

Global Perspectives in Arts Management: Exploring Museum Commercial Strategies and Governance

October – November 2024

Overview

I was the fortunate recipient of the 2024 ICOM Australia Travel Fellowship, which enabled me to travel to the UK and Austria to research my chosen area of arts and cultural management practices, including business and commercial operations and governance in a university museum context. My trip consisted of research at Manchester Museum, the University of Reading and the Ashmolean Museum, and the organisation of and participation in the 2024 Arts and Cultural Management Conference in Vienna, Austria.

Business and Commercial Operations

A vital aspect of my role as Executive Officer at the University of Melbourne Museums and Collections is supporting business and commercial operations across our venues. Dean Whiteside, Head of Commercial and Operations at Manchester Museum and The Whitworth gave me a tour of the museum, highlighting their commercial operations and events sites and strategies, which gave me valuable insight into their business operations. Similar experiences were shared about operating institutions commercially within a university context, and it was interesting to compare the structure of their event sales and catering management in terms of workforce structure, catering partners, stakeholder management, and financial reporting.

When touring the Ashmolean with Commercial Director Claire Lane, I gained valuable insight into the role of commercial operations and the contribution to the overall income of a university-based museum. The diversification of commercial income streams – through cafés and eateries, events and catering, retail, and publishing and licensing, engages a broad demographic of customers. A common thread throughout my research in the UK was the strong emphasis on supporting local businesses and makers in food and beverage and retail. There is a growing push to reduce meat and dairy offerings and minimise food wastage. This is by no means a new idea in Australia, but solidifies the notion that institutions and customers alike are wanting to support local and making informed, sustainable choices in their spending and consumption.

The merchandising and product selection of gallery shops I visited was of great interest, both from a visitor experience perspective and with background knowledge from staff as to best practice, bestseller items, and general trends in museum retail, and how to balance this with sustainability in mind. For example, the Ashmolean commits to buying a percentage of their retail stock from local providers, and the Manchester Museum and Whitworth have a substantial offering of local, sustainable and ethical goods, setting the tone for the customer's overall museum experience.



Governance

Another portion of my research focused on university museum governance. I met with Kate Arnold-Forster, Director University Museums and Special Collections Services/Museum of English Rural Life at the University of Reading, who provided a comprehensive insight into their governance structure, policies and partnerships. I noted the similarities in reporting lines within a university structure, as well as the various project and partnership funding sources i.e. local and national government, philanthropy, and commercial.

In Manchester, I was delighted to meet with Esme Ward, Director of Manchester Museum. Esme gave me a great overview of the governance policies and priorities of the Museum, while sitting within a university structure in the Social Responsibility Portfolio. Esme discussed the importance of pragmatic governance, in terms of having solid and aligned objectives across the institution; healthy political engagement; and positive relationship building in the community, which in turn strengthens relationships within the university and broader community, enhancing stakeholder engagement.

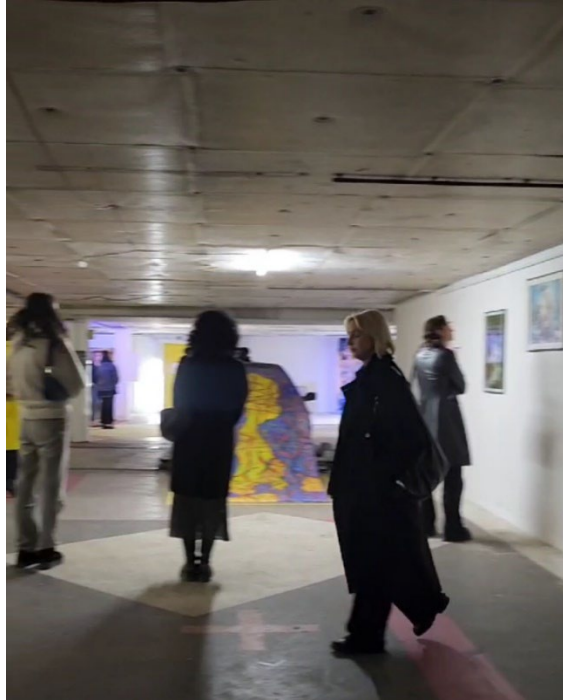
The importance of strategic alignment across governance was also highlighted at the University of Oxford's Gardens, Libraries, and Museums (GLAM) division. The GLAM board oversees six institutions, including the Ashmolean, balancing the museums' independence with the need for shared strategic priorities aligned with the university's broader goals. This structure exemplifies the balance between operational independence and the strategic alignment necessary within a larger institution.

Rachel Davies, Operations Director at the Ashmolean, shared the museum's decarbonisation pathway and the great work they have been doing across their operations to decrease emissions and reach the University of Oxford's target of net zero by 2035. This has had an impact on the stakeholder management at the museum, especially regarding existing procurement policies and suppliers, requiring communication and engagement strategies to gain stakeholder buy in.

Conference

Across 2024 I served on the organising committee as Head of Outreach for the Arts and Cultural Management Conference (ACMC). Held at the University of Vienna and the Romanian Cultural Institute (Vienna), ACMC is an international platform for emerging professionals in arts and cultural management. My role involved the curation and coordination of the three-day conference program, as well as the delivery of online pre-conference events. My involvement with ACMC is ongoing, as I have remained on the committee for 2025 as a consultant.

I had the opportunity to network with fellow museum professionals and academics in arts and cultural management. The theme, *Transgression and Collaboration*, explored topics like Artificial Intelligence, Cultural Diplomacy, Heritage, Audience Engagement, and Climate. Networking with peers from across Europe provided valuable perspectives on evolving challenges and opportunities within the museum sector, and I look forward to fostering these relationships through the 2025 iteration of the conference.



Reflection

Overall, my research and conference trip was highly successful. Thanks to the generous support of ICOM Australia and the University of Melbourne Museums and Collections, I was able to meet fantastic arts professionals across Europe, making lasting connections in my professional life. I look forward to implementing my learnings in the near future and sharing this knowledge with colleagues in Australia.