

Creating inclusive interactive exhibits: a creative practice project that will enable designers and curators of museum exhibits to create fully accessible visitor experiences in a changing technology landscape



WROCAH funded Collaborative Doctoral Award between the School of Arts and Creative Technologies, University of York, York Museums Trust and Human Studio

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Project summary



Increasingly museums include interactive exhibits that use new technologies. While these exhibits offer exciting opportunities for many visitors, disabled people can be excluded due to access issues, e.g. mobility limitations affecting control of a Virtual Reality experience. This project will focus on understanding how to enable curators to ensure interactive exhibits can be used by any visitor, no matter their access needs. Using a *research by*

creative practice approach, this work will lead to support materials that enable curators to create inclusive, accessible exhibits together with an exemplar fully inclusive, accessible interactive exhibit.

PhD Project description

Accessibility has been an important consideration within museums, galleries, and other cultural institutions for many years. These settings are often exemplary in terms of supporting physical accessibility for visitors with a wide range of disabilities and access needs. As new digital technologies (e.g. Augmented Reality, Virtual Reality etc.) are used increasingly within interactive exhibits to create exciting visitor experiences, some visitors are unable to participate as their access needs are not always appropriately supported by these technologies.

Technology innovation with immersive experiences is likely to continue apace, so it is important for cultural institutions to find ways to use these new technologies that do not exclude any visitor. Therefore, research is needed to ensure all visitors can engage with interactive exhibits, no matter what their access needs are, nor what the technology comprises. As access needs can sometimes be conflicting, i.e. an exhibit that includes features to make it accessible for one



person, can make it an inaccessible exhibit for another, future exhibits need to be configurable for the specific access needs of the visitors at the time they wish to engage with the exhibit. However, it would be inappropriate to suggest that curators must become accessibility experts so it is crucial that suitable guidance and support for curators is created.

The project will follow a PhD by Creative Practice route to allow for a deep exploration of the complex issues associated with the curation of interactive exhibits that can be configured for anyone's access needs within a museum context. The work will begin with a literature review focused on interactive visitor experiences and accessibility, followed by interviews and focus groups with curators to understand how accessibility features within their work. In adopting the philosophy 'nothing about us without us' interviews will be undertaken with disabled people about their experience in engaging with interactive exhibits at museums.

It is only through the creation of exemplar exhibits that the PhD researcher will be able to immerse themselves in the full complexity of the process of both curating and designing fully accessible interactive exhibits. Therefore, this foundational work will lead into the key creative practice element of the project – to explore accessibility issues through the design and creation of an exemplar exhibit that can be configured for the accessibility needs of the visitors. The exact form of the exemplar exhibit will be shaped by the PhD researcher's areas of interest in their own creative work and the needs of the museum partner.

Ultimately, this work will lead to greater understanding of the nature of a fully accessible interactive exhibit. Importantly, the project will also lead to a set of guidelines that will be disseminated to curators to support them to ensure exhibits can be configured to be

accessible to any visitor, no matter what the technology involves, nor the person's access needs.

The research will address the following questions:

1. What are the barriers in creating inclusive, accessible interactive exhibits?
2. How can curators be supported to ensure that future exhibits are accessible to anyone at point of use?
3. What does it mean for an interactive exhibit to be configurable for full accessibility?

About York Museums Trust

[York Museums Trust](#) (YMT) is an independent charitable trust, which was created in August 2002 by the City of York Council to manage York Art Gallery, York Castle Museum, Yorkshire Museum, Museum Gardens, York St Mary's and their extensive designated museum and gallery collections. Rooted in York and Yorkshire, YMT shares collections, gardens, buildings, art and stories for learning, enjoyment and wellbeing. As a charity, YMT's income enables the Trust to care for heritage and to benefit all. York Museums Trust is one of the Arts Council England's National Portfolio Organisations

YMT's vision is to work with audiences and communities to inspire, share and care for cultural heritage. Although YMT successfully develops exhibitions and programmes, it is keen to develop accessible digital experiences. Traditional approaches to digital interactives have often been curator, or technologically led whereas YMT's vision and values requires a focus on audience and user accessibility. Recent installations such as a Viking VR experience (developed in partnership with UoY), AR interpretations of fossils and a VR sauropod experience have been highly popular with visitors but could not be adapted for access needs. This collaboration will enable YMT to focus on the process of designing and creating an accessible immersive experience and provide invaluable learning as they seek to ensure their offerings can be enjoyed by anyone visiting the sites.

About Human Studio

[Human Studio](#) will act as a secondary partner organisation to provide expertise on the design and development of the creative outputs. Human Studio is a creative team with expertise in design, animation and immersive experiences. Driven by the discovery of knowledge, technology and culture, Human collaborates with individuals, groups and organisations that make a difference.

Engagement, outreach, dissemination and impact initiatives

The PhD researcher would be expected to submit their work for dissemination at relevant conferences within both an arts and humanities perspective (such as MuseumNext Digital Exhibitions Summit; Museums, Play & Games Summit) and for a Human Computer Interaction audience (e.g. ACM Conference on Human Computer Interaction, ACM

Designing interactive Systems) as well as for publication within, for example, the International Journal of the Inclusive

Museum. For public engagement, the exemplar exhibits will be submitted for exhibition within York's Festival of Ideas. We would encourage blog posts to be written about the work at various stages for websites including XRStories and School of ACT, as the academic supervisors are aligned with both of these larger initiatives.

Financial support

Studentships for doctoral research are 40 months in duration for full-time study. Awards are subject to satisfactory academic progress. Awards must be taken up in October 2023; no deferrals are possible. Awards will comprise fees at Research Council rates and a maintenance grant (£17,668 in 2022/23). The grant pays the fees at the Home/UK rate; international students are, however, eligible to apply for this Studentship and the difference between the Home/UK and International fee will be met by the University of York for a successful international applicant. Awards may be taken up on a part-time basis if a student is eligible to undertake part-time study; international applicants may be required to study full-time by the terms of their visa.

Qualifications

Strong applicants will have a good first degree in an appropriate subject, as well as a Master's degree (or be working towards one) and professional experience relevant to the scope of the project. We are looking for a well-qualified student with a background in any relevant discipline.

Requirements of the Studentship

WRoCAH students are required to undertake a bespoke training package and to complete a Researcher Employability Project of at least a month, a Knowledge Exchange Project, and to engage with Internationalisation.

All WRoCAH students must submit their thesis for examination with the funded period. This is a requirement of the Arts & Humanities Research Council, which provides the funding for WRoCAH, and is a condition of accepting a Studentship.

Before applying for any WRoCAH Studentship, please first ensure that you have read the WRoCAH webpages about the WRoCAH training programme and requirements, as well as other funding opportunities

<http://wrocah.ac.uk/>

How to apply

By 5pm Wednesday 8 March 2023, applicants are required to submit to WRoCAH an Expression of Interest, which should include:

1. A CV with details of academic qualifications
2. A covering letter comprising a two-page statement to convey your motivation and enthusiasm for the project, and to demonstrate your suitability for your intended PhD studies with the University and Project Partner.

The covering letter should specifically highlight the following:

- Your interest in the project and details on why you have chosen that University and Project Partner.
- How you will apply your current skills, knowledge and experience to undertake a PhD and the approach you would take to develop the project.
- How the project fits into your career plans and ambitions.

Expressions of Interest must be [submitted via this form](#).

- **17 March 2023: decision on short-listing**

The short-list of candidates to be invited for an interview will be announced on Wednesday 17 March 2023. *Short-listed candidates must complete a PhD programme application before interview.* If you are short-listed for an interview you will be sent details of how to apply for a place at the University of York. At that point you will need to submit the names and contact details of two referees, copies of transcripts of your academic qualifications and (if applicable) an IELTS certificate.

- **w/c 17 April 2023: interviews**

Interviews will involve the academic supervisor, Project Partner supervisor and a member of the WRoCAH Studentships Committee. They will be conducted online.

For more information about this project contact

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