University Museums from Home: observations on responses to the impact of Covid-19

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Abstract

This paper presents data about the impact of the covid-19 pandemic on university museums and collections through the stories and reflection of individual university staff from Europe, North and South America, Africa and Asia. It is shown that one common impact was the requirement for university museums and collections to transfer much of their programing to digital platforms. While there is obviously much uncertainty as to the shape of the global university sector after the pandemic, some university museum and collection staff felt that challenges could be turned into opportunities through creatively reimagining the work of the university museum.

Introduction

Much has already been written about the impact of the covid-19 pandemic on higher education. Some examples include the impact on national sectors (THATCHER et al. 2020), the impact on pedagogy (ANDERSON 2020), the impact on student experience (AUCEJO et al. 2020; BURNS et al. 2020; ISLAM et al. 2020) and the impact on academic processes and activity (SAHU 2020). Similarly, there has been much written about the impact of the pandemic on museums (CROOKE 2020; SAMAROUDI et al. 2020), but there is little documentation as yet regarding the impact on university museums and collections, apart from speculative editorial notes (SIMPSON & LOURENÇ0 2020).

The paper attempts to fill the gap as a snapshot of responses to the global pandemic during the calendar year of 2020 from university museums and collections around the world; from across various disciplines and different types of universities. It is a collation of data and intuitive reflection that commenced from an original call for content, in late March 2020, by the University Museums and Collections International Committee of ICOM (UMAC) for a webpage on responses to the pandemic.

As universities across the globe switch to remote learning and university museums and collections' professionals were largely working from home as a result of the coronavirus pandemic. The call requested input on the challenges of remote work, specifically UMAC sought information on how university museums, university botanic gardens or university collections were coping with remote work? What impact did it have on daily work practices? How were university museums and collections addressing museum issues that require some degree of physical staff presence (e.g. conservation, security, others)?

It was noted that during the pandemic many museums were taking digital to a whole new level and reinventing themselves online. Responses about the challenges of maintaining engagement were also sought. What strategies were employed for keeping audiences engaged? What activities were being postponed, transferred online, or cancelled altogether? Were there any audiences that were being left behind because of a lack of access or resources?

It was also noted in the call that university museums were also directly contributing to minimize the suffering in affected countries and communities, from promoting solidarity campaigns and mobilizing medical equipment to university hospitals and health centres to donating their stocks of masks and alcohol to help national campaigns and joining expert groups that

unpack and communicate relevant scientific information to the public. The call for responses requested information about any such special initiatives undertaken by university museums and collections.

The call initially attracted eighteen individual responses from university museums around the world. For these reasons, the annotated and summarised information presented below should not be considered a random sample. Participants were self-selected by responding to the call.

Of those that responded and provided data for the website there was follow up communication in October 2020 seeking reflections on three specific questions, namely: -

1. Would you add to, or change, anything that you have already written for #UniversityMuseumsFromHome?

2. We often consider university museums as supporting a) teaching b) research c) community engagement. Do you think this balance has changed for your museum during the pandemic?

3. What was the most surprising thing your museum learnt as a result of the pandemic?

Some of the initial authors responded by answering these reflective questions and agreeing to contribute to the development of this paper. The compilation of stories of impacts and later reflections about the impact of the pandemic comprises the body of this paper below. Despite the fact that it does not represent a systematic response to the question of how university museums and collections have been impacted globally by the pandemic, it does provide some insights into similarities and differences in the responses of university museums and collections globally.

Initial impacts

By the end of March 2020, museums and the botanical garden at the University of Florence were closed to the public. Only a limited number of gardeners were allowed to physically work in the garden, despite the fact that the spring season is usually a time of heightened activity in this area. Similarly, environmental controls needed for the collection of anatomical waxes and the herbarium could only be monitored by one employee at a time as required by the University because of the pandemic. This was enforced by guards who also collected contact details, ensured there were protective practices in place and monitored entrance to the museums.

The museums at the University of Florence provided games for children on their websites because of their confinement at home. However, it was noted that many primary schools had adopted digital platforms for their teaching in the early stages of the pandemic so there was competition for

student time that was mainly around school lessons on digital platforms and direct connections between students and teachers through these. Italy was suffering a high death rate from the pandemic at the time, particularly in the northern regions.

Around the same time at the ULB Museums Network in Brussels (Universite libre de Bruxelles) time was also put towards creating some simple games for children who were similarly confined by the pandemic. The games refer to a program called "objects of the month" published on both their website and FaceBook page over the previous ten years.[1]

Meanwhile, in the United Kingdom in early April the Museums of the University of St Andrews were working on how to reimagine their University Museums through curiosity and conversation, and to be a cultural and social hub during lockdown. Even though the University buildings, including museums, were closed, the university museum service aimed to bring people together online, to stay connected to St Andrews, and to inspire their online audience with research stories from their university.

This was done through three online sessions each week. They hosted the Wardlaw Workshops for children on Monday, giving children a mission for the week ahead and advice from a University of St Andrews expert to help them undertake it. Projects ranged from creating secret messages, like the ancient Incas, to building flying machines. Examples of what people had made at home during the previous week were shown in the following week's video.

On Wednesdays, the St Andrews museum team ran Wellbeing Wednesday for adult audiences. It consisted of the team to telling anecdotal stories about their collections, in particular stories not usually in use during other interpretive programs. On Fridays St Andrews ran a Wee Wardlaws digital session for children under the age of five 5 consisting of rhymes, stories, activities and crafts inspired by our collections, and programs encouraging children to create their own museum.

More widely, St Andrews University's cultural partners: the Byre Theatre, Laidlaw Music Centre, the Library and Museums of the University were working closely together to bring audiences *Culture At Home*: a regular dose of performance, music, images, objects, films, poetry, literature or podcasts, from the University of St Andrews or recommended by the university.[2]

In Spain at the University of Cantabria in early April, the museum service created a new web site where each day a new piece of the university

1   Universite libre de Bruxelles https://musees.ulb.be/fr/le-reseau-des-musees
2   St Andrews University social media – http://www.facebook.com/MuseumsUniStA/ http://www.instagram.com/MuseumsUni-StA/ http://www.twitter.com/MuseumsUniStA https://museumevents.wp.st-andrews.ac.uk/

Heritage (from the collections, exhibitions, teaching material, publications, etc.) was featured. Despite the confinement of the population audiences could visit university buildings through a digital portal and learn to know the most important pieces through interviews posted on Youtube.[3]

In April 2020, the situation was different in some Asian countries. For example, in Taiwan all schools were still open and operating normally. University Museum staff from the National Taiwan University still attended the museum office each day. There were strong rules in place, however, for activities including the number of participants and social distancing requirements. All people entering any university building were required to wear a mask, answer a questionnaire about their health, have their temperature measured and recorded, and use a 75% alcohol hand wash. Only ten visitors with masks were permitted at a time in the Museum of Zoology because of the relatively small exhibition spaces. While staff and students could attend the university, members of the public were not allowed thus narrowing options for direct public engagement. Maintaining public interest under these restrictions became an issue for museum staff. As a result various social media channels were employed.[4]

In April 2020 the Zoology Museum were planning online tours. With tours for the public cancelled online courses for the general public were also under consideration. The museum also considered it advantageous time to cover a backlog of work with the collections including conservation and cataloguing.

During April 2020 in South Africa there were lockdowns and a switch to working from home. The University of Pretoria Museums in South Africa did not feel they were well resourced or equipped to work remotely from home due to technical challenges, high data costs and not have enough resources for webinars, zoom workshops or virtual reality or 3-D online exhibitions. University museum staff felt the pandemic had set them a great challenge that made them reflect on how curators can "work from home" away from collections. Initiatives included updating their website, bringing weekly objects and artworks from exhibitions that were closed to the public onto online platforms. Roles have flipped as they discovered that the museums were technologically challenged- something we did not envisage would impact so greatly on our work.

Striking a work life balance under lockdown conditions is always challenging. For some collections managers it was the ideal time to fine tune and upload the backlog of accessioned items onto the database, while the conservator

3 Project Website "Your Cultural Campus in house": https://web.unican.es/campuscultural/Paginas/Tu-Campus-Cultural-desde-casa.aspx University of Cantabria Social Networks: https://www.facebook.com/exposicionesUC/ https://www.instagram.com/areadeexposiciones/ and University Heritage Web: https://web.unican.es/utiles/patrimonio

4 National University of Taiwan, Museum of Zoology https://www.facebook.com/museumzoology/videos/1882144525396235/

could continue art conservation work in the home studio. It also provided an ideal time to work on proposals and articles. Staff of the University of Pretoria also envisaged that discussions about post-covid world of university museums and collections should be underway during the height of the pandemic. The University of Pretoria's work with different communities had to continue. In all sectors and nationally at that time all museums were closed, the economic and social impact of the pandemic was recognised as a far greater concern for universities. But it was strongly felt that discussions about the heritage impact and museological impact on local and global scales needed to commence.

On the other side of the Atlantic in North America at the Lowe Art Museum staff felt well provided with strong infrastructure for working remotely embracing the use of Office 365 and its remote tools such as Teams, SharePoint and One Drive. Teams was used for a combination of project management, teleconferencing and document sharing. SharePoint was set up as an internal website for staff to aggregate many of the COVID-19 resources being circulated around the sector. One Drive was embraced to remotely access files and also share and collaborate. Staff felt the transition was been relatively smooth.

On the interpretive side of things during April 2020, the Lowe Art Museum were also strategizing on how they could make more educational material available to their communities. One example of this was through "Lowe on the Go", a daily dose of art from the collection with descriptive information. This was mostly a marketing engagement campaign. From this they were working on the development of a virtual tour of all of the objects highlighted through a Guide that visitors could access online with their mobile devices. Staff were also combing through educational lesson plans looking for opportunities to post these resources on their website for lessons that can be done at home. They were also looking at a host of virtual online options. To do this in a way that is strategic, intentional, cohesive and achievable, they created a Remote Engagement Task Force that began meeting virtually on a weekly basis to outline new initiatives focussed on digital engagement across all departments: advancement, marketing, membership, exhibitions, education and visitor services.

Elsewhere in North America at the same time there were similar programs to expand online engagement. Middlebury College in Vermont launched an initiative to help families, students, educators, and the public enjoy Vermont's museums and galleries from the comfort and safety of their own homes. Vermont Art Online offers virtual 360-degree tours of participating cultural sites as well as ideas for and links to videos, classes, and online arts

activities that people can do at home.[5]

In South America lockdown and quarantine produced similar challenges. The La Plata Physics Museum, Argentina attempted to keep in touch with their communities through social networks, posting videos with simple experiences that could be organised at home. But the care of heritage was seen as problematic because of the closure of university buildings and no access to collections. because the Faculty is completely closed. Staff utilised Zoom and WhatsApp for communication. In April 2020 the museum commenced an online training course for their mediators and educators with the *Mundo Nuevo* science popularization program.

Lockdown was also enforced in Columbia at the same time. At the Universidad del Rosario in Bogota, Colombia, tools for working remotely such as OneDrive and Zoom online classrooms for lectures and team meetings or conferences were utilised. WhatsApp groups were used for different museum management processes (one with educators and students, one for communications, one with conservation staff). While much documentation was available remotely, some such as the collection management software was not.

The Universidad del Rosario also reported the major role of social media since the outbreak of the pandemic. The museum has been promoting its online tools and resources through its social media accounts. There was also an alignment in the communication efforts between the university museum and the historical archive, both part of the Cultural and Historical Heritage Unit of the University. The university museum projected three phases of work during the pandemic.

Firstly, there was re-use and re-editing of contents previously available online, initially through promoting the use of previously created and disseminated online resources that were dispersed through different platforms and outlets. For example, this included a collection of podcasts that relate to heritage topics and artworks from the museum available via the university radio station website. There were also blog articles that shared previously, a selection of these were disseminated via social media.[6] Videos previously produced in collaboration with other institutions and available in external websites were collected in a central platform for resources. The museum had also been using the open-access platform *Roundme* for virtual tours, this obviously became increasingly important as an engagement link when the museum buildings were not physically accessible.[7]

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5   Vermont Art Online, http://www.vermontartonline.org
6   Examples of Universidad del Rosario social media Facebook: https://www.facebook.com/MuseoUrosario/ Instagram: https://www.instagram.com/museo_ur/ Twitter: https://twitter.com/museo_ur?lang=en
7   Some Universidad del Rosario virtual tours, the Portrait Gallery at the "Aula Máxima" https://roundme.com/tour/24534/view/117015/ . Take a tour of the Gallery of Independence Heroes https://roundme.com/tour/24535/view/59464 . Discover the altarpiece of the Chapel La Bordadita https://roundme.com/tour/24535/view/117174 .

In the second phase online tours and other educational activities were launched using Zoom and Roundme. As activity with on-site tours has been affected and this was seen as a vital role for new students and other visitors, it was important to re-think this activity within the limits and possibilities of online tools. With screen-sharing options to help enable live excursions using the virtual tour online, museum staff intended to develop a dialogic experience for visitors to the digital platforms. Extending social media capabilities was also seen as strategically important new development. This involved the design of Instagram 'filters' using artworks of the collection and GIFs with particular themes. Staff were also publishing games and challenges via social media, these were especially intended for the university community.

A third phase involved webpage renovation and the use of new tools to show online exhibits. Due to the urgency of promoting online museum resources, there was a need for renovating the webpage into a more visually attractive suite of pages and, in particular, consolidating in one section all the previously dispersed online resources. Furthermore, sharing collections online through platforms such as Google Arts and Culture became another of the museum's priorities.

The Universidad del Rosario also reported that conservation activities faced major challenges in the COVID-19 scenario. This was because it was not possible to access their restoration workshop, contracted conservation staff were therefore forced to work remotely on research and documentation activities, temporarily leaving aside on-site conservation work. The museum did not intend to affect or cancel these contracts, as part of the university's policy of approaching the difficult situation with resilience and solidarity.

Initial reflections

The initial impacts outlined above all capture a sense of unpreparedness of workplaces when it became apparent that working patterns and behaviour would be severely disrupted by the pandemic. It is also fair to say this was similar to the initial impacts felt at many workplaces globally. This resulted from lockdown requirements and the need for workplaces to reconceptualise how tasks could be done without physically attending the university museum or gallery. From the global responses provided above most university museums were closed, at least in the early stages of the pandemic. There were some attempts at reopening after the first wave had passed in some places, this was followed by closures when second and third waves impacted. In other places universities and their museums remained closed for most of the year.

The challenge of working from home to keep museum and collections viable as central parts of university business was variable. Those universities with well-structured governance arrangements for their museums and collections and with centralised museum services within the university that already successfully advocated for resources within the institution were probably better placed to negotiate and survive the workplace transition than those that did not.

From the reflective questions asked in November 2020 some nine months after the original closures of physical museum spaces, it was apparent that most places thought they had been on a massive learning curve during the year, with many saying there was a lot more to add to their initial responses during the earliest stages of the pandemic.

Another issue that many university museums had to confront that was not necessarily apparent during the initial phase of the pandemic was the impact of budget cuts by their host universities who were suffering financially as a result of the pandemic and the cancellation of classes and reduction of revenue from foreign students. For example, the Botanical Garden and Palaeontological Museum of the University of Florence were reopened late in May 2020 and their Anthropological Museum in early June. They were open just on the weekend because of university budget cuts, however they recorded good numbers of visitors, similar to levels recorded prior to the pandemic. By early November there was, once more, a total closure of museums in Italy. All museums, including university museums in Italy received some form of government support as a result of the pandemic. This underscores the fact that national agendas and priorities were variable and both the university sector and the cultural sector could be impacted in different ways by decisions taken by national jurisdictions during the pandemic.

While many museums, including university museums maintained audiences with a mixture of online content, when it was possible to physically reopen, a different clientele was available. Many of those university museums that benefitted from global tourism because of their setting and unique content, discovered that this audience had essentially disappeared with the onset of the pandemic. However, this also presented the opportunity to build stronger relations with a local audience, keen to engage with cultural provision in their local areas because of an inability to travel far from home. This can be described as 'proximity tourism' where local communities become more aware of cultural heritage of their local regions. For university museums and collections that were already cultural providers for local communities, there was an opportunity to strengthen these connections, for those that weren't

a cultural provider in this sense there was a new audience to discover.

For those university museums that did reopen during the pandemic, like those that were still open in some parts of the world early in the year (see notes on Asia above), these were under strictly controlled circumstances and had to meet the requirements of host universities and regional and national health jurisdictions. The imposition of requirements around physical distances, mask wearing, hand sanitising and data gathering obviously varied from place to place. The nature of public health requirements and their enforcement could also vary depending on levels of testing and what stage of pandemic development was being experienced. Many different experiences were voiced on this issue during the UMAC post-lockdown webinar series.[8]

While some university museums initially believed the opportunities provided by the lockdown would centre on digital or physical engagement with external communities, some found themselves reorienting work programs after a while. As the months went on, and with the beginning of the new academic year, the University of St Andrews museum's efforts became refocused – largely to support and enhance student experience and wellbeing. They initially began thinking along the lines of developing a specific wellbeing programme – of which our Museum Storytime was at the centre. However, as their thoughts developed, it became clear that developing the entire programme around the 'Five Ways to Wellbeing'[9] was the most appropriate way to develop their wellbeing agenda. Subsequently every one of their events was carefully designed to contribute to the Five Ways to Wellbeing.

As with many other university museum services, St Andrews also took the opportunity to re-evaluate their online programming in consultation with their student community. They discovered that the artistic community in St Andrews lacked an artistic hub – therefore, they worked with a student society to develop an online workshop series focused on identity, with an online home on Microsoft Teams.

St Andrews also used the lockdown period to work towards a decolonisation strategy, strongly supported by the student community. This involved a *Critical Conversations* series, discussing the issues at the heart of museum practice. All their other public engagement programs adopted a form of digital delivery.

In terms of providing services to internal audiences and supported by the

8　UMAC webinar 'Reopening to the Public Part 1' https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iDEZr6KT1Ss&list=PLLFNQIIYJV3y-r6F2ZllzlD76-Fd-4o6cp&index=2&t=26s　UMAC webinar 'Reopening to the Public Part 2' https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w0-30h-bTqo&list=PLLFNQIIYJV3yr6F2ZllzlD76-Fd-4o6cp&index=1&t=1271s
9　Five ways to Well-being (UK), https://www.mind.org.uk/workplace/mental-health-at-work/taking-care-of-yourself/five-ways-to-wellbeing/

Esmée Fairbairn Collections Fund and developed by Mnemoscene, a project was initiated during the Covid-19 pandemic to meet the needs of The University of St. Andrews in the development of its "dual delivery" online and on-campus teaching. Exhibit was developed in response to the challenge of providing an engaging and interactive experience using the museums and special collections. It addresses the sensory and tactile encounters students would have with this original material.

As a result, the university museum believes it has dramatically scaled up their digital engagement. The pandemic has brought forward much of the digital engagement offers they had aspired to develop – and, in consultation with their audiences, had encouraged them to 'think outside the box'. As a result, this university museum group believe the focus of their responsibilities had shifted towards their internal audiences, particularly through 'dual delivery' teaching. They were surprised and encouraged by the embrace of the digital at St Andrews.

A similar story unfolded in South Africa with the University of Pretoria Museums. In terms of the balance of teaching, research and engagement changing during the pandemic, this university museum service believed that their efforts swung heavily towards both the inward university community engagement and public engagement to enhance understanding that the University of Pretoria Museums continued to function despite lockdown. They believe this demonstrated both the success of working from home strategies and resilience. They believed their impact was greater online than they could have ever anticipated at the start of the pandemic. They also believed the challenges had positively stimulated staff creativity.

In South America, the museums of the National University of La Plata have remained closed since March 14, 2020 and, at the time of writing, it is still unclear as to what date in 2021 they will be able to reopen. As noted above, their main objective was to maintain relationships with various audiences during this period. They also sense that the challenges of the new working conditions can also provoke creative responses and hope this will improve their museum practices in the longer term.

Similar to other regions, La Plata has tried to keep the balance between their work on teaching, research and engagement while developing digital content. But they note there have been challenges here with a decline in external school visitation and supporting the needs of internal audiences. In summary La Plata notes that the pandemic presented them with new possibilities and the opportunity to offer new experiences in communication of heritage. This has made them utilise professional museum networks and made them attentive to the issues faced by other museums, globally. They

believe that many of their new museum practices developed during the pandemic will continue to be utilised after it has passed because of the extra value it brings in deepening connections with various audiences.

In the United States at the University of Miami they also recognised the investment of time in developing digital content, but believed there was impetus during the pandemic towards community engagement because it was becoming more important as they sought greater relevance and community impact. They also believed that staff resilience in the face of challenges posed by the pandemic was a defining feature of the university museum's response.

In Asia at the National University of Taiwan they also identified a change in the balance between teaching research and community engagement. There was a perception of a greater focus on research activities and support and time to work with collections and think about forward exhibition planning post-pandemic. This is interesting given that there was still some physical access to collections and exhibition spaces as noted above. They also recognised that with the university museum being open during the pandemic there was a much greater workload for individual staff members, particularly around health control regulation responsibilities for visitors.

From the above responses we can initially surmise that the impact of the pandemic has been uneven on different parts of the global university museum sector. It has varied because of the severity of the pandemic and the timing of different waves of the pandemic and different national and institutional responses. One universal outcome seems to have been the challenge to develop greater digital engagement with all audiences, be they the specialised internal audiences of teaching and learning or the more generalised community audiences. The future of university museums and collections throughout the world after the pandemic will obviously depend to a significant degree on changes to the university sector itself. However, there is certainly a sense of optimism at least among some colleagues that the challenges of a changing operating environment can be met with creative new museum work that will still position some university museums and collections as central to the core business of their host institutions.

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We hope that this paper will stimulate further discussion and analysis of the impact of covid-19 on the museums and collections of the higher education sector.

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