

ASSEMBLY: A New Conversation about Museum Research

Episode 1 – Shaping a new path for university and museum research partnerships in Australia

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ASSEMBLY is currently being developed by the Australian Museums and Galleries Association (AMaGA), in collaboration with the Australian National University and Monash University.

By working together, we aim to initiate this process by asking:

How might we convene a dialogue across the Australian museum and university sectors to reimagine research collaboration aligned to their shared public values?

We suggest that the introduction of support structures or supportive mechanisms designed to foster shared dialogue and develop a greater sense of collectivity within the sector are integral to this process and can help “us” build our combined research capacity.

We are looking to nurture this conversation by hosting a series of nation-wide **assemblies** later this year. These gatherings will be convened online, and the curation of each session will be seeded by a series of think pieces drafted by Sejul Malde (ANU) and Vince Dziekan (Monash) along with Katie Russell (AMaGA); this article being the first.

While focused at a national level, this project also forms into an expanded network of research observatories being established internationally through association with the Institute for Digital Culture (University of Leicester, UK).

Interested practitioners associated with any Australian museum, gallery or university are invited to join us to explore these ideas further; as only by doing so collectively, can we determine and map our way forward.

Callout – More definitive information about ASSEMBLY will follow in the coming weeks. If you are interested in the ideas behind this initiative and would be keen to collaborate with us in its continuing development, please get in touch with Sejul Malde [Sejul.Malde@anu.edu.au].

With this introductory paper, we hope to initiate a conversation within the Australian museums and galleries sector by setting out why thinking differently about the role and value of research can help them to purposefully interrogate, productively understand and proactively respond to the pressing strategic demands and changing public contexts they share with universities. It is our belief that there are currently unrealised, yet mutually beneficial opportunities presented for both universities and museums¹ that they can activate together through developing a new *collective and practice-driven* approach to research as a key strategic institutional capability shared between these knowledge institutions.

¹ Please note that “museums” will be used as a shorthand reference, or proxy, for cultural sector organisations over the rest of the article.

Pursuing shared and pressing needs through reimagining research

On the face of it, museums and universities have a lot in common with each other. If we focus less on the specific functions that distinguish them and more on their shared purpose, we are immediately drawn to their close alignment as public serving, civic institutions. Traditionally the articulation of societal benefit derived from what both museums and universities *do* has relied heavily on the weight (some may say tyranny) of history and the perception of inherited worth that, typically, is predicated upon the authoritative roles they assume in relation to knowledge production. However, whether this is *done* along more abstract, theoretical lines as disciplinary knowledge or materialised through forms of cultural expression, both sectors find themselves confronting just what their public value, purpose and place in civil society is at this particular moment in time.

Globally, the social responsibility of public institutions such as museums and universities is being put under the spotlight.² While this may be due, in part, to increased accountability placed upon public funding, it also acknowledges a need for these organisations to be more transparent in the ways that they are responding to a dramatically changing social and public sphere. Whether it be environmental crisis, poverty, inequality, discrimination, public health and wellbeing etc., systemic challenges like these require museums and universities to demonstrate that they are critically reflecting on their place in the world. To do so they must move beyond a tacit assumption that they create social good simply through their mere existence by better articulating the unique contribution they can make towards addressing such complex issues. This (moment of) reckoning with public value and purpose is something that both museum and universities share – and, therefore, can and should – be faced together.

To embark upon this path, museums and universities must grapple with their key roles as stakeholders of the knowledge system. If they are to be properly *responsible* public institutions, how do they *responsively* take account of a shifting landscape that increasingly encompasses alternative forms of knowledge? In the past couple decades across many sectors in society there has been a noticeable turn towards more participatory and constructivist modes of knowledge production: how it is created, and by whom; the contexts where it is found and practiced. These conditions are not only due to the influence exerted by digital transformation, but also reflect a deeper crisis in traditional models of expertise. Running alongside any increased political willingness to democratise knowledge-creation is a challenge driven by a wider epistemological discontent that the ways knowledge is conventionally acquired, formed and disseminated is far from satisfactory and riven with historic inequalities.

² Public programmes and campaigns such as Museums Change Lives (Museums Association, UK), MASS Action (Minneapolis Institute of Art) and the Museums are Not Neutral movement are indicative of the groundswell that's occurred around the topic of museums and social justice.

As organisations that reside on the very site of some of the world's oldest knowledge systems, it is incumbent upon Australian museums and universities to wrestle with what it is that they bring to this place and contribute to this reservoir of knowledge. Yet despite their coexistence within this *ideoscape*³, these institutions still tend to be framed by paradigms of knowledge provision that reinforce certain forms of authority. Internally museums and universities also have entrenched hierarchies of knowledge production, where certain positions and roles (typically curators and senior academics) exert institutional power as expert knowledge creators, holders and disseminators. Important types of enterprise-critical “know-how” derived from other internal roles and practices are all too often under-acknowledged or devalued, and therefore prone to remain hidden or overlooked entirely.

We propose that reimagining research offers museums a productive path forward here. Research should not be presumed a scholarly activity undertaken by research experts only but as a collective and socially-engaged pursuit. After all, research doesn't happen in a vacuum. It is a situated activity that exists within cultural, social, environmental and political *milieus*. Research is actively embedded in the world. On this point, it is important to stress the valuable knowledge contribution that people and communities formally operating outside of institutions themselves can make when participatory research and practice-based or led research models are embraced.

Positioning research as a shared strategic institutional capability has the potential to open up important new avenues of collaboration. Realigning the ways that knowledge, knowing and know-how are commonly associated with the ways research has been transacted between museums and universities enables more democratic processes and practice-orientated activities to come to the fore as **research action**. Undertaking research with a twin emphasis upon *practice* and *purpose* presents a means of achieving their public goals, as well as serving as a gateway to building a new basis for cooperation founded upon shared values and understandings. In the process, forming a new collaborative partnership towards research has the potential to reshape the knowledge landscape by reinforcing the important civic and public contribution that museums and universities make towards social good.

³ Globalization theorist Arjun Appadurai identifies the ideoscape as a distinctive feature that characterises global cultural flow by encompassing the movement of ideas and ideologies at both small, individual scale and across larger and more systematic dimensions.

Why is there a need to focus on new forms of collaborative research between universities and museums?

If we start by looking at what a collaborative research agenda looks like from the perspective of both universities and museums, we might see how developing new forms of *connectivity* and *collectivity* can help both sectors respond to pressing strategic demands.

A predominant narrative that frames the current research environment for universities is the perceived need to build closer collaboration and partnership with external organisations. In the main, a pervasive neoliberal perspective has come to fore internationally and exerted noticeable influence on the Australian university sector.⁴ One way this has manifested itself is through the reliance upon research to drive (ever) greater and (more) diverse income generation; and does so by leveraging research as a service designed to meet the economic goals of industry, particularly by emphasising science, technology and innovation. But, notwithstanding this market-driven impetus and the prevailing economic realities it seeks to respond to, there are enduring and significant social, cultural and public value drivers that universities should equally consider.

Currently global higher education policy environments are demanding a greater focus on social impact. Demonstrating positive societal or public benefit is becoming a top-level strategic priority by universities, partly in response to increased pressure from both government and funders for accountability and impact. However, the settings for societal engagement are often volatile and shift rapidly, meaning that universities need to rethink whether their existing approaches to teaching and research are necessarily the best fit for these changing circumstances. To stay ahead of the curve, strategies and structures that work with change rather than react are needed. Numerous universities internationally are proactively responding to this challenge by duly emphasising a “third mission” that focuses on utilising their civic and place-based roles to engage more openly with the public and inform societal value.⁵ This narrative is just beginning to gain momentum within the Australian university sector.

To face the challenge of this service mission, universities should reflect upon how they can become *better partners*. This might start with recognising the importance of creating less transactional, more collaborative research agendas that adhere to shared principles and mutual value exchange involving a wider range of strategic partners, particularly those from the community, civil and cultural sectors. To build this capability at an institutional level, they will

⁴ An indicative set of references are included in the Bibliography.

⁵ Research conducted by the National Co-ordinating Centre for Public Engagement and that undertaken by the UPP Foundation for the Civic University Commission are illustrative cases drawn from a UK context.

need to develop their *relational literacy*.⁶ This process can be initiated by enculturating values-driven methods for undertaking ethical research, convening in ways that welcome diversity and difference, and directing their research efforts and ambitions towards social good. Cultivating this capacity should enable universities to pursue strategic partnering opportunities in new ways and manage these research connections better and more sustainably. Exploring avenues to develop new strategic research partnerships that are aligned with such principles presents a distinctive opportunity for both universities and museums to rise to by working together.⁷

From a museum perspective, research partnerships with universities would appear on the surface to present myriad benefits, including as a means of accessing pools of competitive research funding from traditional sources or enabling gateways to national and international stakeholders to open up otherwise inaccessible funding streams. More tacitly, benefit may be derived from the extra rigour, criticality and reflexiveness that universities are deemed to provide. Yet despite the perceived value any of these bring (fiscally, or more qualitatively in terms of reputation gained or expertise acquired), it can prove difficult to gauge the true, actual worth that museums realise from their research relationships. In part, this may be because universities – ostensibly as the principal research-focused institution involved in the partnership – tend to dominate the relationship and reap the main, measurable benefits in terms of research income and publication output. Within such a framing of research cooperation, museums are often consigned to serving a functional role – as a basis of case studies, objects for study or sites where the public can be accessed – rather than contributing as an equal partner in the investigative, knowledge-generating process. An academic framing of research usually predetermines the basis of *what* is researched and *how* the research process itself is structured and the methodologies used. As a result, the terms of collaboration for museums can, in practice, lean towards being an inequitable one that focuses primarily upon their ability to support and service the needs of academia. All this means they are less likely to reap the kind of intangible benefit that can come from enhancing research capacity – for the individuals directly involved or more broadly to the organisation at large via association – and thus miss out largely on what transformative value can be gained from creating suitable conditions for a research culture to flourish within the organisation.

While running the risk of over-generalisation, the nature of much research conducted between universities and museums has tended to concentrate on well-established areas of scholarship. For the sake of illustration, research that investigates collections has traditionally

⁶ *Relational literacy* encompasses an institution's ability to productively understand its relationships with external parties. Such understanding goes beyond narrow definitions of research partnership or serving instrumentalised purposes (i.e., capturing traditional formal outputs for evaluation purposes). Instead, relational literacy is an expansive ability that can be harnessed to strategically analyse and interrogate a whole multitude of relationships, at scale and also at depth, in order to illuminate the potential value of research collaboration and engagement and inform strategic planning.

⁷ For instance, in their recent anthology, *Institution as Praxis*, Rito and Balaskas approach research as an experimental mode of enquiry that expands upon the more academic framing of the role that research has played in contemporary curatorial and artistic practices.

drawn heavily upon academic fields such as art history, social history and the material sciences. Consequently, highly siloed forms of disciplinary practice are reinforced that rely upon specialist training. Research projects are often premised upon the particular needs of academic researchers to access archives, collections or other resources in order to pursue their own research agendas, rather than developed along properly collaborative lines that translate into a mutually valuable research agenda based on shared, collective needs or interests of both parties. Additionally, it should not be overlooked that most research involving collaboration of this kind is likely to be concentrated in major city centres where larger universities and national or state-wide museums co-exist and build powerful urban knowledge economies. Indirectly, smaller regional museums may find themselves marginalised and placed at a disadvantage, even though direct alignment between research and community engagement may prove much more immediate and impactful.

All of this describes a model of research connection that has proven to be too narrowly applied (in terms of focus and scope) and unevenly weighted in terms of the power relationships involved. At present, this approach might be said to privilege the academic interests of universities disproportionately and doesn't adequately account for the diversity of knowledge practices of museums, of all sizes, located right across Australia, nor the range of communities and audiences that they serve. As museums find themselves questioning how they are to remain relevant now and sustainable tomorrow, it is worth raising the question whether the current model of research partnership speaks purposefully enough to the "real world" issues and "real-time" challenges they face?

Charting a path forward

In this paper we have endeavoured to sketch – at times in fairly broad-brushed terms, it must be conceded – a picture of the current state of research partnership between universities and museums. In the process we have distinguished between research collaboration (as an institutional imperative driven by self-serving needs of either partner) and collaborative research (as a relatively untapped capacity that holds mutual benefit for all parties involved); which leads us to asking: Can research between universities and Australian museums and galleries be approached differently?

In our estimation, there is an apparent lack of research into the ways that relationships formed around **museum/research** function in the Australian context. We run the risk of failing to appreciate the mutual benefit that collaborative research can bring without a properly nuanced understanding of the ways that the act of researching itself is *practiced* between universities and museums. On this point we propose that if framed in more emancipatory,

constructivist and situated ways that are more calibrated and attuned to change, research can be reimagined as a *key strategic institutional capability* for museums. Instead of being seen as serving scholarly, academic ends, research can be purposed in ways that might help museums better interrogate, authenticate and realise their civic value. Thinking about the purpose of research implicates institutions (such as universities and museums) with other knowledge ecosystems and social contexts and reinforces the need (not want) for connecting with each other, as well as other stakeholders including the creative industries and wider publics and communities, to mobilise around shared research agendas.

To pursue the reframing that we've proposed here, in the next "episode" of this series of articles, we will ask: What are the prevailing modes of museum/research, and are there alternatives that should be explored further?

Callout – More definitive information about ASSEMBLY will follow in the coming weeks. If you are interested in the ideas behind this initiative and would be keen to collaborate with us in its continuing development, please get in touch with Sejul Malde [Sejul.Malde@anu.edu.au].

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