The Social-Cultural Impacts of Museums on their Local Communities

This project, in partnership with Exeter’s Royal Albert Memorial Museum (RAMM), commenced in April 2010. The museum is currently undergoing a re-development of its main building and will re-open by the end of this year. The challenge of this studentship is to create an informed approach to measuring the socio-cultural impact of the museum in the period immediately following its re-opening, which is relevant to the current and future policy climate and meets the needs of this specific regional museum.

To date, Fiona has been concentrating on reviewing the range of preferred indicators of socio-cultural impact and their reasons for selection; examining impact reports for cultural organisations and work by Non Departmental Public Bodies of the Department for Culture, Media and Sport. She has also been developing a deeper understanding of the academic and practical issues surrounding the examination of socio-cultural impacts; consulting relevant academic, practitioner and policy literature. Additionally she has been examining the extent to which existing ideas and experiences of impact assessment from fields such as tourism, geography and sport could be transferred to museums and galleries.

Although the debate around the value of arts and culture has a long history attempts to evidence the impacts of the arts and culture emerged in the 1980s. Initially these were based on evidencing economic impacts of new initiatives, encompassing employment, tourism and purchase of goods and services. Criticism ensued that these economic impact studies were missing the true value of culture, which could not be expressed in monetary terms. Impact studies of museums have increasingly included techniques to try and elicit the social and cultural value. At the same time economists, museologists and cultural theorists have highlighted the failings of different approaches and suggested alternative ways of categorising impacts and collecting evidence of their achievement.

The debate on the approach to evidencing impacts is framed by a more general discussion in the museum field regarding the purpose of museums, their core functions and the extent to which museums are, and should be, instruments of broader policy priorities. The current political context of reduced departmental and local authority budgets, the transferral of responsibility for museums to Arts Council England and changes to the structure and process of public funding allocation for the sector, form the political and policy context for this project.

Fiona is now concentrating on developing a strategy to capture the socio-cultural impacts of the reopening of RAMM in 2011. She intends to capture the impact of the museum on its wider community. She will focus on the museum service as a whole and the impact of the museum for users and non-users, within a defined geographical area. She intends to conduct two large-scale surveys pre and post opening. The findings will be enriched by quantitative data through interviews with community members. Following her data collection and analysis of the findings Fiona will concentrate on producing a toolkit and best practice guide of practical use to the wider sector.

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