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# ***Audience Research in the Australian Cultural Heritage Sector***

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A study commissioned by  
MUSEUMS AUSTRALIA  
Evaluation and Visitor Research  
Special Interest Group (EVRSIG)



## **Executive Summary**

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# 1. Executive Summary

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## 1.1. *Research aims & method*

The central aims of this study are:

- to provide a better understanding of the current practice, acceptance, integration and impact of audience research in the Australian cultural heritage sector and
- to determine best practice and to make suggestions for improvements.

### 1.1.1. Stage One: Qualitative research

In the first research stage, qualitative research methods were employed to identify issues pertinent to the current practice, acceptance, integration and impact of audience research in the Australian cultural heritage sector and to establish terms of reference. 45 depth interviews were conducted with staff from different areas of work within institutions and organisational documents as well as publications were analysed by way of qualitative content analysis.

### 1.1.2. Stage Two: Quantitative research

Based on the findings from the first stage, in the quantitative stage of the research, a survey served to describe in detail the current practice of audience research and to determine best practices. In total, 119 institutions throughout Australia, selected from the AMOL web directory, participated in the survey which was administered via an online questionnaire. The survey results allowed to identify areas for further action and to make suggestions for improvements.

## 1.2. *Key findings*

### 1.2.1. Conduct of audience research in the Australian cultural heritage sector

- 32.77% of the 119 institutions studied have commissioned or conducted specific research on their audiences
- In 1970, the first audience studies were undertaken in the Australian cultural heritage sector

- Of the institutions that currently do not undertake audience studies, 13.5 percent find it “very likely” and 44 per cent think it “likely” that they will undertake audience research in the future.

As the number of institutions embarking upon audience research has steadily increased from the 1970’s, there is a potential for increasing the quota of Australian cultural heritage institutions undertaking audience research even further, on condition that major impediments are dismantled.

- The main barriers to undertaking audience research are:
  - The resourcing requirements for audience research are perceived too high for the institutions to afford,
  - No one taking responsibility for audience research within the institution,
  - institutions not knowing how to go about undertaking audience research,
  - a lack of awareness of audience research and its potential benefits,
  - a lack of interest or belief in its benefits.

### **1.2.2. Kinds of audience research undertaken in institutions**

It appears that classical audience research types and methods are generally well in hand. It is evident that a number of institutions have recognised the potential of applying audience research to issues outside the classical scope of audience research. These signs of a continuous development of audience research, catering for novel requirements, hold promise for the future relevance of audience research in the sector.

The kinds of audience research undertaken in the Australian cultural heritage sector can be summarised as follows:

- Summative evaluation and visitor research are the most popular study types in Australian cultural heritage institutions,
- Visitor satisfaction is the subject area of broadest interest throughout the sector, followed by the ‘classic’ visitor socio-demographics. Second, audience research is applied in relation to exhibitions and programs, including learning research, and third, for marketing, positioning and sponsoring.
- Informal data gathering methods are the most widespread. In terms of more formal methods, audience studies are based, with few exceptions, on a repertoire of established methods such as surveys, discussion groups, depth interviews, tracking and observations.

- Institutions are extending the scope of their studies beyond the standard study types of visitor and market research as well as different forms of exhibition and program evaluations. They are widening their focus beyond visitors towards considering a range of stakeholders. Audience research even goes beyond the boundaries of the individual institution in investigating issues relevant across institutions and for the sector as a whole.

### **1.2.3. Integration of audience research in institutions**

- Among the institutions undertaking audience research, more than half have someone who, among other responsibilities, is also responsible for audience research. Six institutions even have at least one person dedicated to this function.
- There is a clear dominance of summative evaluation in contrast to front-end, remedial and formative evaluations, locating evaluation predominantly in the completion stage of projects.
- More than 60 per cent of institutions indicate that it audience research is largely accepted among staff. Barriers to acceptance are:
  - Staff not working in the public side of museum work tend to be less inclined to see audience issues as integral to their work,
  - Staff have limited confidence in the research strategies applied, especially qualitative research,
  - Audience research can challenge cherished beliefs and assumptions and is perceived as threatening.

Audience research appears to be quite integral to current practice of cultural heritage institutions, considering both organisational and attitudinal aspects. While summative evaluation is well established, front-end evaluation holds a potential that could be worth further exploration, as this is the stage where audience research can have most impact in revising and improving concepts and their implementation.

### **1.2.4. Impacts and outcomes of audience research**

A wide spectrum of potential impacts and outcomes of audience research was identified, from the instrumental use of research findings on an operational level to cultural change and organisational learning. 13 items were selected to be further examined in the survey.

- The two major impacts of audience research are findings being used in exhibition and program development as well as in planning. Apart from that, the contribution of audience research is predominantly seen in

visitor-related areas of work, with the exception of audience development. In contrast to what one would expect, audience research does not play a major role for audience development. Further, the input of audience research on a broader organisational level appears to be relatively secondary.

- From the perspective of organisational learning, the results clearly indicate that audience research currently is more a means of short-term instrumental learning than of long-term organisational development. There remains some potential to be explored concerning the possible benefits of audience research for an ongoing development and change of organisation and staff.
- In general, larger institutions assess outcomes higher than smaller bodies.

It is apparent that the impact of audience research concentrates on the operational level and instrumental learning, but is not limited to the individual project it is conducted for. Audience research affects the entire organisation in many ways, including staff attitudes. However, the contribution of audience research to audience development and long-term organisational development are areas deserving improvement efforts.

#### **1.2.5. Best practice of audience research in the cultural heritage sector**

Findings from the qualitative stage emphasised that it is not only important to ensure high quality research, but it is crucial to pay tribute to the organisational context in which audience research occurs. In that wider perspective, the following 13 best practice factors were identified, ordered by decreasing importance for optimising outcomes of audience research across institutions:

1. Acceptance and support of audience research throughout the organisation
2. Readiness to learn from audience research
3. Involvement of project staff in the research
4. Responsibility for audience research within the institution
5. Understanding of the role, methods and principles of audience research
6. Visitor orientation
7. Integration of audience research in projects and processes
8. Research utility
9. Communication
10. Resources

11. Leadership of senior management
12. Awareness of audience research
13. Research quality

It is evident that characteristics of the research itself, i.e., quality and utility, are of minor importance compared to attitudinal questions that appear to be essential (acceptance and support of audience research, readiness to adopt research findings). These aspects are on the whole more important than organisational features such as responsibility and resources for audience research. And, very importantly, resources are by far not such a limiting factor as one might expect. The results suggest a departure from too narrow a focus on optimising research methods to the organisational conditions that impact on the effectiveness of audience research.

This has implications for the role of the researcher. It needs to be recognised that the role of the researcher is an expanded one, demanding to be an advocate, a diplomate, a good communicator and a manager at the same time, beyond being an excellent researcher.

### ***1.3. Key learning points and recommendations for improvements to audience research practices***

#### **1.3.1. Key objectives**

From the findings of this study, the following key objectives were derived:

- Increase the awareness and interest of audience research and an understanding of its benefits throughout the sector,
- Increase the understanding of the role, methods and principles of audience research throughout the sector and within institutions
- Ensure that sufficient resources are available to institutions to be able to undertake audience research,
- Ensure someone takes responsibility for audience research within institutions,
- Increase the institutions' capacity to prudentially commission and undertake audience research,
- Consolidate capabilities concerning common audience research types and methods throughout the sector,
- Enhance acceptance and support of audience research throughout the organisations

- Ensure staff are prepared to learn from audience research and adopt findings
- Ensure project staff are closely involved in the research
- Change attitudes to the importance of audiences for the institutions' mandate and success
- Ensure audience research is an integral part of the development of projects, especially with smaller institutions
- Ensure good communication of audience research findings
- Ensure strong support for audience research at senior management levels
- Ensure a high level of research utility
- Ensure a high quality of the research

### 1.3.2. Suggested strategies

The following main action courses are recommended:

- \* That these findings eventually inform the creation of a sector-wide development strategy in the area of audience research, coordinated under the aegis of the EVRSIG, and that the success of this strategic intervention be evaluated after a period of time.
- \* That a set of standards and guiding principles for audience research be developed, agreed upon and widely disseminated, taking as a model for example *The Program Evaluation Standards* (1994), published by the Joint Committee on Standards for Educational Evaluation. These standards need to be further developed and complemented to cater for the specifics of audience research in the cultural heritage sector and to incorporate the full range of best practice factors identified in this study.
- \* That institutions wishing to undertake audience research liaise with like-minded institutions, possibly by arrangement of the EVRSIG, to jointly seek funding and share cost, workload and experience, or seek contact with university staff and students to explore possibilities of undertaking joint research projects to the mutual benefit,
- \* That there be someone within the institution made responsible for audience research matters, even if this responsibility is only partial among other duties, and that person be given time and opportunity for professional development, in order to increase understanding and research skills and to enable coordinated research efforts,

- \* That a dedicated role for audience research be embedded in a supporting infrastructure, and that it be associated with a neutral department with organisation-wide functions, such as the executive area, as high as possible in the hierarchy in order to ensure its relevance to the institution as a whole. A model to consider is the matrix project organisation in which the researcher shares responsibility with department leaders who provide input relating to their functions, while the audience researcher provides research-related input and coordinates the studies. That would ensure sufficient involvement and consideration of all departments.
- \* That a network of strong advocates for audience research is built within institutions, especially at the senior management level, through involving key people in research planning and conduct and enhancing their understanding of audience research and its benefits (see recommendations to enhance understanding and involvement).
- \* That strategies are put in place to ensure the credibility of the research, such as ensuring the research undertaken is rigorous, the persons conducting the research are skilful and competent and the impartiality of the researcher is maintained, and that the purposes and procedures of the research are transparently and comprehensibly described,
- \* That researchers ensure to sufficiently consult and involve project teams to make sure that the needs, expectations and agendas of designated end-users of the research be carefully diagnosed and addressed, in the manner of client needs assessments, maintaining an internal customer focus and service delivery understanding, in designing the research, reporting on the study and in communicating the findings,
- \* That accountability measures are put in place to ensure project teams respond to recommendations based on research findings,
- \* That audience research, especially evaluation, is made a compulsory mile stone in project development schedules,
- \* That the EVRSIG expand its role for professional development in the field, possibly supported by a coordinator for which funding should be sought, in providing assistance, mentoring and training to institutions,
- \* That institutions invest in audience research training for dedicated and interested staff to enhance research skills and experience, i.e., that persons taking responsibility for audience research and other members of the institutions interested in audience research be enabled to participate in training programs of different forms to establish a certain level of audience research expertise and skills. These training programs could be provided or coordinated by the EVRSIG.