘new museology’ emphasises a people-centred approach, but the changes in the role of traditional collections workers are often much more organisationally focused. The change in job titles, for example, and the emphasis on managerial and administrative roles for curators, aligns them much more with the bureaucracy they work within than the people who they serve. This shift in focus indicates that there can be organisational and managerial limitations to the practical application of the ‘new museology’ within museum services.

### **Effective implementation**

The previous discussion has shown that the context in which museum workers negotiate policy is far from simple. There are competing factions based on functionality, complex worker/managerial relationships and structures, and a sense of role ambiguity. It is difficult within these environments to assess the extent to which the principles of the ‘new museology’ have become a part of the established practices of museum staff. Actually undertaking the process of transforming museums is not straightforward. The museum worker below notes how the changing role of the museum is not only a difficult transition internally, but also externally:

*“From a public point of view, it’s difficult to change the public perception of museums. One is that we are all mad boffins and the other is that we have a lovely life just sitting behind the scenes drinking our cups of coffee looking at paintings... one person in that team who has been our contact point for two years said he has just come to understand and appreciate for the first time the incredibly difficult environment we work in compared to academia. But it’s very hard to break the stereotypes”.* (Museum Worker, England).

The wider roles of museum staff create difficulties at the policy implementation stage within museums. With multiple interpretations of key policy concepts, there were different routes to implementation. The ambiguity of policy and policy direction often created more room at the ground level for museum workers to pursue their own ideas and values.

This also raises the question of what ‘effective implementation’ actually is. Lipsky (2010) believed that effective implementation was the fulfilment of higher-level policy expectations at the ground level. However, we would argue that the negotiations and actions at ground-level make workers the key agents in ‘effective implementation’. It is the level of discretion at the ground level that allows museum workers to negotiate the multiple expectations within policy and their roles and function.

*“I consider myself very much at the chalk-face of implementing things but I have to say that I haven’t read a strategy document on what I do... I think it comes naturally... Telling people the stories of the objects”.* (Museum Worker, Scotland).

This paper has shown the extent to which an effective service is delivered has a lot to do with the resilience and creativity of the workers at ground level. Worker discretion can lead to other implications such as a diverse service for different users, but in a service with many exogenous and endogenous pressures having a uniform service would be impossible from the outset. This discretion means that the effective implementation of the ‘new museology’ depends on the degree to which workers themselves believe in its related values. Thus, the extent to which the ‘new museology’ can be seen to have become embedded within individual museums and museum services is as much a matter of the subjective judgements of museum staff themselves as it is a matter of objective external assessment.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, the ‘new museology’ has had less practical effect than the museology literature might anticipate. This is a result of multiple causal factors that extend far beyond the forms of professional control of the museums sector and museums policy that the ‘new museology’ literature is based on. Despite this, the ‘new museology’, and the discourses associated with it, has been a useful tool for museum workers. Museum workers have been shown to be key

agents in utilising the rhetoric related to the ‘new museology’ in the pursuit of multiple museum functions and in managing their own practices. How this relates to broader questions of museum practice is more debatable, as museum workers utilise the discourses in relation to their own values and activities, rather than to anything outward-facing. There has been some progress with regard to activities around the ‘new museology’, but a full transition into this ideology has not been achieved by any museum service in this study.

The empirical evidence has clearly shown that there are different and competing tensions within museum services. There was evidence of polarisation within museums services based on museum function and worker’s roles, especially between managers and traditional curatorial roles. This polarisation is often pushed by management control mechanisms that lead workers to adopt defensive strategies within their services. Tensions are connected to views of professionals and the widening role of museum workers into “*para-professionals*”, or what we term, ‘bureau-professionals’. The increasing emphasis on the bureaucratic part of the ‘bureau-professional’ role could limit the extent to which the ‘new museology’ can be implemented in practice, particularly if it conflicts with broader managerial tendencies and expectations.

We emphasize that the real picture in museums is not simple. Our findings show that these polarisations do exist within museums but they are not particularly fixed. The discourse related to the old and ‘new museology’ is dynamic. Perceptions around the role and function of museums can go backwards and forwards between these continuums. The picture in most museums includes workers who understand both sides of this picture, but often structural challenges (such as collections being “*downgraded*”) force people to adopt a certain side in defence. These structural constraints and defensive mechanisms can limit the extent to which the intentions and expectations of the ‘new museology’ can be practically implemented in museums. We believe that none of the museums and services that we have examined could be seen to be unambiguously ‘new museological’ in orientation. It is rather a matter of degree depending upon how the factors that we have identified affect individual cases. Further research is required to establish how far individual museums and services have advanced in a new museological direction.

Further empirical work to develop the arguments presented here could demonstrate both the limitations and the opportunities that exist within museums and galleries for the creation of

new approaches and practices within the sector as a whole, and how these opportunities and limitations work out when implemented. We have sought to explain the limitations of change in the particular context of museums, but future questions around the effective management of organisational change would be important to consider in taking these findings forward.

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<sup>I</sup> Full detail of the research methodologies employed in this paper, including categories of museums and staff, and methods of analysis can be obtained from the authors. Interviewees have been given the opportunity to check the accuracy and contextualisation of directly quoted comments.

<sup>II</sup> The United Kingdom refers collectively to Great Britain and Northern Ireland. The current paper is restricted to Scotland, England and Wales which collectively form Great Britain.

<sup>III</sup> These quasi-governmental organisations are intended to place a distance between elected politicians and implementing agencies, commonly referred to as the arm's-length principle.

<sup>IV</sup> These were often involved in fundraising and community engagement activities.

<sup>V</sup> This is itself a rather nebulous term but includes ideas of community and individual inter-action to provide services, either through activities such as individual volunteering or through taking over the direct provision of services by communities. The extent to which it has actually been put into practice is currently unclear but as one curator (England) said about the Big Society idea, 'nobody has the money for it and nobody cares', indicating some of the difficulties that are associated with it.