

# Measuring the impact of museums on their communities: The role of the 21<sup>st</sup> century museum

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## **Abstract**

Museums, their missions, their civic, social responsibilities, and their modes of engagement with communities are in a constant process of transformation in response to social and economic imperatives at local, national and global levels. There is a need for museums to stay relevant and be responsive to pressing social and environmental issues such as population and sustainability, social justice and Indigenous rights. Funding bodies and stakeholders now acknowledge that museums and programs need to demonstrate impact and value within their local communities in order to attract further funding and ongoing support. Several models of impact have been developed in Europe and the United States, and a number of benefits are claimed for participation in museum programs and museum visitation. However these have not been subject to rigorous testing, particularly in Australia. This paper discusses challenges for museums in measuring impact and meeting audience needs drawing on results from two major research projects: *Investigating the impact of small museums in their local communities and Exhibitions as Contested Sites - the roles of museums in contemporary society*.

### **Project 1. Investigating the impact of small museums in their local communities**

Understanding impact in relation to culture and the arts has been a concern of a number of researchers in the past decade (Evans, 2001; Matarosso, 1997; Parker, Waterston, Michaluk & Rickard, 2002; Persson, 2000; Sandell, 1998; Sheppard, 2000; Williams, 1997). The economic value of the arts and culture sector is widely recognized as being only one part of its net worth to the community (Holden, 2004). Identifying social impact has been one way to shift the focus from economics to capture a more holistic understanding of how arts and culture contribute to communities. The strength of research studies into the impact of arts and culture generally is that they have attempted to develop measurable indicators. They have mapped out areas where outcomes and differences can be detected. The weakness lies primarily in the inability to consistently apply these indicators in ways that demonstrates the impact on an individual and community. There is no template that can be consistently used with confidence across a number of situations (Reeves, 2002).

*Investigating the impact of small museums in their local communities* was funded by the University of Technology, Sydney; the Australian Museum; Arts NSW; and Museums Galleries NSW. The aim was to develop methodologies to evaluate the range of impacts of local museums on their local communities and through this to identify types of programs or processes that lead to positive impacts of museums. A case study approach was adopted using a mix of qualitative and quantitative data gathered at three sites across NSW—a south coast museum; an Aboriginal Keeping Place in northern NSW and a metropolitan museum in Sydney. The project studied the question *What are the impacts of museums on their local community and how can these be measured?*, and was

undertaken within the context of social inclusion policy initiatives and previous cultural and social impact studies into the benefits of arts participation conducted over the past decade.

From the literature reviewed it was determined that the conceptual framework for measuring social capital, although problematic, might be more useful than adopting or adapting methodologies that have been used by science museums or projects that measure outcomes associated with participation in the arts (Stone, 2001). As Stone suggests, it may be difficult to prove that a causal relationship exists between museums and the social impact they generate. What is more achievable is to show how museums make or contribute to an impact but do not necessarily cause an impact to happen.

In considering the research question and the definition of impact as changes to social and cultural stock and distribution, social impact becomes the dependent variable—how museums contribute to increase or decrease this stock and how do we know? The impact is dependent on the presence (programs, policies, activities) of the museum. This does not assume that no social capital existed before museums were created within the community. What is being measured is how museums contribute to the stock of social capital not whether they created it, and what type of social capital that can legitimately be claimed as created by the existence of the museum. The framework adopted for this study was informed by social capital concepts of trust, reciprocity and networks using a belief/behaviour dichotomy within the museum/community context (Diagram 1).

Limits were set on the nature and scope of the pilot study so as to develop appropriate methodologies, specifically related to the impact of a subset of regional museums rather than major state or national museums. A subset was chosen as there are sufficient

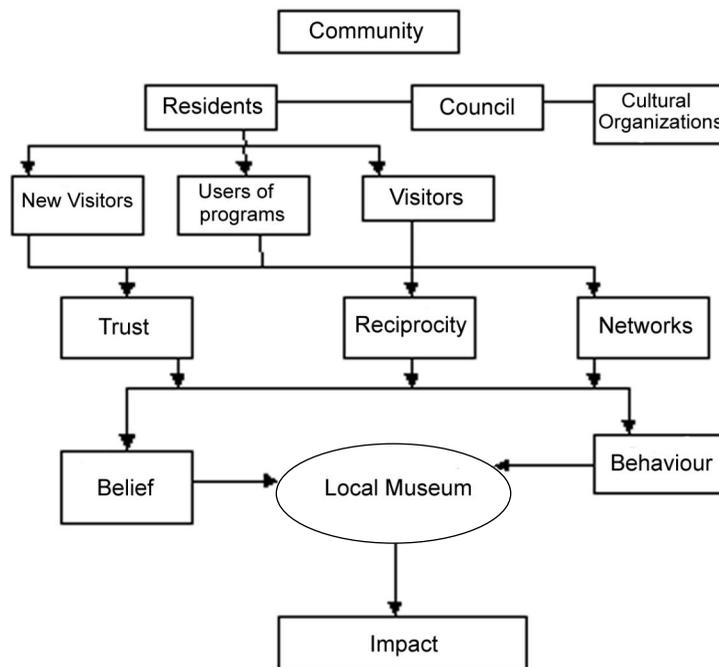


Diagram 1: Relationship of trust, reciprocity and networks - belief and behaviour

differences within regional museums to identify ‘representative’ cases of type; regional museums are more likely to be closely connected to the communities they serve whereas larger museums are more likely to serve a number of disparate and complex stakeholders and require different forms of measurement. Additionally in Australia, smaller regional museums are often reliant on the ‘goodwill’ of community funders therefore making measuring impact a high priority. Therefore, a case study approach was developed with the three museums selected on the basis of:

- A representative of a ‘metropolitan’ museum within the City of Sydney-the impacts that these museums create may be significantly different from those in more remote locations. In addition these museums compete with significant state and national museums in adjacent locations.
- A representative of a small regional museum-in some sense the ‘typical’ regional museum within regional and rural

communities that have undergone structural change through drought or industry displacement of jobs ( for example, logging, fishing, mining) and are now reinventing themselves as tourist destinations or developing other new industries.

- A representative of a Keeping Place-community museums that are established by Indigenous people in their local areas to house repatriated artefacts, host exhibitions, conduct education and research programs while providing employment and a meeting place.

Both qualitative and quantitative approaches were used. The qualitative stage investigated the assumed social and cultural benefits that accrued to the users, staff, volunteers and funders of the local museums. Interviews and focus group discussions were conducted with a number of stakeholders including staff, volunteers, users of programs and Council staff. The purpose of the discussions was to identify perceived impacts the museums were delivering to those directly linked to the centres.

A quantitative survey was randomly administered to the local population in the three areas tested both beliefs and behaviour in relation to using the museum, sourcing information, participating in programs, showcasing the museum to visitors and willingness to pay additional funding to the museum. A total of 294 local residents were sampled across the three sites.

### **Project 1: Results**

The analysis of the qualitative studies identified concepts such as individual social benefits (networking, quality of life, interaction), community social benefits (networking, services to community) and individual and community economic and cultural benefits.

Generally the qualitative findings suggested that the value of local museums were the links back to community; opportunities for people to visit, including attending events; the work opportunities (both paid & unpaid) that were available; the wealth that the museum creates in the local community leading to generate money to go back to the community. Broader outcomes were also identified, such as developing an appreciation of place and culture, community pride, museums preserving heritage, and opportunities for learning across all age levels.

An example of one of the sites researched (the Keeping Place) is presented to illustrate some of the findings. The Keeping Place is located in northern inland NSW. It has a fairly large, new building with good facilities. A diversity of funding sources is available as the Keeping Place forms a key part of a number of projects overseen by a corporation. The Keeping Place serves two communities: Indigenous and general. They see their role to foster community pride and educating all levels of visitors about Australia's Indigenous culture generally, and those of the region specifically. The

qualitative findings demonstrated that social interaction at the facility was important at an individual level, with the community social level outcomes to represent the local community, and to establish links with the local and broader community, as well as being recognised as a community resource through functions and events and other programs. In terms of community economic outcomes the Keeping Place generates income that stays in the local community; it is a place for tourism and is the major employer of local Indigenous people through Government and privately-funded programs.

In the interviews some tensions were identified, such as for whom the centre served-was it inclusive of non-Indigenous people or exclusively for the Indigenous community? For example, one respondent stated that:

*But it's hard for the Aboriginal community to understand that they can't, they get a free cup of coffee and stuff, but just use it like they want to use it. Telling us we're running it like a white organisation.*

Individual and community cultural outcomes included pride, ownership, sharing culture, promoting reconciliation and developing skills within the community, both practical job skills and an understanding and appreciation of how to promote Indigenous culture. However, one difficulty expressed was the problem of racism:

*We're trying to lift the profile but you get the children listening to their parents, from both sides, so they'll go and call someone black or someone white. ... They dwell in the past because it's something, "We wouldn't be like this if you whites didn't ..." There's still that blame.*

In terms of community education the Keeping Place saw that its role is to provide factual information and as an educational resource for a wider community, including schools, for example:

*I think it's the education, especially at the*

*schools, school excursions. It's always the children who tell their parents "you should go there and look."*

There were many ideas for future development in this area, such as exhibitions and events; promoting the Centre as a meeting place; promoting greater links to the broader community; and the planned future building works. Additionally, opportunities were seen in educating international visitors and non-Indigenous people about their culture:

*I really love discussing things with the Europeans because they've been brought up with lies about the Aboriginal people. ... they come in here, they ask questions and I tell them straight about how Aboriginals were treated and they walk out with a completely different attitude and it's just wonderful to see.*

However, there were perceived barriers by the broader community. For example, the Centre could be seen as exclusively "Indigenous" by the rest of the local community, coupled with difficult local issues such as racism. Practical considerations like restricted opening hours and general lack of knowledge about what is there, with some in the local community knowing that the Keeping Place was there but not visited-it was unclear as to why.

In summary, the qualitative findings across the three sites showed that social benefits were evident when the museum was a conduit to the local community through integration into the community and through linkages outside of the institution, the expression of local culture, and in developing skills and providing social interaction. It was widely acknowledged that economic benefits were important. It was also recognised that local museums needed a clear focus of their purpose and a strong, identifiable identity. If not, community divisions and tensions may contribute to unclear goals.

The quantitative phase consisted of 294 interviews with people across the three local

areas. The interviews were conducted on the streets, with respondents answering both open-ended questions and rating scales that looked at the museums' role and the perceived benefits. Overall, the general benefits were described as tourism, an appreciation of history and culture, and general education, among others. Interestingly, and encouragingly, no respondent could list any negatives. When responding to a series of statements about local museums derived from the literature review there was strong agreement that local museums:

- develop pride in local traditions and customs
- play an important role in tourism
- should have exhibitions relevant to the local area
- help people feel a sense of belonging and involvement
- involve people in local projects
- promote contact and cooperation across different cultures
- develop community and social networks
- develop contact across different age groups.

It was found that few respondents agreed that local museums help people take up or develop careers, were places where people can debate issues or were well-known in the local community mainly for education. Looking at where museums fit when people were looking for specific local information the results found that respondents mainly accessed the Internet, with the local library and museum the first place used by around a quarter of respondents. In terms of museums in their local communities, 45% thought museums were just as important as other community organisations.

## **Project 2. Exhibitions as contested sites- The roles of museums in contemporary society**

The second research project, Contested

Sites, examined current and potential roles of museums, and how they could position themselves better around contentious topics and sensitive issues and build vibrant participatory cultures (Cameron, 2003, 2006; Ellison, 2003; Ferguson, 2006; Kelly, 2006). Contested Sites was a three project funded by the Australian Research Council, with input from partners University of Sydney; the Australian Museum, Sydney and the Australian War Memorial, Canberra. The Canadian Museums Association also generously funded the Canadian component of the project.

A range of museum audiences were sampled to investigate their perceptions about the roles museums could play in contemporary society. This study moved beyond the specifics of exhibition controversies and theoretical rhetoric to examine the relevance, plausibility and practical operation of a broad range of museums as civic centres and for the engagement of topics of contemporary relevance and importance. To this end answers were sought to a range of questions including:

- How can museums contribute to discussions on issues of contemporary relevance and importance?
- How might museums effectively engage contentious topics in new ways that acknowledge and embrace conflicting opinions, are non-alienating and acceptable to the majority of audiences?
- In what ways can museums navigate the sensitive terrain between facts/opinion, authority/expertise, advocacy/neutrality and censorship/exposure?

Four stages of research were identified, each using different methodologies to best deliver the desired results. First, a literature analysis was undertaken into prevailing museological and theoretical debates about the roles of museums in contemporary society and in the fields of media and cultural

studies, sociology and conflict and peace studies. The aim was to link contemporary debates across a range of disciplines to contribute to and extend understandings of the capacity of museums to anticipate and engage with controversial subjects outside traditional thinking. This was followed by literature analysis of exhibition controversies in the United States, Canada, United Kingdom and Australia to situate controversy in a historical context by investigating how particular exhibitions in the past have been defined as controversial and how the definition has affected the roles and functioning of museums. From the themes identified in this review a multi-method strategy was developed and implemented that was both quantitative and qualitative. These investigated museum roles, community, audience, staff, management and stakeholder expectations and concerns. The multi-method ensured both reliability and validity (Cohen & Manion, 1994). A series of statements were developed and used across all samples that addressed the key issues identified from the literature review.

In the second stage, telephone (also called omnibus) surveys of the broader Australian community were conducted, both museum and non-museum goers detailing demographic profiles including socio-economic data correlated to a series of questions on topics and museum roles. Survey respondents were asked whether or not museums should present exhibitions on contentious topics and were then invited to respond to a series of current and potential role statements using a five-point Likert scale (strongly agree to strongly disagree) based on the following themes:

- Are museums information sources and safe places to explore these topics by presenting a range of viewpoints? Or should they take a more active role, as transformative spaces to challenge and change views?
- Should museums act as provocateurs and

take a leading role as social and political activists to bring about change, and to assist in the resolution of issues on a personal or political level?

- Alternatively, is the primary role of museums to offer non-challenging social experiences?
- Can museums be all of these things at once?

Exit surveys were conducted at the Australian Museum and the Australian War Memorial in the third stage, drawing on statistically significant samples of 197 and 248 respondents respectively. The same range of questions were used in order to compare the responses of the broader community with audiences and to gather more detailed demographic data about age, gender, cultural or ethnic affiliation, social, economic and family circumstances. With a generous grant from the Canadian Museums Association, visitor surveys were undertaken at three Canadian Museums, the Museum of Anthropology Vancouver, the Canadian War Museum and the Musee d'Art in Montreal with a total of 286 visitors. This survey was administered in French and English in Ontario and Quebec and English-only in British Columbia, using the same set of questions as in the Australian museums. Quantitative exit surveys and questionnaires were analysed using SPSS (data analysis software) to enable comparisons between all data sets, cross-correlations, comparing results from different cultural contexts, while extending the research sample.

The fourth stage of the research was qualitative in nature in order to explore, unpack and discuss the findings from both the telephone and exit surveys on topics about the civic roles and social responsibilities of museums as well as experiences of museum visiting, functions and activities, authority, expertise, trust and censorship. Five focus groups were conducted with museum visitors in Sydney

and Canberra-adults aged 18-30 without children, adults aged 30-49 with children, and adults 50-64.

In contrast, the perspectives of museum staff and stakeholders were also gathered using the an online survey, in-depth interviews and focus group discussions with over 100 staff and stakeholders in 26 institutions in Australia, New Zealand, Canada, the USA and UK. In the focus groups, participants were asked to identify any topics or issues that were particularly controversial or 'hot' in that country, or for that museum at that time. This enabled the research to capture emerging controversies and contemporary responses. Other questions related to museums, social responsibilities and civic roles, as information sources including authority, expertise and censorship, the impact of controversies on institutional functioning, successful programming and funding arrangements. By comparing the different geo-political, social, cultural and institutional contexts within which the international museum community operates we sought to illuminate the challenges, limitations and opportunities that institutions face in presenting contentious subjects.

## **Project 2: Results**

The results presented here are a selected sample from the broader project, serving as a general comparison to the specific findings from the impact study described earlier. Generally, respondents felt that museums have a role in presenting controversial issues, with over half of the general population sampled agreeing or strongly agreeing with the question *Do museums have a role in developing exhibitions on taboo and controversial topics?* Strongest support was from the industry respondents, followed by Canadian museum visitors and Australian Museum visitors. A selection of other areas that participants agreed or strongly agreed with is outlined in Table 1.

	AWM (n=248)	Canadian(n=286)	AM (n=197)	Industry (n=148)
Places to explore important issues	97%	91%	90%	94%
Places that allow visitors to make comments	86%	89%	89%	92%
Places that should provide information	99%	96%	98%	94%
Places for non-challenging social experiences	43%	40%	46%	24%

Table 1. Positioning Statements

Strong agreement was noted in the areas of information-provision, with less so on museums focusing on non-challenging experiences. Coupled with strong support for museums as places to explore important issues, these views provide positive feedback for museums.

Some of the key questions that visitors raised in the study that are worth further thought and reflection are issues about authority, whose voices are being represented and the issue of trust. A final consideration was to engage audiences in ways that they like to learn through finding the right balance between being popular and being populist; being controversial and critical; between providing information and generating knowledge; and recognising the relationship between learning and entertainment.

What do the *Contested Sites* results demonstrate about the roles for museums? Museums as trusted, reliable and credible sources for information were critical, especially given these times of incessant change. Museums are socially integrative and inclusive experiences, with audiences wanting to be challenged more than they are currently. Whose voices are being heard in the museum and how museums are dealing with social change are critical. Trust in the institutions and the authority of museums was well-recognised. Overall, bringing out important challenging and controversial points of view in a democratic, free-thinking society for many was seen as a key role for museums—one of the few places where these debates can happen:

- *Museums aren't just for showcasing surface aspects of culture. (visitor, Museum of Anthropology, Vancouver)*
- *Museums are a public forum for issues that should challenge society. (female, 30-39 years, business owner, Sydney)*
- *If museums don't do it who will? (visitor, Australian War Memorial)*
- *Controversy is just one factor in diversity and people have a choice to attend an exhibition or program. (visitor, Museum of Anthropology, Vancouver)*
- *Hiding something doesn't help kids and the future of Canada. You have to air it in order to get to the truth, whatever the truth is. (visitor, Canadian War Museum, Ottawa)*

### Conclusion

These two studies have revealed a range of outcomes about how museums are valued, the impact they have on their local communities and the roles museums play in people's lives. Generally, they show that local communities understand and value the role of museums and that museums benefit the local community, in a reciprocal relationship of mutual benefit. The broader global community also understand and have strong views about the roles of museums, particularly as places that provide information about issues that might be difficult or controversial.

The challenge presented by these studies is to use the information generated to convince governments and funding agencies about the role of museums, their worth in the community and the value placed on them by people. How can we do this in ways that are

meaningful to funding agencies? Using key economic indicators that go beyond numbers is a start. This could be done through highlighting, for example, the social benefits of museums in areas such as mental health and social wellbeing, demonstrating that museums are an integral part of social capital. Another example is to make clear the contribution museums make to the monitoring of environmental indicators, which is

becoming critical given the increased emphasis in the world today on climate change. Finally, museums have opportunities to influence, challenge and sometimes change how visitors think, inspiring them to take action on big issues and be more informed citizens in an increasingly globalised world. Visitors want this; are museums ready and willing to provide?

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## About the author

Lynda Kelly is the Head of the Australian Museum Audience Research Centre (AMARC) and has been working in the evaluation and audience research fields since 1994 and in the museum industry since 1987. Ms. Kelly has extensive experience in planning and conducting quantitative and qualitative research for a variety of purposes and a range of audiences. Ms. Kelly is particularly interested in Indigenous evaluation; visitor experiences and learning and how these can be measured; use of digital media in research and evaluation; as well as the strategic uses of audience research in organisational change.

Ms. Kelly is internationally recognised as a leader in evaluation and audience research in the cultural sector through her extensive projects, publications, conference papers and workshops. Ms. Kelly, through AMARC, pioneered a website (<http://www.amonline.net.au/amarc/>) that provides extensive information about audience research to assist in the development of industry skills and information provision, both within Australia and internationally.

Ms. Kelly has participated as a Partner Investigator in a range of research projects conducted in collaboration with

universities across Australia, most notably the international research project *Exhibitions as Contested Sites - the role of museums in contemporary society* funded by the Australian Research Council with partners the University of Sydney, the Australian Museum and the Australian War Memorial. This project examined current and potential roles of museums. Other significant projects include *Assessing the Impact of Museums on their Local Communities*, with the University of Technology, Sydney and Arts NSW; and *New Literacies, New Audiences*, part of the Centre for Creative Industries at the Queensland University of Technology. Ms. Kelly has published widely in the field of audience research including four books about museum audiences- *Energised, Engaged, Everywhere: Older Australians and Museums* (2002); *Indigenous Youth and Museums: A Report on the Indigenous Youth Access Project* (2002); *Knowledge Quest: Australian Families Visit Museums* (2004) and *Many Voices Making Choices: Museum Audiences with Disabilities* (2005).

Ms. Kelly is a Board member of ICOM-CECA and the ICOM Australia National Committee, a member of the editorial board for the *Journal of Visitor Studies* and an assessor for the Australian Research Council. Ms Kelly has qualifications in psychology and personnel management, and has just submitted her doctoral thesis which investigated adult museum visitors' learning identities and how museum exhibitions impacted on a visitor's self-concept and how they viewed themselves as a learner.