

## **Museums and Galleries and the International Visitor Experience**

### **Objectives**

#### **List the main objectives of the proposed research in order of priority [up to 4000 chars]**

This proposal aims to bring together modern linguists/intercultural specialists and museum and gallery professionals (notably in marketing and communications) in a three part research workshop series that focuses on the needs and expectations of the international visitor to the UK museum and gallery sector. Building on the initial findings of the pilot research project carried out in 2006 at the University of Westminster, the objectives are to:

- Work through a set of key issues and questions concerning not only the experience of the international visitor but also the needs of the sector and its potential to develop in this area;
- Provide a readily applicable, accessible and adaptable model for the development of culturally informed, high-value, customised information for international visitors based on positive messages and effective intercultural communication that meets these visitors' cultural and linguistic expectations; and
- Develop guidelines for best practice in the application and use of the above model (possibly an online 'toolkit') that will significantly enhance the international visitor experience in the museum and gallery sector.

A Steering Group (comprised of the principal academic investigator and three leading London museum and gallery marketing and communications directors) will plan, organise and review the findings of three one-day workshops, and ensure communication and dissemination to both the academic and museum and gallery communities.

Project funding will provide administrative support and the infrastructure for effective planning and delivery of the project, and will allow further theoretical research and field-work by a small group of modern linguists/intercultural studies researchers whose work on a pilot project revealed the current gap in provision of information for international visitors on the part of museums and galleries, and the sector's potential for developing improved communication.

### **Summary**

#### **Describe the proposed research in simple terms in a way that could be publicised to a general audience [up to 4000 chars]**

This proposal builds on a pilot study carried out by a team of modern linguists and intercultural specialists at the University of Westminster in 2006 which showed that the current quality and availability of information for international visitors at London's museums and galleries varies enormously, revealing preconceptions concerning communication and culture, and that it is often negative in subtle ways. In addition, the expectations of those visitors often differ widely from the information currently on offer, as focus group studies in France, Spain, Germany, Russia, the Arab Gulf States, and China showed. London's world-class and internationally renowned museums and galleries are, however, also well aware of the need to provide a suitable welcome for international visitors, in an increasingly competitive global market, and of the need to plan for the 2012 London Olympics in order to make Britain what the UK Government has called "a generous host" and "a cultural inspiration".

But, while the websites and printed leaflets of several leading museums and galleries are good examples of the sector's recognition of the need for information to be available in languages other than English, the information remains variable, inconsistent and patchy. Printed and online information currently takes the form of

translations of varying quality based on written information that originates in a British cultural perspective, showing no awareness of the needs, expectations and sensitivities of visitors from other cultural areas. The results of this series of research workshops will be a better understanding of the type of information to provide for international visitors to museums and galleries, taking into account their needs and expectations from a culturally informed perspective and thereby enhancing the visitors' experience in UK museums and galleries. The funding requested will enable further research to be undertaken into the production of information by one culture for consumption in another, and for the findings to be discussed with a view to establishing the best way to communicate the results of the research to the UK museum and gallery sector, and to suggest effective methods of implementing those findings. It is envisaged that this may take the form, for example, of a readily accessible and adaptable online 'toolkit'.

### **Case for support**

This proposal aims to establish a workshop series to facilitate the further development, exchange, and eventual application of academic research into the needs and expectations of international visitors to the museum and gallery sector. The workshop series will bring together modern linguists/intercultural specialists and museum and gallery professionals (notably in the areas of marketing and communications).

The funding requested will enable a three-part workshop series to be established which will:

- work through a set of key issues and questions concerning not only the experience of the international visitor but also the needs of the sector and its potential to develop in this area;
- provide a readily applicable, accessible and adaptable model for the development of culturally-informed, high value, customised information for international visitors based on positive messages and effective intercultural communication that meets these visitors' cultural and linguistic expectations;
- develop guidelines for best practice in the application and use of the above model (possibly an on-line 'toolkit') that will significantly enhance the international visitor experience in the museum and gallery sector.

### **Rationale and research context**

A pilot study carried out by a team of modern linguists and intercultural specialists at the University of Westminster during 2006 shows that the current quality and availability of information for international visitors to London's museums and galleries varies enormously, revealing preconceptions concerning communication and culture, and that it is often negative in subtle ways. In addition, the expectations of those visitors often differ widely from the information currently on offer as focus group studies in France, Spain, Germany, Russia, the Arab Gulf States and China showed.

Research also showed however, that London's museums and galleries are well aware of the need to provide a suitable welcome for international visitors in an increasingly competitive global market. The need to plan for the 2012 London Olympics is also acknowledged, with the ambition to make Britain "a generous host" and a "cultural inspiration" (Jacqui Smith Keynote Address to Museum Association's 2005 Annual Conference). The websites of Tate, National Gallery, National Portrait Gallery, British Museum and V&A are good examples of the sector's recognition of the need for information to be available in languages other than English, but it remains variable, inconsistent and patchy. The Russian-speaking visitor, for example,

would find information on Tate, the National Gallery and the V&A, but not the British Museum or the National Portrait Gallery. The Chinese-speaking visitor would not necessarily be presented with the appropriate character system when information in Chinese is available at all. Generally, printed information at the point of contact for international visitors (and the main focus of the pilot project) is at best inadequate and at worst alienating. It is often too basic or too confusing to be of any practical or indeed intellectual use. The information takes the form of translations, varying in quality, of written information originating from a British cultural perspective showing no awareness of the needs, expectations and sensitivities of visitors from other cultural areas. In many cases, research at physical as opposed to virtual museum sites reveals a mismatch between the aims expressed in an institution's statements with regard to international visitors, and its practice.

Research for a pilot version of the current project was grounded in theories of intercultural communication and translation studies (for example Bassnett and Lefevre), and also partially based on semiotic analysis (including Lotman's notion of the 'semiosphere' in which he foregrounds the notion of translation, and builds on the ideas of Benjamin), but it extends beyond texts and translations to issues concerning social interaction and ethnographic encounters. The pilot analysis also revealed the potential for methodologies from sociolinguistics, in particular linguistic politeness and the ethnography of speaking, to inform not just the analysis of texts and their semiotic value but also their production by one culture for consumption by another.

However, a major aim of the pilot project was that the insights should convert into strategy, and then into practice, based on evidence-based research findings, and be immediately applicable (hence the use of fieldwork and focus groups in a variety of countries). It is envisaged that this approach would also inform the Research Workshop Series, building on both the practice and the spirit of the original research project that has already excited much interest amongst museum and gallery professionals.

An initial round table held at the University of Westminster in November 2006 with marketing and communications directors and other museum professionals from London's leading museums and galleries confirmed that research has not previously been carried out in this area, that it is a valuable field of exploration in the increasingly competitive global tourist market and that there is a need to re-visit attitudes to the information (and by extension, the welcome) that is provided for international visitors. Enough interest has been generated by the pilot study for both the National Museum Directors Conference (NMDC) Marketing Group and the Association of Leading Visitor Attractions (ALVA) to invite presentations on the research at their respective conferences in May and June 2007.

### **Aims and Objectives**

The central aims of the proposed workshop series are to:

- further the exchange of knowledge, experience and views on the international visitor experience between the museum and gallery sector and modern linguists/intercultural specialists;
- develop the understanding and the application of the results of these discussions within the multi-faceted ways in which a museum/gallery communicates with the visitor;
- develop and use theoretically informed research and fieldwork in intercultural communication in an effective and widely applicable way;

- develop a partnership between academics and museum and gallery professionals with a view to finding the best ways to provide information for international visitors based on testing material and gathering feedback;
- develop a model for the content of, and guidelines for the use of, high value, culturally informed and specifically targeted information for international visitors that would make the research findings available to the UK museum and gallery sector in a readily applicable, accessible and adaptable form (for example, initial discussions suggested the possibility of developing an on-line 'toolkit').

### **Timetable of Activities**

Following the presentation of the findings of the pilot project at the NMDC and ALVA conferences in May/June 2007, it is proposed to hold a three-part workshop series from June to December 2007 with meetings of the Steering Group at regular intervals:

June 2007: Meeting of Steering Group. Review of initial research findings and planning for Workshop 1

July 2007: Workshop 1. Pilot project researchers and a group of London's museum and gallery sector professionals to:

- (i) exchange further understanding, experience and questions regarding international visitor expectations and needs;
- (ii) identify effective methodologies, needs and key questions for further research in academic and museum communities;
- (iii) agree plans to test material developed from the pilot project in one or more London museum/gallery

September 2007: Meeting of Steering Group. Debrief and planning for Workshop 2

October 2007: Workshop 2. Participants as above to:

- (i) exchange experience of using the pilot project material and visitor feedback in the selected London museum/s and gallery/ies;
- (ii) exchange further feedback on the updated material from the pilot project's international focus groups;
- (iii) agree draft set of principles and best practice guidelines for the content and form of the information for international visitors that ensures maximum compatibility for a range of museums and galleries while allowing the flexibility for adaptation within a given museum or gallery's individual identity and mission (this may be the development, for example, of an on-line 'toolkit' for the museum and gallery sector)

November 2007: Meeting of Steering Group. Debrief and planning for Workshop 3

December 2007: Workshop 3. Participants as above, with a range of museum and gallery professionals from across the UK to:

- (i) bring together the research workshop participants to date with a wider group of potential users from London and the UK museum and gallery sector;
- (ii) present the draft principles/best practice guidelines for further discussion;
- (iii) present the results of the use of the project material and agree the most widely applicable form for the use of the findings of the research and its trial (for example, if it is agreed that an on-line toolkit is the most effective method of dissemination of knowledge to discuss the content, guidelines and training for the use of this)

December 2007: Meeting of Steering Group. Debrief and future planning

### **Key speakers or participants**

#### **Academic linguistic/cultural specialists from University of Westminster:**

Pilot project members: Professor Debra Kelly; Laurence Randall (French and Francophone Studies); Maria Blanco (Spanish); Heiner Schenke (German); Natalie Siu Lam Wong (Chinese); also Paul Robertson (Arabic); Dr Linda Aldwinckle (Russian); Robin Cranmer, Intercultural Communication Studies; Eilidh MacDonald, Research and Consultancy.

#### **London museum and gallery sector professionals:**

Marketing and Communications Directors and other museum professionals who participated in the round table to discuss initial findings of pilot project, or who have subsequently shown interest:

Nigel Semmens (National Gallery); Denise Ellitson (National Portrait Gallery); Piers Warner (Tate Britain); Diane Gibbs (Westminster Abbey Museum); Charlotte Kewell (British Museum); Sarah Briggs (Tate); Felicity Allen (Tate Britain); Lucie Amos (Museum of London); Ratan Vaswani (Museums Association); Jane Rosier (V&A); Darryl McIntyre (Museum of London Group); Jillian Marsh (British Museum).

#### **Regional museums and galleries:**

Representatives from the National Museums and Galleries of Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland; galleries and museums in, for example, Birmingham, Bristol, Edinburgh, and Liverpool.

#### **Professional Associations:**

Emily Candler (National Museum Directors Conference Marketing Group); Robin Broke (Association of Leading Visitor Attractions)

Additional invitations on recommendation by the Steering Group

#### **Management and co-ordination**

Steering Group will comprise:

Professor Debra Kelly, Department of Modern Languages, University of Westminster, Pilot Project Coordinator

Nigel Semmens, Head of Communications, National Gallery

Jane Rosier, Head of Marketing, Victoria and Albert Museum

Jillian Marsh, Head of Marketing, The British Museum

The principal investigator (DK) will be principally responsible for the planning and for setting the agenda for meetings of the Steering Group and for organising the Workshops, which will be one-day events held at the University of Westminster. She will be supported by research support administration already in place to ensure an effective infrastructure for the planning and implementation of such events. The Steering Group will meet before and after each one day workshop to consider planning and for debriefing. The Steering Group will also ensure that effective communication takes place with all participants in both the academic and museum and gallery sector communities.

#### **Dissemination**

The findings will be disseminated to both academic and museum and gallery sector communities.

Professor Kelly will oversee the preparation, writing-up and submission of the research project experience and its findings for publication in an appropriate refereed academic journal in the field of intercultural studies, for example, *Language and*

*Intercultural Communication* and/or in the field of applied linguistics, for example *The Journal of Sociolinguistics*.

Other members of the Steering Group will assure the dissemination in the UK museum and gallery sector, for example in publications such as *Museums Journal*, *Museums Practice*, *Arts Professional*, *The Art Newspaper*, *The Journal of Arts Marketing* and *Arts Industry*; individual museums' in-house newsletters, and through the distribution networks of its professional associations and affiliations, for example NMDC and ALVA, the Arts Marketing Association, Visit Britain, and Visit London.

Once this award period comes to an end, it is intended that further bids will be made to funding bodies in Britain to develop the model that results from the research workshop discussions for a suitable and readily applicable, accessible and adaptable method of applying this knowledge (for example, a type of on-line toolkit or other format that can be consulted by the sector in the production of foreign-language printed and website information that is culturally-informed, high value and specifically-targeted) which would allow for wide-spread dissemination and use in the UK museum and gallery sector.

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