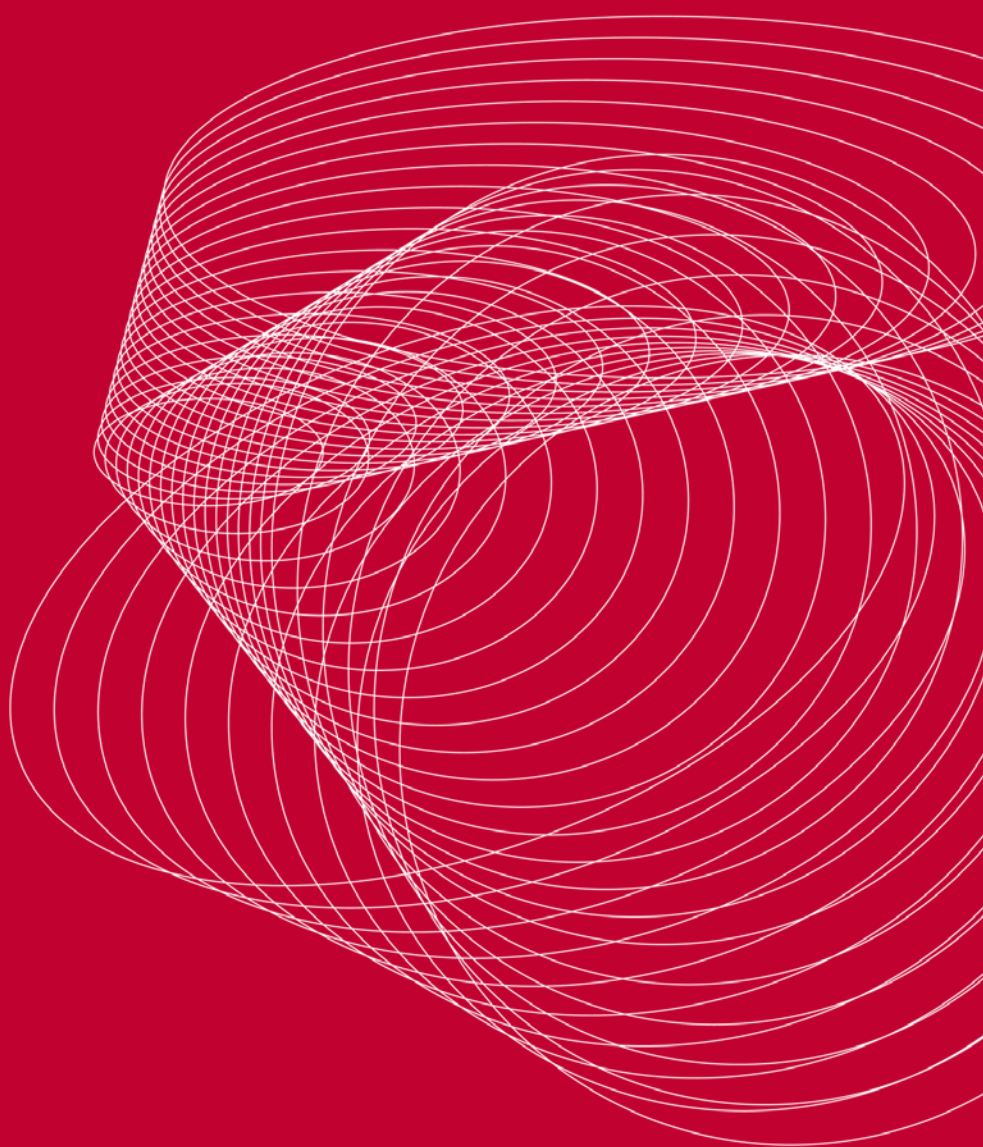


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BECOMING A CHANGE-MAKER IN MUSEUMS: EXPERIENCES, OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES

REFLECTIONS ON THE MUSEUMS ASSOCIATION'S TRANSFORMERS WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT INITIATIVE

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ISBN: 978-1-912989-03-4

DOI: 10.29311/2019.03

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Preface

When the Museums Association first discussed its Museums Change Lives campaign, one of our earliest thoughts was that if museums really are going to have a lasting positive effect on people's lives then we would need a radical workforce to deliver that ambition.

We developed *Transformers*, our mid-career professional development programme, in order to foster individual and organisational change; to support participants on their career journey but also to give them the confidence and clarity to seek organisational change.

Over the past few years I have spoken with participants on all strands of *Transformers* and I have been impressed by their personal resilience, willingness to learn, grow and share and their desire to be part of culture change. We have supported participants to overcome institutional barriers, and breakthrough organisational silos to make real change for themselves, their organisations and their communities.

I am proud that *Transformers* has unleashed a groundswell of socially-engaged work and would like to thank MA staff and the speakers and coaches have supported this journey of growth.

This evaluation demonstrates what we have achieved and what more is still to be done. Thank you to the researchers, Dr Nuala Morse and Dr Mercy McCann, and to Leicester University for supporting this valuable insight into change making in museums.

Sharon Heal

Director, Museums Association

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Introduction

The idea that museums and art galleries can have a social impact is now central to contemporary discussion about the museum sector. Many museum professionals are looking at how they might advance 'socially-engaged practice'¹ within their institutions and how they might enable more participatory approaches to address issues of diversity, access and representation.² As this area of practice grows, the key questions that animate the cultural sector are: What are the processes of organisational transformation? How does this work lead to sustained impact in museums? And who leads change?³

This last question is the starting point for this report. It considers the experience of 'change-makers' in museums and art galleries and the current barriers and challenges they face. It focuses on the mid-career museum professionals who took part in the UK Museums Association's (MA) workforce initiative, *Transformers: Radical Change in the Museum*.

The report presents an analysis of first-hand experiences from those museum professionals who are trying to activate change in museums but who are not in senior leadership roles (senior management or directors).⁴

Our analysis shows that *Transformers* is activating a groundswell of socially-engaged activity and activist practice in some parts of the sector by supporting museum professionals to reflect on and develop values-led practice. The analysis shows how this area of work is sustained through strong networks of support across the sector, and strong internal networks across museum departments.

At the same time, our report shows that participants faced a number of institutional barriers, including risk-aversion, organisational silos, and a persistent view of projects as peripheral to core organisational concerns. These two aspects of the programme meant that participants' experience of becoming a change-maker was a deeply emotional process, which often took on a personal toll. This raises important question about current conceptualisations of change in the cultural sector that emphasise the role of the individual change-maker as catalyst with the responsibility for wider organisational change.

The report summarises a number of recommendations for the Museums Association.

Much more research is needed to fully understand the dynamics of organisational and sector change in museums and art galleries. As a first study into personal experiences of change-makers, this report raises some important challenges for the UK museum sector.

¹ Richard Sandell, "Museums and the Combating of Social Inequality: Roles, Responsibilities, Resistance," in *Museums, Society, Inequality*, ed. Richard Sandell (London: Routledge, 2002), 3–24; Jocelyn Dodd, "The Socially Purposeful Museum," *Museologica Brunensia* 4, no. 2 (2016): 28–32.

² Richard Sandell and Eithne Nightingale, eds., *Museums, Equality, and Social Justice* (London: Routledge, 2012).

³ Bernadette T. Lynch, "Whose Cake Is It Anyway? A Collaborative Investigation into Engagement and Participation in 12 Museums and Galleries in the UK." (London: Paul Hamlyn Foundation, 2011); Bernadette T. Lynch, "Our Museum: A Five Year Perspective from a Critical Friend" (London: Paul Hamlyn Foundation, 2016), <http://ourmuseum.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/A-five-year-perspective-from-a-critical-friend.pdf>.

⁴ The research did not seek to evaluate the programme directly, as this was done internally and with and external consultant Atticus.

The report forms part of the research project *Change-makers in the creative economy: the role of front-line museum professionals in organisational change*, funded through an AHRC Midlands3Cities Creative Economy Engagement Fellowship (grant number AH/R013330/1), with additional funding from the University of Leicester College Research Development Fund.

The research was conducted by Dr Nuala Morse and Dr Mercy McCann, School of Museum Studies, University of Leicester

To cite this report: Morse, Nuala and McCann, Mercy (2019) *Becoming a Change-Maker in Museums: experiences, opportunities and challenges. Reflections on the Museums Association's Transformers workforce development initiative*. University of Leicester.

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Transformers: Programme description

The *Transformers* programme is a professional development and leadership programme designed for mid-career museum professionals and run by the Museums Association.⁵ The programme aims to equip participants with the tools and resources to become agents of change in their organisations.⁶ The programme focuses on developing critical self-reflection and values-led work in museums by enabling participants to identify their personal values and professional goals. It also provides training on pitching new ideas and projects, impacting others, and influencing tactics to gain buy-in within institutions. The programme uses action learning with peers, coaching, and reflective practice throughout.

The initial programme included two residential events and a final day-long 'wrap' event. During the programme, participants were expected to pitch for micro funding (between £1,000 and £2,500 depending on the programme) for further professional development and/or project funding.

The programme has run in several iterations since the initial 2014 cohort, in 2016, 2017 and 2018. In 2017, the programme was split into three strands; **Innovate**, which closely followed the initial initiative; **Diversify**, a new programme focused on embedding diversity, inclusion and equality work in museum practice⁷; and **Influence**, a shorter, 3-day programme focused on developing active partnerships with communities. Innovate and Diversify cohorts have ranged between 18 and 27 participants. The Influence group is larger, ranging between 60 and 113 participants. In 2018, **Influence** was the only programme to run due to funding and was the first iteration with a small fee for participants (£150). A total of approximately 250 museum professionals from museums across the United Kingdom have taken part in *Transformers* across these different iterations.

There are a few differences across these strands that are worth noting:

Diversify participants are able to apply for micro-funding to run a project, but it is not required as part of the programme. The **Innovate** programme asks participants to have a 'project champion', someone within their organisation who can support and advise them on their projects. Often these champions are managers, but they do not need to be. **Diversify** and **Influence** do not require project champions. The rationale for this varies depending on the programme. Influence participants are not expected to deliver a project so there is less practical need for a champion. When designing the Diversify programme, the MA was keen for participants have autonomy to apply without needing to seek organisational permissions.

To take part in the programme, participants must apply through the MA. They submit film pitches of their ideas for change. The MA looks for participants who demonstrate a desire to make change in their organisations from a variety of backgrounds, disciplines and seniority levels. The MA also welcomes applicants from across different museum structures,

⁵ Participant places were partially or fully-funded through Arts Council England, Museums Galleries Scotland, MALD Welsh Government, Federation of Museums and Galleries Wales and National Museums Northern Ireland and Paul Hamlyn Foundation, depending on the strand.

⁶ This builds on 'The Transformers Toolkit for Leading Self and Impacting Others', which is a compilation of resources aimed at guiding participants in personal and professional development. It includes information on pitching, influencing tactics, and identifying their strengths and their working styles, through assessments like Myers-Briggs Type Indicator. *Transformers* also uses MA publications such as 'Power to the People: A self-assessment framework for participatory practice' and 'Museums Change Lives' to lead the programme learning.

⁷ The scheme was created in response to the MA's 2016 report, [Valuing Diversity: The Case For Inclusive Museums](#), and reflecting longer term work of the MA focused on workforce diversity.

whether local authority, national, or independent, so long as the museum is accredited or working towards accreditation.

Initially, mid-career was defined as 'three years or more' working in the sector. Freelancers were able to apply to all three strands. There were no criteria in terms of job role, and cohorts have included staff from directors and curators, to marketing officers, volunteer co-ordinators and front-of-house managers.

Diversify focuses on issues of diversity and equality, but selection to this programme was not restricted to participants from under-represented groups or any single protected characteristic as intersectionality was encouraged.

Data and Methods

The methodology used for this project included interviews between April and August 2018 and a focus group in September 2018. We interviewed **thirty** *Transformers* from the 2016 and 2017 cohorts and a focus group with **five** *Transformers* from the inaugural 2014 cohort. Participants self-selected and were broadly representative across museum size and UK regions.

The main focus of this research was on **Innovate** (including the 2016 and 2017 cohorts – 19 interviews) and **Diversify** (2017 cohort only – 11 interviews).

Interviews aimed to explore participants' experiences of being change-makers in their organisations and the barriers they faced; the focus group aimed to consider the longer-term impact of the programme.

The research was conducted with University of Leicester Research Ethics Committee Approval (number 14714). All participant data was anonymised.

Findings

I. Transformers: Stories of success

There were a number of noteworthy successes that emerged throughout our study. These included positive experiences of personal and professional growth for participants; the activation of new forms of socially-engaged practice across the sector; and the emergence of strong networks of museum professionals committed to this work, both within *Transformer* cohorts and within organisations where a *Transformer* was located.

1. *Positive experiences of personal and professional growth*

Overall, *Transformers* participants shared overwhelmingly positive stories from taking part in the programme. The programme provided an opportunity for museum professionals to reflect on and articulate their professional values through the workshops and mentoring networks, and to then activate values-led practice through their individual projects.

There was a sense that the programme addressed a very significant gap in terms of professional training and support for mid-career museum professionals, which was highly valued by all respondents.

This emphasis on developing values-led practice was highlighted as the most impactful aspect of the programme for participants. Participants felt the programme gave them the tools to identify their personal values as well as their institution's values, and many then went back to their institutions with a greater awareness of the importance of finding connections between the two in order to effect change within museums. This was not always easy or straightforward, and we will discuss this further in the section describing the intense emotional journeys that characterised the *Transformers* experience.

The content was seen as highly appropriate. One of the characteristics of the programme that was frequently referenced as the most valuable was the structure, particularly the residencies, and the length of the programme which gave participants the time required to reflect deeply and develop projects (12 months for Diversify and Innovate, although this also presented challenges, described below).

For many professionals, the experience of *Transformers* was profound, in terms of reflecting on their sense of professional self, their role within their institution and within the sector more widely, and recognising their capacity to enable small-scale change. Indeed, this notion of 'small-scale change' was central to the workforce development initiative as a something to be celebrated, and as a place to start (some of these small-scale changes are described later in this report). Many participants referenced a growth in their confidence and courage as a result of *Transformers*, particularly with regards to initiating projects and being able to convince others in their organisation of the worth of those projects. Participants also referenced feeling they had agency within their organisations to make change with the backing of *Transformers* and the status conferred by a Museums Association programme. As one participant said, 'it gave me a lot more drive about what I could change'.

Expectations of the programme changed over time. Initially, participants said they wanted to join the programme to progress their careers, whether in terms of promotion or greater responsibility within their organisation. However, the most valuable aspects of the programme, as reported by those same participants, were often personal. Participants spoke about fulfilling their passions, recognising the skills gained, and gaining affirmation in what they do and why they do it. They described being more in touch with their personal values and having those values play a stronger role in their professional decisions.

'I think it was a lot more personal and self-reflective than I was expecting... But yeah, I think the hardest bits but most important were reflecting on me and myself and my value set. I wasn't really expecting that. I was expecting more tools and skills and management and self-development, but actually that looking at myself and setting my own values, working out what my values are and having a value-driven life – it's something that I've looked at previously in my personal life but never really thought of in my career. For me that was incredibly valuable. That sense of purpose, why am I doing this, what am I about, and realising what gets me up in the morning and how can I then reflect that in my own personal practice'

2. Supporting socially-engaged practice

One of the significant outcomes of the programme was the further activation of socially-engaged practice across the sector. The micro-funding made available through *Transformers* helped participants to conceptualise and carry out small projects over a 12-month period. The common thread through these projects was the innovation in contemporary socially-engaged practice. Broadly defined, socially-engaged practice refers to museum practice that addresses contemporary social issues (Sandell and Dodd, 2010). *Transformers* is described as being about 'radical change'. In this report, and as an outcome of the work surveyed during the research, the 'radical change' initiated by *Transformers* is best understood as innovative work with a social purpose that fundamentally challenges how the museum works, whether in terms of resources or which museum departments are involved in leading change (i.e. not just outreach workers or directors), or work that challenges how the museum situates itself in relation to local audiences, communities, and local partners.

This report distinguishes three types of socially-engaged projects that emerged, capturing the development of this practice in the UK at this time activated by the *Transformers* programme. This includes a focus on the local context of the museum, actively repositioning the museum as a civic space; a renewal of work with under-represented groups; and the emergence of explicitly activist practice. This socially-engaged practice is supported through the development of new networks of practice.

Despite the short-term nature of *Transformers*, these projects were developed with an eye to sustainability and long-term impact on the organisation as a whole. This returns to the aim of the programme in sustaining change as opposed to creating 'tick box' exercises or one-off engagements with different groups.

A focus on the local:

A number of *Transformers* projects sought to engage with local audiences and residents around contemporary issues, educational opportunities for local young people, and opportunities for people with learning disabilities to get involved in museum work. As one Transformer said, 'we recognised the fact that this building is part of our community here. So, you know, that community should be in the museum!' Another Transformer interviewed expressed this as a move away from what she saw as 'nostalgia' on the part of the museum and an effort to use the collections and history housed in the museum to address local issues.

'Looking at historical images of poverty together with contemporary images of poverty and that kind of stuff have been fantastic for us to do within that local authority setting because it's not only sort of opened our visitors' eyes to some of those issues but it's opened our governing bodies' eyes to some of those issues. And you'd like to think that they would know about them already, but they obviously don't'

This first type of socially-engaged work emphasises how the museum sits within a community. This expands the mission and values of museums beyond collections and traditional audiences to how those collections can be put to work for the benefit of communities and to broaden the reach and relevance of institutions. In this way, we suggest *Transformers* is enabling museum professional to reposition the museum as an active civic space.

Throughout the interviews, there were comments on the museum needing to take up the spaces left empty by the shrinking or removal of social services and resources in the communities around them, as a result of on-going austerity and funding cuts. Additionally, participants often spoke of doing more with less, and in this context, looking to think creatively about how the resources and collections in museums can be put to use for the public good at a very local level. While this study did not focus on the impact of austerity, the emphasis on the 'civic museum' may be seen as a response to the effect of austerity as museums move to support their communities.⁸

Working with under-represented groups

Another trend that emerged through *Transformers* were efforts to engage with minority or under-represented groups, drawing on a long tradition of this work in the UK.⁹ Sometimes these groups were members of the local community who had not previously been represented in the museum exhibitions or programmes. An example of this was a co-curated exhibition around LGBTQ experiences in an area with a large LGBTQ population. Other times, these were broader social groups whose stories were present in collections, but whose voices had not been a part of how those stories were told, such as BAME artists. These projects took the form of new partnerships, inviting groups in to collaborate on

⁸ Nuala Morse and Ealasaid Munro, "Museums' Community Engagement Schemes, Austerity and Practices of Care in Two Local Museum Services," *Social & Cultural Geography* Online First (2015): 357–78; Nuala Morse, "The Social Role of the Museum: From Social Inclusion to Health and Wellbeing," in *Connecting Museums*, ed. Hooper Glenn and Mark O'Neill (London: Routledge, 2019).

⁹ Jocelyn Dodd and Richard Sandell, *Including Museums: Perspectives on Museums, Galleries and Social Inclusion* (Leicester: Research Centre for Museums and Galleries, University of Leicester, 2001).

projects, or developing programmes that were more in line with the demands of these groups. These projects were not restricted to the **Diversify** strands, since the programmes were not set out in that way.

The emergence of activist museum practice

The third major trend in the type of socially-engaged practice seen developing in *Transformers* is the emergence of activist projects. These are projects defined by participants as not only addressing contentious or pressing contemporary issues, but providing a clear moral or ethical standpoint on the part of the museum. An example of such a project was an exhibition about global warming that both described the effects of global warming and encouraged visitors to change behaviours and advocate on behalf of environmental initiatives. Another example was a project advocating to further open museums to individuals with autism. Specifically, the project provided museums with the tools with which to support and encourage people with autism to visit and also to work in museums, making their experiences and perspectives more visible in the galleries and in the operations of the organisation. In the views of participants, these projects went beyond access and were framed more explicitly as activist practice.

Many *Transformers* participants felt that their organisations maintained strong values but were not always putting those values to work. As one Transformer said,

'It was a real challenge from my organisation's point of view because basically we were starting out, we've always been, presented ourselves as a campaign museum but basically, we haven't been brave enough to do anything. So at the time I was starting my Transformers project we were starting to really kind of walk the walk... Acknowledging the whole thing, we're not a neutral space and trying to give ownership to the other visitors and the wider context'

This type of practice was challenging for many Transformers to institute in their organisations, but those who were successful used the approach of tying projects closely to organisational values.

This type of practice was challenging for participants and organisations alike. Some organisations were primed and open to this type of work. In general, participants in these organisations expressed feeling supported and valued by peers and managers. This work was not limited, however, to organisations that were already open to activist practice and there were several participants who worked to institute this type of work in organisations that were less receptive. In general, the findings showed that projects in these less receptive organisations were smaller in scale or more isolated from the rest of the institution.

3. Different professionals leading change

Transformers emphasised the involvement of museum professionals from across the spectrum of museum work. While many of the participants came from public programming or educational backgrounds, and some participants expressed in interviews that these areas were often where 'change' or 'radical practice' was expected to sit, *Transformers* challenged this assumption. Participants also came from front of house, security, curatorial, collections management, public relations, and communications departments. There were also freelancers, volunteers and interns in the three strands of the programme. These

individuals, who might not have come from the 'expected' areas of museum work, were provided with the same tools to initiate change within their organisations within the programme. This was a further effort on the part of the programme to show that this type of change-making work can take place across the museum and is not restricted to specific departments or activities.

4. Networks of professional support

The major outcome of *Transformers* was the developments of networks of support for mid-career museum professionals. There were three types of networks identified through the research: the *Transformers* networks, internal organisational networks and external networks. In all three cases, these networks were organic in nature, not formally organised by the MA or the *Transformers* programme, but initiated and sustained by the participants themselves.

The network created by the distinct cohorts as well as the network created by *Transformers* alumni formed a groundswell of like-minded and socially-engaged museum professionals. *Transformer* participants felt this network enabled them to have an impact larger than their individual projects. Participants described how the networks provided ways to find support and solutions for some of the issues they encountered in their work by being able to exchange experiences and ideas with other professionals who were working in similar ways or dealing with similar issues, including organisational barriers.

'I think universally, in our year certainly, the biggest thing that everyone got out of it was the other people doing the development, and the kind of camaraderie and support and inspiration of that, which I hadn't quite anticipated how important that would be, but it was incredible'

The *Transformers* network was not limited to cohorts, connecting individuals across programmes, organisations, levels of seniority, and departments. The *Transformers* network also seemed to persist well beyond the duration of the programme. The focus group ran with the 2014 cohort demonstrated that many of the participants from that cohort were still in touch and connected around questions, challenges and ideas. Participants from more recent years also mentioned they had maintained connections with many of their fellow cohort participants.

Internal organisational networks often incorporated other museum professionals in the participants' organisations in efforts at organisational change. One of the programme's workshops that was identified as particularly meaningful was learning to identify allies in an organisation. This also involved identifying those who might not be on board and learning influencing strategies to try to get those individuals 'on-side'. Identifying allies helped many *Transformers* create networks across departments and across hierarchies in their organisations. For example, some spoke of HR and Public Programming working closely together, or Public Relations and Education. On a broader scale, these organisational networks began to break down silos in some organisations and flatten structures that in many cases were described as hierarchical or vertical. These networks, therefore, worked alongside the projects that came out of *Transformers* to influence the way organisations work, and are a significant element through which wider sector change may be activated.

The third network observed was **external and extended beyond individual organisations**. There were several projects that were not based within a single institution but worked

across several. In these cases, participants described situations where they discovered allies and mentors across the sector and were able to build broader networks in that way. These external networks also involved creating connections with partners and collaborators outside the sector who brought additional knowledge or skills to the museum.

5. Small-scale organisational change

There is evidence of small-scale organisational change as a result of *Transformers*. Notably, while individuals serve as the starting point for change through *Transformers*, networks were the most significant factor as a route to change within institutions. In several cases where a *Transformer* project was only created for a finite time and ended, participants reported that they would or have continued to work with allies in their institutions to develop new practice and projects. These allies were direct results of the *Transformers* experience. It seems that momentum for change is created through networks.

There have also been a small number of examples of museums that have made significant changes to their operations as a result of *Transformers*. One museum has made their *Transformers* participant's project permanent and created an ongoing programme that allows staff from any department, including volunteers, to propose short term programmes and exhibits that the museum will sponsor. Another has not only embraced the new use of a space dedicated for use by minority youth, but is looking to expand that idea and create additional spaces. Another has incorporated mindfulness, a concept that was previously held solely by the public programming team, into the exhibitions team as well.

Given the scope of research at this point, we are not able to draw conclusions about which museum types or job roles are most effective in creating change. The current study also is limited in terms of the longitudinal view needed to be able to see the lasting impacts.

II. Challenges and barriers faced by change-makers

Alongside the successes described above, there were a number of common challenges and barriers to change that were described by interviewees and in the focus group. Institutional barriers included operational barriers that participants came up against within their organisations or in the sector. There were also barriers linked to institutional cultures, referring to the ways in which cultures of organisations regulate expected ways of working and habits of mind, and the tensions that appear around value clashes within organisations. There were also challenges associated with the nature of the *Transformers* programme itself and the way in which it imagined 'organisational change' in museums.

Overall, from this research, it is not clear how far the programme has contributed to organisational change, or whether projects initiated by *Transformers* are sustainable. While there have been some success stories of programmes and projects that have been adopted by organisations and run beyond the initial funding provided by *Transformers*, it is still too early to tell whether the projects and individuals have been able to fundamentally shift the way the organisations operate or the influence change in the sector more widely.

1. *Silos*

One of the main operational barriers referenced by participants were 'silos' in institutions. These silos were manifest as staff being unable to work together because of departmental divisions. Organisational protocols, departmental reporting structures and departmental benchmarks were cited as difficulties in overcoming these silos. Often interviewees expressed frustration that despite common goals or values, departments were kept apart by targets or bureaucratic structures. This barrier was not only operational but also reproduced a 'silo mentality' that created an additional barrier, as staff may have not been willing or may have been uncomfortable working across boundaries. Often this meant that *Transformers* participants were not able to access the knowledge or resources they needed to make their projects succeed. There was also a feeling that was expressed from time to time that management did not see this type of collaborative work as valuable or that it was too time consuming and inefficient. While some overcame these silos through developing networks of allies, this remained an overwhelming challenge for most participants seeking to affect change in their organisations.

2. *'Vanity projects'*

A challenge many participants discussed was the difficulty of integrating their projects into their organisation more broadly. As one participant said, 'When you're an individual with a project, people do see it as a vanity project. That's quite a barrier to having an impact'. This 'vanity project' mentality meant that many projects were not able to generate the impact participants would have liked as their projects were considered as something apart from mainstream museum concerns. They were seen instead as an individual's own professional development project. It also meant it was more difficult to get other staff on board to support the initiative.

Participants who had the strongest support of management or their project champions were able to avoid this response and better integrate their projects within their organisations. However, the presence of a champion, which was required on the *Innovate* strand, did not necessarily mean that the project would receive institutional support. Even with champions, many projects were seen as separate from the larger organisational strategy.

3. *Managing Risk*

In many cases, barriers were subtle, part of the 'invisible power' in institutions.¹⁰ They were not as straightforward as a clear 'no', but were often manifest in redirection or a push towards a more 'acceptable' or 'safe' option for a project idea. This was particularly the case in situations where the project involved more risk or new practice for an organisation. While the *Transformer* programme and participants embraced risk and acknowledged the need to fail on the way to success, this seems to be a problematic idea for the museum sector more broadly. As one participant described:

¹⁰ Steven Lukes, *Power: A Radical View* (London: Macmillan, 1974); Bernadette T. Lynch, "'Whose Cake Is It Anyway? A Collaborative Investigation into Engagement and Participation in 12 Museums and Galleries in the UK.'" (London: Paul Hamlyn Foundation, 2011).

'It's kind of a reach-around thing of... I'm not being told 'no' but [I am being told], 'this is safer, so maybe go with the safer option. That [safer option] looks great, that will make the institution look fab.'

There seemed to be a low appetite for risk in many museums. There was fear of public scrutiny or pushback. There was also fear of unknown audiences and populations. An example of this was a project meant to be a collaboration with a museum's local community who were largely minority and largely lower-income. Some museum staff members expressed concern that this group wouldn't appreciate or respect the story told in the museum. There was concern that the new audience might have expectations of the museum that did not align with the museum's mission, or would make demands that it was not prepared to fulfil.

Finally, there was a fear of using resources or dedicating staff to something that wasn't proven to work, such as attracting new audiences or establishing new partnerships. Participants expressed a 'Catch 22' where the museum management wanted innovative projects for which the participant needed resources, but without proof that the programme would work, resources were not allocated. In the words of one participant:

'I think there needs to be a structured approach to risk taking in the sector'

There were no instances that we found in this research of projects that were detrimental to organisations' reputations or caused conflict in the wider community, but there were many challenging projects that required organisations to re-examine their goals and values.

4. Middle management as resistant

Middle management, often referred to as 'the sticky middle', was where many participants referenced finding the most resistance to their work and change. The general consensus seemed to be that junior staff and upper management were often on board with more radical or innovative ideas. The middle was where people seemed to be bogged down by with bureaucratic work:

'It's that kind of middle management level where people feel under pressure to deliver and reach the set goals. So for them it's not a priority, they don't have the time, they don't see that your own priority. And for them it's not part of what makes the organisation go forward. So it was really trying to link the two [upper management and junior level] or try to carve time out for yourself'

While there were several stories of supportive middle management, this was a clear trend in the discussions around barriers as many mid-career levels staff report directly into this middle management.

III. Challenges within the Transformers programme

There were some barriers that were inherent given the structure and timeframe of the *Transformers* programme. The project-based model reflects a long-standing issue in cultural funding that works against embedding change. The timeframe of the project also meant that many projects were rapid-fire, which participants felt meant that it was easier for

organisations to keep the projects separate from other museum or gallery initiatives. In some cases, it also meant that it was too short for participants to really feel able to integrate the projects into their organisations, or bring people on board and rally further support for their initiatives.

As a workforce development programme, *Transformers* places emphasis on the efforts and the responsibility of the **individual**, something participants often found difficult.

'Being one person and coming up with an idea and the transition of growing a project and trying to integrate it within institutional practice – that in itself has been such a huge sticky, mammoth job with something like this'

While participants did feel there was support in the programme and through the networks they created, they all described moments of feeling overwhelmed or discouraged by the task. This was not always long-lasting, but it is important to recognise the emotional burden placed on an individual in this kind of work. The structure and support of *Transformers* was important in mitigating this burden, as much as possible. This included the working groups, training sessions, and opportunities to debrief and exchange findings at the end of the programme.

The ways in which many participants described overcoming barriers identified in the research amounted to 'asking forgiveness instead of permission' – that is, working outside of, or at the limits of, organisational approval. The *Transformers* programme does not directly encourage participants to break organisational rules; rather, it aims to support participants to affect 'radical change' through influence and through values-led practice. However, in our research, we found that staff often had to put themselves at risk, asking for 'forgiveness' afterwards, in order to create the sort of change expected of *Transformers*.

By imagining change as occurring from the middle, through risk-taking and resilient individuals, *Transformers* placed the share of responsibility for change on individuals rather than institutions. This responsibility was experienced as both a positive opportunity *and* an emotional burden for participants.

IV. The emotional journey of a change-maker

Throughout this report, we have described the challenges and opportunities for individuals in *Transformers*. While the programme sought to develop professional values-led practice, by focusing on the individual as change-maker, it tends to blur the line between personal and professional within the programme. The process of at the heart of *Transformers* – defining values, examining how those values align with an institution, finding allies, and connecting over shared goals and ideals – is a personal and emotionally demanding journey. Many of the projects developed during the programme were driven by personal values and goals of the participants. It would be remiss to look at *Transformers* without addressing the emotional journey that many of these participants went through, and the emotional toll of becoming a 'change-maker'.

As the first part of the report makes clear, there were many positive stories of personal growth as participants gained greater confidence, courage and self-awareness in terms of their core values. This was often at a personal level, rather than a strictly professional one:

'I think the key thing out of Transformers for me was identifying my core values. And that's not something you're taught at school, it's not something you learn through doing a PhD, it's not something you learn through sitting at a desk and designing a temporary exhibition, it's something you learn by taking that time out to think about yourself. Which feels really self-indulgent but, actually, has completely transformed the way I work and completely transformed the way I think about my work and transformed the way... Or has the power to transform the way the sector works.'

There were also difficult emotions expressed through the course of interviews as participants reflect on their current work situations. Some spoke of being discouraged, frustrated, overworked, stressed, or dejected at various points in their professional life. Many participants expressed feeling stuck in their careers and they were looking to the programme to provide support, validation, or an opportunity that would allow them to free themselves from whatever was holding them back.

'I was looking for different opportunities. I'd been pretty demoralized and limited in my job, so I wanted to do other things so I could look up and out. And I'm also really passionate about the potential for museums to contribute to social justice, and Transformers just seemed to be a really good fit to that. I felt like, I didn't know what my organisation's values were, but they clearly weren't mine, so I was looking for somewhere where I could feel a bit more at home I guess, a bit more validated, like I wasn't alone. I think it did that really well.'

There were several points throughout the programme at which participants discussed the difficulties of trying to understand their core values and how they matched with the values of the organisation. Based on the research, there seems to be a direct link between finding a synergy (or lack thereof) between personal, professional and organisational values, and maintaining a positive and constant sense of worth as a museum professional. It was when these values were misaligned or incompatible that the most negative emotions seemed to surface. For some participants (notably in the **Diversify** strand) there was an added emotional strain of having to 'embody diversity' and lead this work on behalf of the organisation.¹¹ Others noted that they were sometimes tasked with levels of responsibility for large-scale organisational change over and beyond their professional remit, which they felt were inappropriate and they felt unable to deal with. For many participants, the journey of self-reflection through the programme was personally demanding, surfacing many other issues, and at times this had adverse effects on their mental well-being:

'I mean, it was interesting because it definitely has been emotional for me... They had some kind of coach catch-up, with all the different coaches in the programme, and apparently they all said that the people they were looking after were dealing with a huge amount of stress and things like bullying and emotional issues... So it seems to have been a theme.... But it was really hard work, and it was exhausting'

The programme has many support mechanisms in place for participants who experienced these difficult moments. What the research reveals in this relatively small

¹¹ On this topic, see Sara Ahmed, *On Being Included: Racism and Diversity in Institutional Life* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012); Nirmal Puwar, *Space Invaders: Race, Gender and Bodies out of Place* (Berg, 2004).

group, is a mid-career workforce that is feeling strained due to a lack of agency or meaningful purpose at work, with adverse effects on staff morale and well-being.

V. Leaving organisations and changing jobs

There were a small number of cases (4) where the individuals who initiated *Transformer* projects then moved to new organisations that were more closely aligned to the participant's values and their vision of museum work. Within the focus group from the 2014 cohort, three had changed organisations and two were actively looking to. This mobility of professionals towards organisations that value risk taking, socially-engaged practice and innovation is a significant area for further research which may point to other ways in which change might be occurring across the museum sector: not through change that is embedded or mainstreamed in institutions, but rather, through individuals and individual practice that are moving across organisations. The consequences of such moves cannot be determined from this one study, but it would be interesting to follow whether this mobility could split the sector into innovation hubs and more traditional organisations, or whether such movement will force organisations that are unwilling or unprepared for new ways of working to re-examine their values if they are to stay relevant in a changing professional workforce.

Recommendations:

Based on this research, we would like to make a series of recommendations the Museums Association:

- *Transformers* meets a clear demand for mid-career professional development. This is particularly needed at this time, in a sector where the workforce at this career level feels 'stuck' in terms of career progression, and is feeling unable to make a meaningful or creative contribution to the sector. The MA can have a clear impact here in fulfilling this demand for workforce development through *Transformers* and other initiatives.
- There is a significant untapped potential within the mid-career workforce that is dedicated to socially-engaged museum practice but is currently unable to develop this work because of resources and/or because of their role and limited responsibilities within their institution. *Transformers* provided opportunities for those professionals who took part to develop a range of skills to activate socially-engaged museum practice. The MA should continue to play an important role in supporting individuals to develop values-led and socially-engaged practice, linking to the MA Manifesto for the sector 'Museums Changes Lives'
- The experience of participants was described as an emotional journey, with positive stories of personal growth *and* a significant emotional toll. *Transformers* was set up in a way to support individuals through that journey, but it also places the responsibility for change on the individual, which was often experienced as an emotional burden. The MA could consider longer-term support for individuals who took part in the programmes. The MA can also play a wider role in advocating for and supporting individuals' well-being in the workplace.
- Change in the organisation and across the sector appears to be happening at a small-scale through the networks that have emerged through *Transformers*, by connecting like-minded and committed professionals at different levels of seniority. Investing in networks, whether the *Transformers* network or networks within and between organisations seems to be the way to move the sector forward. There is a role for individuals in activating change, but the lone change-maker seems to be a difficult role to fill. Change in museums appears more likely to happen when it is supported through investing in collectives, not just individuals. The MA should consider longer-term support where it is required (financial or otherwise) for the networks that have developed organically out of the programme. The MA should also encourage future networks by offering micro funding for cross-organisational group projects.
- The report notes that some of the barriers to change came from middle management. The MA may consider investing further in 'champions' within this management level through future *Transformer* programme, or consider an additional workforce development programme for middle managers to support mid-career individuals. This goes to the heart of how the MA imagines sectoral change. This research suggests that it may not be possible to change institutions only through investing in mid-career professionals, and that a programme of

workforce development may need to address multiple levels of the workforce to be successful in activating the radical change advocated by the programme.

- Another barrier identified in the research was around risk-aversion in the museum sector in relation to innovation. The MA can play a role here in leading a sector wide conversation about perceptions of risk and risk-taking as part of changing the sector.
- Silos were identified as another barrier, and projects were more successful where they managed to overcome these and work across museum departments. The MA may be able to play a role in supporting cross-departmental working through initiatives in that area, for example, through team approach to *Transformers*.
- A final barrier identified was connected to project-funding. While this is a difficulty that is faced across the sector, the MA may consider how it can support *Transformers* projects and initiatives on a longer basis to ensure they are embedded in organisations or otherwise sustained.
- There is a need for further longitudinal research to track participants where they are changing organisations, gaining more senior positions in museums, or potentially leaving the sector. This will enable the MA to assess the wider impact of the programme in terms of sectoral change and the development of socially-engaged practice in the UK museum sector.
- In terms of the structure of *Transformers*, the interviews illuminated the value of providing space for self-reflection. Staff members who were given the opportunity to take time (over 12 months) to examine their values, to take risks in developing their projects, and to explore how they might contribute to the organisation and the sector in innovative ways seemed to have greater positive impact on their organisations. They also expressed more sense of positivity and fulfilment. We recommend to keep the time for long-term reflections within future iterations of workforce development programmes such as *Transformers*, as this experience cannot be gained through practical skills training only.

Final reflections

Ultimately, the story that emerged from examining *Transformers* seems to be a tale of two halves. The programme was successful for individuals, pushing them to examine their values, build their confidence, identify allies and build strong connections within their organisations and across the sector. The lasting impact on museums is less apparent as barriers often kept projects separate, labelled as 'vanity projects' or less crucial to the success of the organisation.

However, there are indications that the programme is activating the development of socially-engaged practice and enabling small scale change through the networks of professional support that were formed as a result of the programme, both internally within organisations and externally across the sector.

Becoming a change-maker in museums is a deeply emotional process: connecting personal values into professional practice is leading to new socially-engaged practice across the sector, but this work can take an emotional toll as museum workers are faced with a number of barriers to developing and sustaining this work.

Much more research is needed on to examine the longer-term impact of programme such as *Transformers*. We conclude this initial report with some important questions for the UK museum sector:

- What is the wider impact of new types of practice that are being activated in the sector, in particular values-led and activist practice?
- What is the long-term impact of the programme on participants' career progression, either inside or outside of the museum, if they are leaving the sector?
- In terms of the participants in the **Diversify** strand, what are the experiences of being a change maker and the obstacles they face?
- And finally, how can professional networks of support enable wider change at an institutional level, and at a sector-wide level?

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