Section 1

‘A would-be civilised democracy will not abuse culture for immediate political ends, nor impose its own pre-determined definition of culture on its people. It will be open, democratic, not bullying nor endlessly all-things-to-all-men-or-women. It will offer perspectives on the better and the best; its citizens will be free to be both inside and outside their own cultural overcoats.’

Richard Hoggart

1.1 Lifelong learning

Lifelong Learning is a familiar term throughout Europe but, as with other concepts that exist in a range of cultural traditions and contexts, it can mean different things to different people. This handbook defines lifelong learning in two ways.

The first is to highlight the importance and significance of learning throughout life, as distinct from the kind of education directed at school-age and college students. In this handbook we are focusing on the learning that adult visitors (i.e. those over 16 years of age) can experience in museums.

The second usage has to do with what is meant by learning. Formal implies an exchange between teachers and students, in which the students are instructed by the teachers. Lifelong learning puts the emphasis on the activity of the recipients. It may occur in response to formal instruction but it also takes place in a variety of other ways and settings, including everyday lives, interactions with other people and cultural opportunities.

What characterises lifelong learning is that it happens everywhere, not simply in schools, colleges, or universities. When it happens in public and cultural spaces like museums or art galleries – it happens through choice rather than compulsion. It often happens informally, without the need for accreditation, qualification, or measurement. Museums can be ideal places for promoting informal learning. Visitors may leave a museum knowing more than when they arrived; knowledge, understanding, insight or inspiration that helps to make a positive difference to their lives.

1.2 Adult learners

Lifelong learning within a museum can be informal, casual, or even accidental as far as the learner is concerned, however educators and other museum staff must still adopt a formal and rigorous approach to devising learning opportunities, taking into consideration some of the characteristics of adult learners.

Methodologies working with school groups are well-established and museums have a wealth of experience
in this area – from making contact with teachers, devising programmes to support and enhance the formal curriculum, and employing a variety of learning styles. Much of this good practice translates to adult learners in the museum. For example, both adults and children:

- Would like to be treated with courtesy and respect

- Enjoy contributing their own knowledge, experience and opinions to the learning process

- Appreciate having an element of choice in the learning process

- Do not want to be talked down to or patronised

There is one great difference between children and adult learners: children and young people go to school and college because they have to. Adults are more likely to get involved in learning because they want to know about something that interests them, or because they need to learn about something for their jobs or in relation to their families and communities. Learning is for a purpose. It is less about memorising facts and pre-digested information and more about exploring new ideas and experiences, weighing up the evidence and coming to some tentative conclusions. It involves developing practical skills and discovering hidden talents. Some of the main characteristics that make adults different from children when it comes to learning are as follows. All of these are relevant to learning in museums.

- Adult learners are autonomous and self-directed. They need to be able to direct themselves and be actively involved in the learning process. They have to choose what they want to learn and to work on projects and subject matter that reflect their interests.

- Adults have accumulated life experiences and knowledge including work-related activities, family responsibilities, life-changing challenges, personal passions and previous education. New learning is most effective and successful when it starts from, and is connected to, adults’ existing knowledge and experience. The starting place for new learning should build upon existing strengths and experience but not, of course, be restricted to what they already know.

- Adults are goal-oriented. When they start a formal learning activity, they usually know what they want to achieve and where they want to get to. In informal learning situations adults generally appreciate an education programme that is well organised and has clearly defined elements. In informal learning situations, adults learn best when the signposts are clear; the purpose is relevant and interesting and when their emotions (such as curiosity, anger, wonder, pleasure) are engaged.

- Adults are relevancy-oriented. For most adults, learning has to be relevant to their interests, their lives, their work or other responsibilities. Again, learning should start where people are. Once they are stimulated and eager to learn more, then there is every chance that what they regard as interesting and relevant will be greatly expanded.

- Adult learners often start out by being practical, and want to focus on those things that are most useful to them in their work or lives. At first they may not be interested in knowledge for its own sake but once they get the learning bug they often want to learn about all kinds of things that were previously outside their experience.
1.4 Attitudes and motivations that lead to learning

What makes the difference? Why do some adults decide to get involved in learning? Knowing the answer to this question can help museum educators think about how they approach adult visitors. Research into adult learning generally agrees about what motivates adults to be interested in learning. Attitudes are strongly influenced by family and cultural background, social class, gender, school experiences and social networks. Though not all of the reasons apply strictly to learning in museums, they are useful to keep in mind when designing learning programmes and situations for adults in museums and galleries.

- Family: to help children and to understand better what their children are learning at school. Joining family learning programmes often motivates parents to learn for their own benefit.
- Social: to make new friends, to meet the need for social association and friendship.
- Educational progression: to get a qualification or to move on to a more demanding course.
- To settle and contribute to communities – to take a more active role in their communities. This is especially true for newly arrived immigrants, refugees, asylum seekers, and migrant workers.
- The example and encouragement of other people: family, friends, workmates or education professionals, community or guidance workers, and employers.
- Involvement in community action or in voluntary and community groups and organizations: involving the development and practice of skills and the celebration of identity and culture.
- Work: to get a better job and to improve performance at work.
- Personal development reasons – to improve their knowledge and skills, to pursue an interest or hobby.
- A life change or crisis: migration, bereavement, illness, redundancy, house move, divorce, retirement.
- Compulsion or requirement: by an employer or the state, such as changes in work, pension, welfare benefit regulations and naturalisation requirements.

1.5 Equality and access

Museums in Europe are popular places, visited each year by millions of people. Visitors come because they are interested in history, art or culture, searching for significance and identity, looking for inspiration, or to learn something about the objects on display. Some come because museums are the places to visit when you are exploring a new city or have some free time. They are places of pleasure, leisure, entertainment and learning.

But for the many people who visit museums, there are others – a majority of the population – who rarely or never do so. In general, museum visitors are likely to have higher social, economic and educational status than non-visitors. Those who are poor, those who have been less well served by formal education, those who are members of minority groups that are already disadvantaged or discriminated against in society do not easily recognize museums as public places which they are entitled to visit. They may believe that museums are for other people and not for them. Too often museums are not as welcoming and accessible to their non-traditional visitors as they might be.

At European level, it can also be said that museums, when developing educational programmers or activities, generally focus on school groups, rather than the adult population. Given the acknowledged educational role of museums, and the understanding of governments at both national and European level of the importance of lifelong learning, this needs to be addressed.

The expectation that museums should play a part in public education, in widening participation and access, and in somehow ameliorating the human condition through the pleasure or insight to be derived from what they have to offer, remains contentious in some quarters.

Choosing to make education and equality a high priority in museums means:

- Developing an accessible and learning friendly environment, which encourages visitors and supports learning.
- Taking a multi-layered approach to display and interpretation, so that everyone from the first-time visitor to the academic feels welcome.
- Ensuring that museum staff are as informed and rigorous in their knowledge about visitors, as they are about collections and exhibitions.
- Considering display so that exhibits provide access, in all senses, to diverse audiences.
- Making the existing educational levels and learning styles of potential visitors the starting point for targeted education work within the museum.
- Reviewing and modifying some of the conventions of museums in order to be welcoming to new visitors.
- Ensuring that the diversity of staff reflects the diversity of the audience the museum wishes to attract.