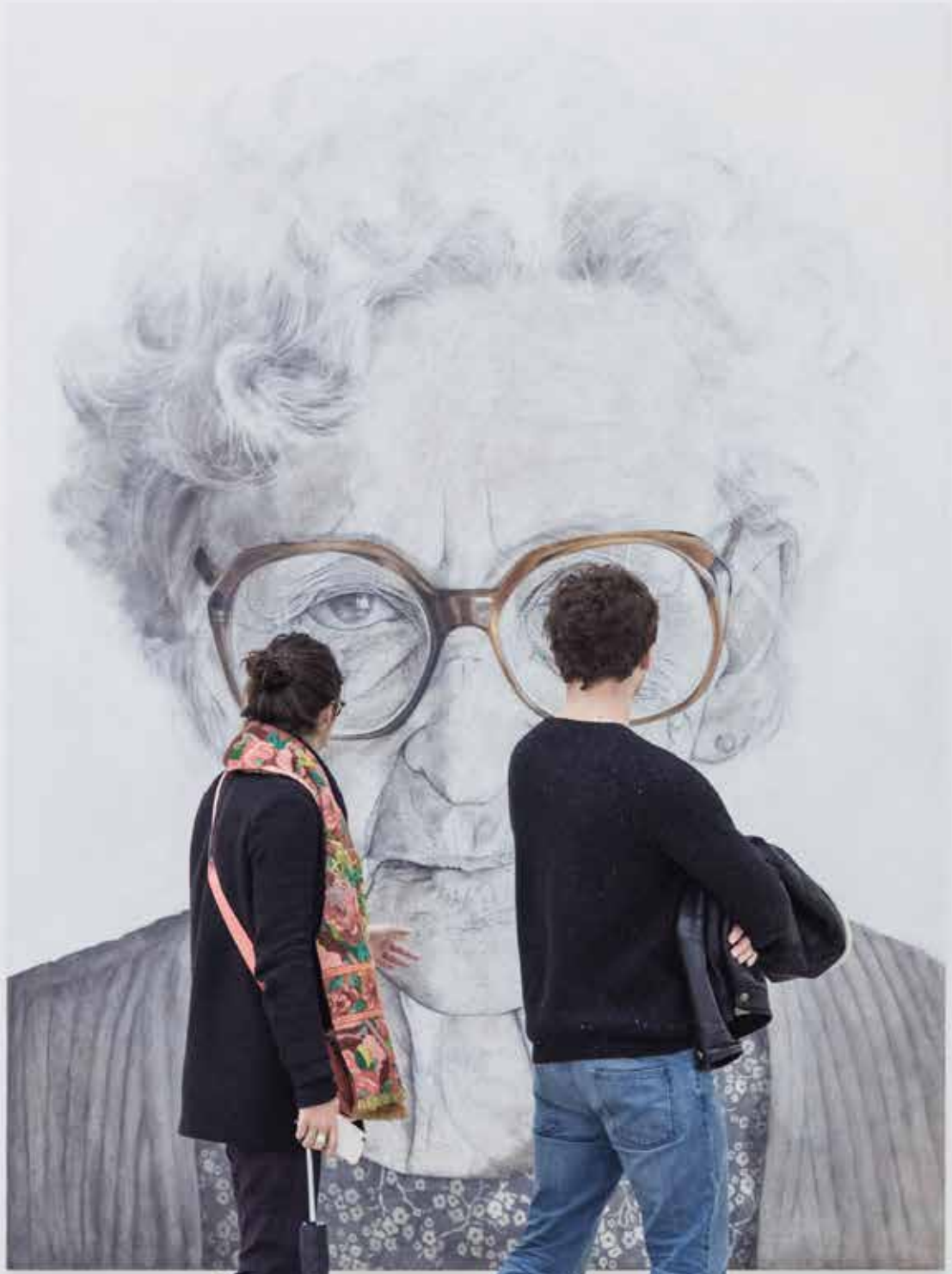# Museum Leaders' Report

Challenges and Responses for Leading with Purpose

Written by researchers at the University of Oxford

Commissioned by the National Museum Directors' Council

In early 2017, as the then Chair of the National Museum Directors' Council (NMDC), I was engaged in conversations across the sector that would contribute to *The Mendoza Review: an independent review of museums in England*[1] and the *Strategic Review of DCMS Sponsored Museums*[2]. Given the thinking about the future direction of the sector, I felt it was both timely and critical to initiate another, different kind of report – focused on museum leaders. I had come across *Saïd Business School's The CEO Report* [3] through my association with the Oxford Cultural Leaders Programme[4] and seen how it resonated with leaders there. Building on the research framework set out in this report, researchers at the University of Oxford were invited to hold up a mirror to leadership in the cultural sector – to create a better understanding of how senior leaders acquire the relevant skills and experience necessary to help their organisations be successful and sustainable both now and in the future.

The Museum Leaders' Report is the culmination of an 18-month research project that saw a team of academics from Saïd Business School and Oxford University Museums undertake in-depth personal interviews with almost all of the NMDC membership, and with the support of an NMDC steering group. By giving centre stage to a group of people who are leading at the cutting edge of the sector, it provides a unique perspective on the leadership issues cultural organisations are facing. Importantly, the rigour applied to analysing the data generated by the interviews has resulted in fresh approaches to how we look at our sector's leadership and has raised new, vital questions for us to consider in terms of how we move into the future.

NMDC members represent a range of diverse organisations in terms of governance structure, collection type (including libraries and botanical gardens), size, scope and geographical location. Therefore, I am sure that the content and insights highlighted in the report will be relevant to all museums, libraries, cultural, heritage and arts organisations.

The research has also generated new ways for the business world to look at leadership and to learn from us: a positive two-way exchange of ideas and practice, which is already being used by Saïd Business School academics in their teaching and publications.

I look forward to seeing how the findings and provocations from the Museum Leaders' Report are taken forward.

Diane Lees
Director-General, Imperial War Museums

---

1 https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-mendoza-review-an-independent-review-of-museums-in-england
2 https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/strategic-review-of-dcms-sponsored-museums
3 https://www.sbs.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/Press_Office/Docs/The-CEO-Report-Final.pdf
4 http://www.oxfordaspiremuseums.org/oxford-cultural-leaders

Content

Authors

Dr Michael Smets
Principal Investigator

Associate Professor in Management
and Organisation Studies,
Saïd Business School

Michael studies and advises multi-mission and value-based
organisations. He is a lead author of the CEO Report and
teaches leadership on various post-graduate and executive
courses, including the Oxford Cultural Leaders Programme.

Dr Chris Moos
Research Project Leader

Teaching Fellow,
Saïd Business School

Chris's research focuses on organisational evaluations.
He teaches leadership to graduate and executive students
at Saïd Business School.

Lucy Shaw
Principal Investigator

Head of Programmes and Partnerships,
Oxford University Gardens, Libraries
and Museums (GLAM)

Lucy works across the University of Oxford's gardens,
libraries and museums, building partnerships, developing
programmes of activity and running the Oxford Cultural
Leaders Programme.

Dr Pegram Harrison
Principal Investigator

Senior Fellow in Entrepreneurship,
Saïd Business School

Pegram studies entrepreneurial leadership, mainly in cultural
organisations. He teaches on the Oxford Cultural Leaders
Programme as well as on various undergraduate, post-
graduate and executive courses.

Bridget Bryan
Research Project Assistant

MSc Sociology Student,
University of Oxford Department
of Sociology

Bridget studies mental health in the workplace with a
particular focus on the relationship between management
practices and staff mental health. She is currently
completing an MSc in Sociology.

Gabrielle Cunningham
Research Project Assistant

DPhil Candidate in Management
Research, Saïd Business School

Gabby's research focuses on identity, talent, and future-
thinking, with a particular focus on the arts, culture,
and entertainment. She is currently a student at Green
Templeton College.

Executive summary

National museums and similar cultural institutions in the UK are operating in an increasingly complex environment, shaped by constraints to the traditional funding model, changing audience expectations, new technologies, and a variety of political and societal trends that affect the sector directly or indirectly. Externally, museums and other cultural organisations are engaging with more and different stakeholders, and internally with different kinds of people using new skills. The issues are multi-layered and interconnected, with implications at sectoral, organisational, and individual levels.

The Museum Leaders' Report is based on a study of leaders in national museums, national cultural institutions of similar stature, university museums, local authority museums and independent trusts. The report shows how sectoral challenges converge on the leader, typically the person in the institution whose role looks **inwards, across the sector, and outwards at external influences and trends as a whole**. Also, in organisations that collect, conserve and exhibit, **leadership is as much about the past as it is about the present and the future.**

Interviews with museum leaders reveal that the challenges they face can be plotted along three dimensions: 'culture', which relates to the core purpose of museums; 'commerce', which deals with funding and resources; and 'communities', which concerns how museums interact with diverse audiences and stakeholders. These three dimensions are often perceived to be in tension, with some stakeholders and many museum staff viewing them as 'either/or' problems.

Culture

Communities
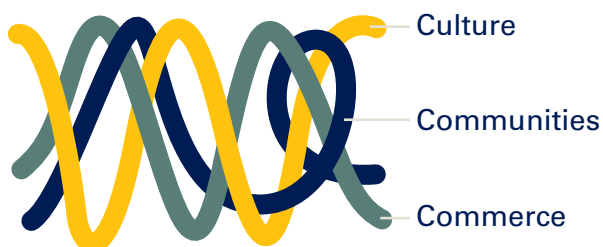
Commerce

However, many museum leaders consider these tensions to be creative frictions, rather than dilemmas. When thinking about delivering cultural, commercial and community value, they think **'both…and', rather than 'either…or'.** Such paradoxical thinking, which explores underlying synergies

between demands that might seem contradictory on the surface, not only eases potential tensions but paves the way to museums that are more intellectually interesting, economically sustainable, and socially inclusive. Rather than being entangled with each other, the 'three Cs' become mutually reinforcing, as in a cube.

Culture

Commerce

Communities
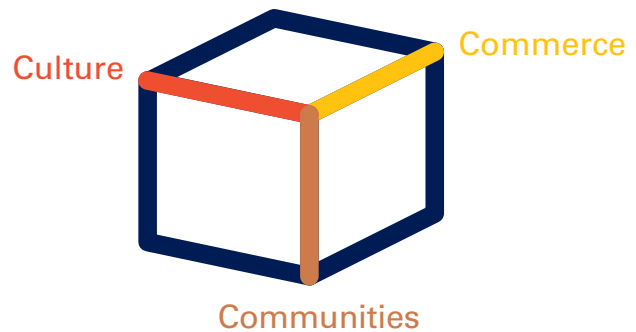
In order to respond to and reframe competing demands as mutually reinforcing, leaders need a positive disposition that enables them to **welcome and embrace paradox**. They must shape and communicate a sense of the multiple purposes of the museum that animates stakeholders both internally and externally, and empowers all members of the organisation to generate value along the different dimensions. This sense of empowerment requires a certain amount of 'letting go': the essence of a paradox is that it is never resolved, and therefore must be sustained productively. Leaders who are successful in this context know that efforts to 'own' every decision personally tend to create unnecessary bottlenecks. Also, they are **able to harness uncertainty and present it as opportunity**.

In order to continue generating value in the face of limited resources, museum leaders need to **foster an entrepreneurial outlook**, inspiring their organisations to a positive and opportunity-focused attitude instead of an overly managerial one. They innovate through encouraging debate, bringing together apparently dissonant ideas and attitudes, creating partnerships, and finding new ways to engage with communities and make their institutions relevant. By presenting museums as spaces for debate and places of identity for the nation and multiple communities, they place an emphasis on relevance, story-telling, and the possibility of exploring big questions. **Museums communicate and create value in ways that other types of organisation often find difficult, perhaps impossible, to maintain.**

---

1 Please note: throughout this Report we will use the word 'museums' to encompass similar cultural institutions participating in the study (e.g. the British Library, the National Archives, the Royal Botanic Garden at Kew, etc)

Practising entrepreneurial and paradoxical leadership when responding to overlapping challenges can create opportunities for organisations and individuals to lead with purpose. This is achieved through **abilities, resources, and credibilities** that also overlap and converge.

Ability has traditionally been measured by formal qualifications, typically higher-level degrees, to which leaders have gradually added skills in other areas such as finance, marketing, and human resources. New abilities and qualities that are becoming increasingly important for museums include digital skills and commercial savviness. It is not essential that leaders themselves become experts in these areas, but they need to find the people who are. For many museum leaders, therefore, leadership is something 'we' do, not 'I' do.

Resources for the present are located in organisations: collections, people, funds, reputation, to name but a few. Resources for the future seem to reside much more in the sector, which means leaders (now and in the future) must pursue and support opportunities more broadly than ever before. The variety of institution types, and the different ways in which they have struck the balance between culture, commerce, and communities, offer many opportunities for learning from each other – especially in the area of resourcing.

Harnessing resources – both internal and external to the organisation – critically depends on leaders' **credibility**. Leaders can only deliver value along all dimensions if they are accepted as credible by the different expert constituencies and resource holders. In the areas where leaders are not experts, they are most effective at building their credibility by engaging the interests and enabling the expertise of

others. Listening skills, genuine enthusiasm, and the ability to recognise the value that people with different perspectives and skills bring to the organisation are key. Credibility allows museum leaders to guide people to do their best, rather than 'manage' them. It is this broad, cross-constituency credibility that allows museum leaders to communicate 'both… and' visions broadly – and to do so with clarity of purpose.

So how do museum leaders develop these skills now, and where should they be looking for the leaders of the future? There are **no predictable routes to the most senior roles**, nor a required set of specific skills, experiences, or qualifications. The study reveals a general sense of discomfort among current leaders with perceptions around class, wealth, gender, ethnicity, and other demographic factors. There is also a suggestion that governing boards and other influential stakeholders might need to change traditional attitudes to professional qualifications and leadership qualities. In addition, museums will need to expand their ability to access networks both inside and outside the sector, and to identify talent based on entrepreneurialism, people-skills, agility, future-orientation, and commercial and operations management acumen, as well as museum-related experience and formal curatorial experience.

The report derives some **general recommendations and provocations** for further thought and action – including the need for more systematic development opportunities for senior leadership. And it suggests areas for further research into the skills and qualities needed at the top, both for today and for the future.

The sector faces challenges, but the responses of its current leadership are increasingly empowered and empowering – leaders are rising to these challenges with vigour and a strong sense of **purpose**.

This section presents the current challenges reported to us by museum leaders, as well as new challenges emerging in the future, together with our analysis of how these challenges affect the sector, organisations, and individuals.

Challenges

Sectoral challenges

Funding: Seeking financial resilience

As public funding for museums becomes increasingly constrained, leaders throughout the sector feel the need to access alternative funding sources. Interviewees noted a marked shift in their agenda. Reacting defensively to funding cuts has been consigned firmly to the past, as leaders feel they have already cut as far as they can. Now, their agenda is proactively to build financial resilience by advocating against further funding cuts, and especially by raising funds and generating their own income in support of their various missions.

'If there were two things I was concerned about, one is how you continue to buffer yourself against the vagaries of those visitor markets. And the other thing is how you cope with the potential of the government pulling the rug from underneath you again in terms of sustainability, which is where that drive towards the commercial side probably really comes from.'

The overall funding challenge problematises the relationship between 'culture' and 'commerce'. We asked museum leaders to position their organisations on a scale where commerce is 0 and culture is 100 (see Figure 1).

On average, they placed their organisation at 70 at present, while predicting this would shift to 59 within the next five years. This shift signals two things. First, as indicated, commercial sources of income will become even more important. Second, in their interviews, museum leaders presented culture and commerce as increasingly synergistic – like two sides of the same coin. This opens up new funding opportunities, but also presents new leadership challenges.

Purpose: Straddling competing demands

While leaders overall predict a clear shift from 'culture' towards 'commerce' in the next five years, many emphasise that culture and commerce do not represent two opposing poles. Instead of seeing commerce and culture as competing demands, many leaders are clear that, invariably, they will need to respond to both.

Many leaders also express the wish to become more 'commercial' in order to serve their cultural mission better. (Respondents use 'commercial' as an umbrella term for non-government funding.) However, leaders expressed reservations about where a commercial focus might take museums, and expressed a sense that many museums 'haven't reached the destination' and still had a long 'journey' to go in making culture and commerce work together. While leaders spoke about the challenges that an increase in commercial focus brings, they also found that becoming more commercially orientated and increasing self-generated revenue can 'give us the freedom to do more of what we want to do'. For example, leaders perceive a need to focus their constrained resources on creating impact through engagement with their various audiences and the increasingly changeable visitor market. This, however, raises potential issues about sustainability and the building of organisational resilience, as the museum environment is becoming more volatile.

'It's expensive to do the things that we do and the support that we get from the State is dwindling. We need to prepare to become more commercially savvy and to have more of a commercial focus, but always with a view to extending our principal remit which is to engage the public about great works of art.'

Figure 1: Current and predicted position of museums on the commerce-culture continuum
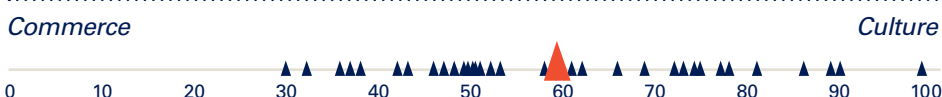
Where would you position your organisation on this line?

Now
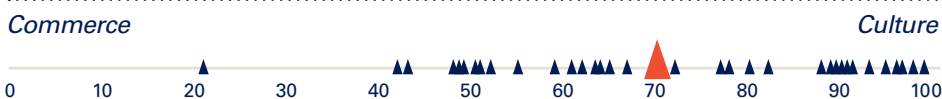
Where would you like your organisation to be within the next five years?

In 5 years

Museum leaders were asked to position their organisations on a scale where commerce is 0 and culture is 100

Impact: Articulating multiple missions and the 'right to exist'

Linked to the funding and sustainability challenge, museum leaders see themselves as responsible for articulating and defending the purpose of their institutions, both externally and internally.

As museums investigate alternative sources of funding and develop new ways of generating income, a clearly defined purpose is important for selecting appropriate activities and relationships. The challenge that museum leaders are facing is that museums do not have a single purpose, but are characterised by a multiplicity of purposes.

As these purposes relate to each other in complex ways, leaders see them as potentially both complementary and conflicting. In addition, with an increased focus on reaching out and engaging communities, leaders face the challenge of rapidly changing audience expectations. Museums are increasingly more things to more and more different people, which presents an important challenge in its own right.

Some leaders even emphasise the need for the sector to understand that museums have 'no automatic right to exist'. To the extent that museums rely on public funding, museum leaders increasingly feel that they need to be able to prove the impact of their museums on the communities they serve, and emphasise that museums are delivering a public good.

'The purpose of this organisation is to maintain and to preserve the collections for the general audience, for future generations. The second which is not less important, is to make them accessible, and that means obviously showing them. But also in the sense of helping people to understand what these objects are about, telling the stories based on sound scholarship of these objects and groups of objects … Bring together different disciplines and make them interact in experiments, which is to say be daring, be experimental, be innovative to yield new insights and understanding … So, based on these purposes, the role of this institution in the end is to create public good.'

Museum leaders find themselves needing to balance their institutions' long-term purposes with the resource constraints to which their organisations are exposed. This covers the traditional purposes of museums, such as provision of public benefit through preservation, education, knowledge creation, and learning. Increasingly, however, museum leaders also see other purposes becoming more prominent, such as the verification and falsification of information given the 'post-truth' political climate, the provision of spaces for debate, in particular to engage otherwise marginalised communities, and spaces for the development and refraction of local and national community identities.

Environments: Adapting to rapid change

Most types of educational and entertainment experiences have become more accessible in recent decades, and information technology is reshaping the way consumers use, form expectations about, and engage with many forms of culture. Museum leaders recognise that there are many other activities competing for audiences' time and money. This changing environment raises questions about the role of museums in society and in the education and entertainment sectors, broadly conceived. In the context of a rapidly changing environment, leaders see a variety of threats and opportunities (see Figure 3).

Generally, museum leaders expect trends such as the rising importance of health and well-being, digitisation and new technologies, the ageing population and workforce, as well as migration, to potentially benefit museums. Leaders identified terrorism, cyber threats, and Brexit as threats from the wider environment in which museums operate. Importantly, while leaders typically see opportunities as falling within the realm of their own museums, they perceive threats as affecting the sector overall, implying that many of the challenges may best be countered with joint action in the sector.

Trends such as the post-truth political climate, increasing cyber dependency, social polarisation, intensifying nationalism, rising income disparity, and climate change were

seen as challenges by some leaders, and as opportunities by others. Many leaders provided examples of how museums generate relevance by publicly engaging with these trends, and demonstrated how these challenges also provide opportunities to emphasise the purpose of museums, for example in the provision of space for debate, the verification of information, and the engagement of affected communities.

For museum leaders, many emerging trends also present an indirect challenge as they affect the ways in which museums engage with and attract visitors and even organisational members, from staff to volunteers. In this context, leaders frequently mentioned Brexit, and the potential challenges it could bring to their organisations – for example, through its impact on tourism, as well as the potential loss of access to the talent and fiscal resources associated with the cultural sector of the continent.

These environmental changes mean that leaders are increasingly interacting with a wider set of stakeholders. In addition to pursuing cultural and commercial purposes, leaders also find themselves weaving a third strand into their jobs: serving numerous diverse communities, ranging from familiar and close at hand to newly emerging interests often far afield.

Overall in the sector then, there are three critical challenges: already described are the culture challenge, which is about a museum's purpose, and the commerce challenge, which is about funding and is a means to an end. Added to this is the challenge of serving the needs of a diverse range of stakeholders: a communities challenge (see Figure 2).

Figure 2: The triple helix of culture, communities and commerce

One way in which museums engage with the culture-commerce challenge is by reaching out to affected and marginalised communities, and by providing spaces in which populist politics and a perceived polarisation of society can be debated.

'For knowledge institutions, there's a particular role around authenticating knowledge and helping citizens validate information, be informed, discriminate, become informed citizens, be alive to the forces at work that may disrupt the information flow or distort it inasmuch as libraries and to some extent museums are centres of continuity of stability and the values around knowledge and scholarship.'

### Trends: Contextualising threats and opportunities

Different museum types also have a different perception of the threats and opportunities to which they are exposed (see Table 1). Due to their generally regional locations, independent trusts perceive Brexit as less of a threat. Unlike other museum types, university museums see climate change mostly as an opportunity to provide information and educate the public. While independent trusts see rising income disparity as neither a threat or an opportunity, they estimate that intensifying nationalism will present more of a challenge to them. Local authority museums, university museums, and independent trusts have broadly similar perceptions regarding their overall assessment of challenges and opportunities, where as national museums are considerably more pessimistic about their changing environment, seeing terrorism and cyber-dependency as major threats given their heightened public exposure. National museums also express less optimism about the ageing population and migration.

Technologies: Necessary but disruptive

Leaders see new technologies as having the potential both to enhance current operations – for example, in terms of collections management – and to create innovative experiences that reach new audiences. An additional area for development, shared with other sectors such as retail, is the potential integration of traditional (non-digital) and digital services and activities. Along with other sectors, museums find it difficult to decide where to prioritise spending on digital activities.

'I think if one thinks of what the original mission of the museum is and has been, I think there is a whole new sphere which we are required to operate in. We are fantastically behind the curve on that. There are two areas to this, one is around the huge task of making a collection of a million objects, of actually just digitising them. The other challenge which is in a sense much more interesting, much more challenging and much less clear in what direction it's going, is how the digital world will change the way in which people actually use museums and respond to them in the physical space.'

Figure 3: Threats and opportunities in the cultural sector
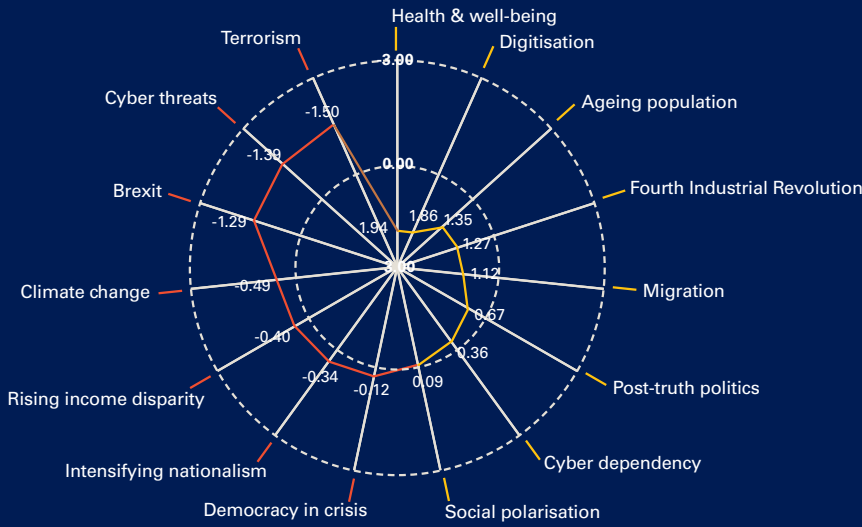
Leaders were asked to rate how a selection of trends will have a negative (0 to -3) or positive (0 to +3) impact on their organisation.

Table 1: Opportunities vs threats per museum type

	Opportunity/Threat	All Museums	Local Authority	National	Universities	Trusts
Opportunities	Growing importance of health & well-being	1.9	2.1	1.8	2.4	2.0
	Emerging technologies/digitisation	1.9	1.6	2.0	1.8	1.6
	Ageing population/workforce	1.3	1.1	0.9	2.0	1.6
	The future of work/Fourth Industrial Revolution	1.2	1.2	1.1	1.0	1.0
	Migration	1.1	1.6	0.8	1.6	1.3
	Post-truth political debate	0.7	1.3	0.2	0.6	1.1
	Rising cyber dependency	0.4	0.1	0.2	-0.4	1.0
	Deepening social & cultural polarisation	0.1	0.9	-0.2	-0.4	0.5
Threats	Democracy in crisis	-0.1	-0.1	0.1	-0.2	0.0
	Intensifying nationalism	-0.3	-0.1	0.1	-0.2	-0.9
	Rising income disparity/social mobility	-0.4	-0.6	-0.3	-0.6	0.0
	Climate change	-0.5	0.0	-0.6	1.0	-1.1
	Brexit	-1.3	-1.6	-1.3	-1.6	-0.8
	Cyber threats	-1.4	-1.3	-1.5	-1.0	-1.3
	Terrorism	-1.5	-1.3	-1.7	-1.2	-0.9
	Total	**2.9**	**4.9**	**1.6**	**4.8**	**5.0**

Leaders were asked to rate how a selection of trends will have a negative (0 to -3) or positive (0 to +3) impact on their organisation. This data is presented for all museums and by museum type.

Organisational challenges

From aligning to orchestrating the multi-purpose museum

The major organisational challenge faced by museum leaders is coordinating and inspiring organisational members to achieve the overall mission of their museums.

In an organisation with a single purpose, the leader would talk about 'alignment'. In a multi-purpose organisation, a more appropriate image is that of an orchestral conductor, bringing together different groups of specialists playing their own parts to create a harmonious whole. Museums are characterised by varying priorities of people in different areas: departments and individuals might view their own missions, including their place within the triple helix of culture-commerce-community, in ways that differ from the museum as a whole. Museums are also subject to a range of expectations that are projected onto them by others, and which often run counter to the beliefs and practices of people within the museum. Additionally whilst externally museum leaders are champions of culture, internally they cannot champion culture at the expense of their other responsibilities within the organisation.

'It's difficult being a Director these days because there are so many things to think about at a given time. But like an orchestra, you need to play well and in order to go forwards you need to make sure everybody's tuned in.'

Leaders perceive many of these tensions to be 'and' challenges that are intrinsically irresolvable and must be addressed simultaneously. At the same time, they report that many of their staff view them as contradictions – 'either/or' choices – that can only be dealt with at the expense of each other. Leaders see a responsibility to reframe these contradictions as interrelated challenges that can be addressed at the same time, and not in isolation.

From internal to external focus

Funding challenges are making leaders more outward-facing and prompting a change in the relative importance of internal and external stakeholders. In particular, leaders reported spending increasingly more of their time building relationships with philanthropists and private donors, rather than government and grant-awarding bodies. In particular, leaders found that there was 'considerable potential to do more with high-net-worth individuals, donors and commercial sponsors'.

As shown in Figure 4, leaders currently feel that new and current audiences, employees and trustees are their most important stakeholders, whereas local and regional government, patron schemes, friends' organisations, and commercial sponsors are their least important stakeholders.
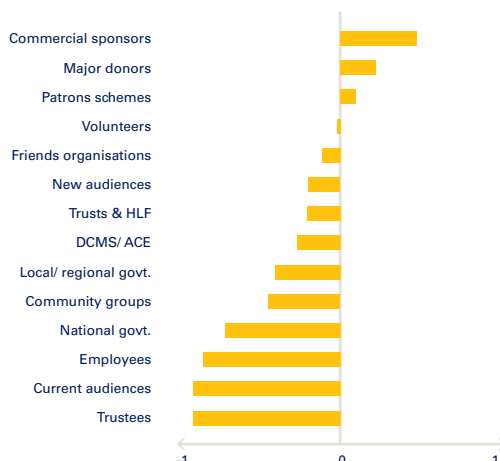
As shown in Figure 5, while they predict an overall decline in the importance of all stakeholders, there are a select

Figure 4: Leaders' present accountabilities
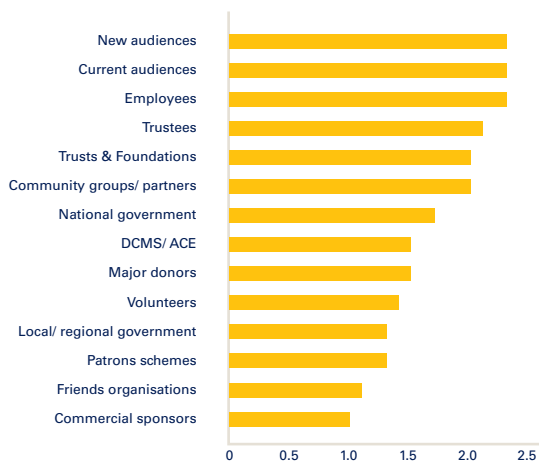
Leaders were asked to rate the current importance of stakeholders on a scale from very important (+3) to not important at all (-3).

Figure 5: Leaders' predicted change in accountabilities in the next five years

Leaders' changes of their assessment of the importance they place on stakeholders within the next five years.

number of external, commercially-focused stakeholders that leaders predict will increase in importance. Leaders foresee commercial sponsors, major donors, and patron schemes playing a more important role in the future.

These changes in focus cause difficulties for leaders in terms of where they spend their time. A greater number and variety of stakeholders translates into a 'chameleon' effect – where leaders must adjust fluidly to vastly different audiences, and run the risk of spreading themselves too thin. Concentrating more on external stakeholders means that, given limited time and resources, museum leaders will be able to spend less time with other important stakeholders such as audiences, employees, and trustees – raising the potential for conflict with those current key constituents.

The changing importance of external stakeholders varies considerably between different types of museum (see Figure 6). Independent trusts generally see the biggest upward potential in developing patron schemes, commercial sponsors, and major donors, whereas leaders of national museums generally predict a stagnation or decline in importance of all three types of stakeholders. This indicates that national museum leaders, due to their relatively stable funding sources, feel less of a need to buffer themselves against potential changes by raising funds from third parties. While university museum leaders predict the importance of patron schemes and commercial sponsors to increase considerably, they foresee a decline in the importance of major donors, perhaps because they have already exhausted this potential source of funding, or find it disproportionately difficult to compete for in a university environment. Leaders of local authority museums predict an increase in the importance of all three sources of funding, but they remain below the predicted average of the combination of all museum types, suggesting that they are somewhat less sanguine about those under-appreciated sources of funding. Consistent with their need to raise funds independently, leaders of independent trusts expect the strongest increase in the importance of patron schemes and major donors.

This divergence between types of museums demonstrates that the importance of external stakeholders as sources of funding differs according to their operating environment. A one-size-fits-all solution for diversifying funding sources is not a feasible strategy. Overall, leaders feel the need to change their focus and perspective on key relationships that have been of primary importance in museums for decades. Building new relationships while maintaining existing bonds in an increasingly changing and varied environment represents a key challenge for museum leaders.

Figure 6: Change in accountabilities per museum type for patron schemes, major donors, and commercial sponsors
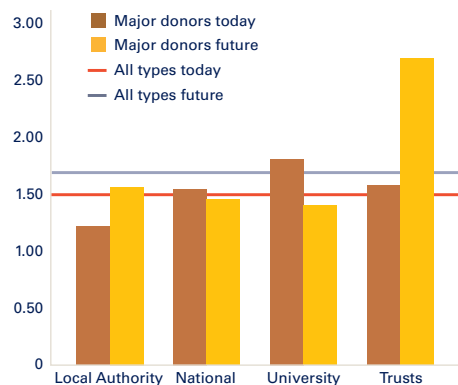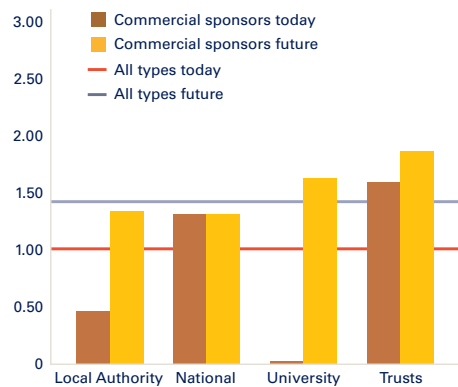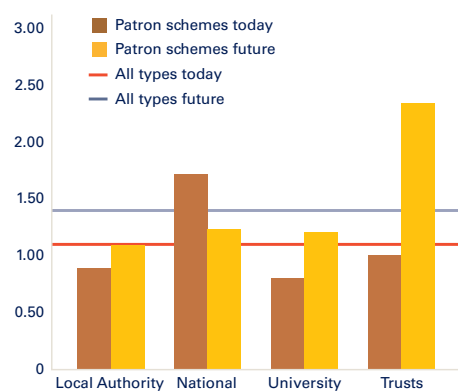
Leaders were asked to rate the current and future importance of stakeholders on a scale from very important (+3) to not important at all (-3).

Attracting and retaining talent in an 'uncertain, badly paid profession'

Museum leaders face the challenge of maintaining and building the skill base of their organisations, attracting and retaining top talent across widely different areas. While funding cuts have not caused a sudden loss of skills, leaders spoke about an ongoing 'hollowing out' of expertise. This incremental change may not have seemed alarming initially, but it might severely affect the ability of museums to fulfil their strategic goals in the long term.

'We're operating with sometimes as little as fifty percent of the staff numbers we used to and it's really exhausting for everybody to keep the show on the road and pretend to be cheerful. That's the real leadership challenge for a lot of us.'

Museums will continue to need highly expert and traditionally qualified staff in some areas, such as research, conservation, collections management and object-based learning. However, they also face the challenge of acquiring new skills quickly, particularly in relation to the commercial and digital domains. As a consequence, increasing the skill base of their employees and attracting more specialised staff from diverse backgrounds is a key challenges for museum leaders, especially given the reputation of the sector as an 'uncertain, badly paid profession'.

Reaching the next generation of leaders

For many current leaders, the biggest challenge is finding and developing the leaders of the future. Concern about how attractive the UK cultural sector in the future might be to the right talent is top of mind for many current leaders. Next to low pay, job uncertainty in a sector with decreasing funding, and unclear career paths were mentioned as major roadblocks to attracting talent from other industries in the future. This relates especially to technology but also to managerial functions, such as marketing and finance, that are likely to increase in importance given the trend to professionalise the leadership of the sector.

There are many questions in leaders' minds: are the right people in the UK now, or more likely to come from abroad? Are they in the cultural sector now or likely to come from other industries? Do they already have cultural sector skills and experience or are they acquiring transferable skills elsewhere? Are we providing the right developmental opportunities to support leaders of tomorrow currently rising within organisations and the sector as a whole?

Anxieties about representation and identity surface frequently, and the difficulty of attracting diverse leadership talent is seen as a big challenge. Furthermore, to some leaders, it is important that they themselves represent the diversity of the organisations they preside over, as well as the communities they serve and inhabit; for example, there is concern about the stark gender disparity between most of the workforce (72% female) and top leadership (71% male, see Figure 7).[1]

Figure 7: Gender ratio in top leadership

29% of current NMDC museum leaders are female.
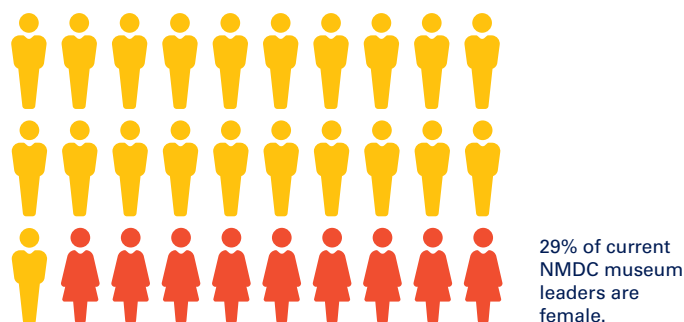
Similarly, there is a perceived 'need to recruit more BME leaders and a more diverse range of staff in all levels of the organisation'. For many leaders, low socio-economic diversity at senior levels is especially problematic given that museums are sometimes perceived to be places that reinforce elitism.

'Museums are very class-ridden and very class-dominated; it is all about class.'

As a result, interviewees expressed a desire to recruit more diverse staff, particularly to reflect the diversity of their visitors and to encourage greater access.

'I grew up in a pretty socioeconomically deprived part of the UK. How do we get kids from that background or from any other socio-economically deprived backgrounds in?'

This will not be easily achieved: structural obstacles relating to class, wealth, gender, ethnicity, and other demographic factors seem strongly in place, even for the future. The pervasive emphasis on formal qualifications was specifically cited as a block to socio-economic leadership diversity that is affecting the flow of diverse talent to the sector.

Overall, leaders express the need to become more inclusive organisations across their governance structures, workforce and audiences. They acknowledged they still have a very long way to go.

1 Character Matters: Attitudes, behaviours and skills in the UK Museum Workforce Full Report, ACE, Museums and Galleries Scotland, Museums Association, Association of Independent Museums, 2016, page 26, accessible at http://www.artscouncil.org.uk/sites/default/files/download-file/ACE_Museums_Workforce_ABS_BOP_Final_Report.pdf.

Individual challenges

Emotional implications of growing expectations

Museum leaders are the ultimate decision-makers in their organisations, and feel an acute sense of personal and moral responsibility for all aspects of the museum. This includes the ongoing care of organisational assets, the livelihoods and wellbeing of people in the organisation, relations with external stakeholders, and the impact their work is having on future generations.

This sense of personal responsibility can take a toll on leaders' emotional well-being, in particular when it comes to complex and personalised decisions related to restructuring and layoffs. This challenge becomes heightened when it takes place in an increasingly volatile environment.

'When things have got very unstable, in my earlier years I struggled really badly with the stress of that and feeling. I was totally responsible for some things that go down the plughole. You worry about destroying the future generation's legacy – let alone current.'

While some leaders say that they benefit from building deep and emotionally meaningful connections with employees, others point to the pitfall of emotional entanglement when difficult decisions have to be made.

'I think museums actually really suffer from having too many people in leadership roles for whom it is important to be liked, and I think that's almost mutually exclusive with being an effective senior leader because you have to make a load of tough decisions. The best you can really expect is to make those tough decisions and be respected for the way you did it.'

Whereas leadership in all sectors is about building and maintaining relationships, leaders in the cultural sector place particular importance on the people-related aspects of their role. This is a result of sectoral norms, but also the longer than average employee and leader tenure in the sector, which creates longstanding relationships with heightened expectations.

'Everything in the role comes down ultimately to people, whether they're stakeholders, staff, volunteers, the public, it's people. So, managing people and peoples' expectations is absolutely key to the role.'

While many leaders say they doubt themselves when making decisions, most see this as part of a natural process of introducing new or different information into their decision-making process, in particular in areas in which they feel they do not have a lot of experience. Along with essential due diligence, leaders emphasised the basic need to make difficult decisions and move their organisations forward in a chosen course of action. However, a lack of feedback about their own performance presents a major challenge: they do not have the information to allow them to assess their own effectiveness. This points to a need for meaningful performance evaluations of leaders.

'The strangest thing is how little feedback you get. Before one's a leader one's getting quite a lot of feedback all the time, but actually I have no idea really how good a job I'm doing'.

Gaining and retaining credibility

Many leaders we interviewed indicated that museum leaders do not need to be curators themselves to succeed, or to have formal curatorial training. However, leaders emphasise how understanding curatorial issues and having technical qualifications can raise their authority with employees, and facilitate their understanding of many core museum issues.

'You need to have credibility with curators. It's good to have knowledge about parts of the collections, it's good to have historical or artistic knowledge of better still both, as well as having a range of management skills.'

As the skill base in the sector is changing, and leaders' focus is increasingly shifting from internal to external stakeholders, leaders face the challenge of building and integrating management and commercial skills credibly into their organisations, while simultaneously maintaining the core passion and knowledge in their institutions.

Challenges for the future

The idea of the triple helix of culture-commerce-community implies irresolvable tensions; as discussed, this can be re-framed as being productive, energising, opportunistic. As the challenges of balancing tensions become increasingly complex, a new way of seeing things seems to be emerging in many leaders' minds. In this model, the three Cs are not entangled with each other as in a triple helix; instead, they are mutually reinforcing, as in a cube.

Leaders feel the need to think of museums of the future as 'cultural businesses', even though current qualifications and skill sets 'largely don't cater for that'. Yet they feel that an entrepreneurial spirit cultivated in museums and similar cultural organisations will best equip the sector and its institutions to embrace the challenge of reduced resources and increased expectations.

Similarly, leaders identify a challenge in ensuring an appropriate talent pipeline for the future. Their aim is to attract and develop people with the skills to pursue cultural agendas, supported by commercial acumen, and the ability to engage effectively with more diverse communities.

In the following section, we'll explore how museum leaders are responding to these current and ongoing challenges.

Figure 8: Three Cs Cube

Culture · Commerce · Communities

This section analyses how museum leaders respond to the challenges they face, and examines the mind-sets, techniques and skills that they employ.

Responses

Embracing and transcending tensions

'It's about how you generate income and revenue through your attractions, to invest into your programming so that you can then convert your non-users to users and that to me is our whole business model.'

Museum leaders face a set of nested tensions, which create challenges at sectoral, organisational and individual levels. Notably, however, some museum leaders perceive these tensions as creative frictions, rather than dilemmas. When thinking about delivering cultural, commercial and community value, they think 'both... and', rather than 'either… or'. Such paradoxical thinking, which embraces underlying synergies between demands that seem contradictory on the surface, not only eases potential tensions, but paves the way to more distinctive museums that are attractive, inclusive and economically sustainable.

A positive emotional disposition that welcomes and embraces these paradoxes is only the first step towards a more distinctive museum. Competing demands need to be met in practice and the ways in which individual museum leaders go about it varies. Key to all variants is, however, that cultural, commercial and community values are mutually enhancing, not compromising. For some museum leaders and their organisations, that may mean keeping the three strictly separate. Museum shops and cafés that generate revenue away from exhibitions are commonplace and widely cited even in the management literature as examples of 'selective coupling'[1] – the separate-yet-connected delivery of different values. Other museum leaders clearly differentiate a portfolio of activities. They move between activities that generate different kinds of values, and are very clear what each activity is expected to contribute. Whether separate or oscillating, they are mutually reinforcing.

'We are commercially-focused and we do a lot of stuff to make money, but it's sort of done within the overall boundary of knowing what we're doing for purely financial gain, what we're doing to make money while still being authentic, and what we're doing that will never make money and be wholly for our pure charitable purpose with no look to any financial commercial gain.'

Others are very clear that additional commercial value need not flow from increasing income, but may be generated by increasing efficiency – which enhances,

rather than undermines the quality of cultural offerings:

'It's not about Disneyfying our museums and it's not about commercialising what we do, but it is about how we make it more sustainable by looking at all of our revenue-generating opportunities and looking at how we deliver things much more effectively and efficiently, because there's a lot of practices that we have that are prehistoric.'

An alternative approach sees a more conscious blending, rather than separating of different value propositions. Key to this integration is a sense of 'transcending'[2] current and potentially conflicting demands in pursuit of some higher-order value. In this context, we heard a lot about story-telling as a means to positively engage and create value along all three dimensions of culture, commerce and community. This approach creates a distinctive societal role for museums as social 'glue', using cultural objects to tell stories that bring together increasingly atomised communities and 'open up new horizons for people':

'In a society which is very fragmented and atomised, [museums] offer significant examples of historical continuity. I think they are places where communities can find their roots, I think they're places where people can think beyond their immediate circumstances. So, they are places that can take you on journeys, journeys of imagination, journeys of the spirit and journeys of learning. And so they are places that give the opportunity to open up new horizons for people.'

Multiple purposes are difficult to embed in organisational structures – and also in the staff who inhabit them. Internal and external stakeholders might be confused by an organisation trying to accomplish too many things at once. It is therefore imperative that museum leaders

1 Pache, A. & F. Santos (2013) Inside the hybrid organization: Selective coupling as a response to competing institutional logics. Academy of Management Journal, 56(4): 972-1001.
2 Schad, J., M. W. Lewis, S. Raisch, & W. K. Smith (2016) Paradox research in management science: Looking back to move forward. The Academy of Management Annals, 10(1): 5-64.

Photo by Antenna

communicate tensions consistently, craft a mission for the organisation that mobilises all constituents, and empower all members of the organisation to generate value along different dimensions.

This sense of empowerment requires a certain amount of 'letting go': the essence of a paradox is that it is never resolved, and the notion of 'transcending tensions' implies that the leader does not engage with them directly. Leaders who are successful in this context tend to be comfortable with delegating, because efforts to 'own' every decision personally tend to create unnecessary bottlenecks. One respondent considered this sense of empowerment 'the greatest joy of why I do my job and why it suits me very well':

'I've tried to instil a sort of family business culture as well, so I empower [staff] to make decisions and sometimes I feel that's a little uncomfortable because I like to know what's going on and because I'm empowering people to make decisions, I rely on them communicating to me what they've done. Mostly that happens but sometimes it doesn't [and] you get a surprise and think "oh I didn't know we were doing that". And so it's that trust and communication which is vital to me as a leader. My predecessor refused for any staff to interact at all with any Trustee, so Trustees were kept to one side and staff to another side and the two never interacted. I've changed that culture completely, in such a way that now each of my leadership team has a Trustee mentor.

What the management scholars say

In order to handle competing demands, organisations may take a variety of approaches. Organisations may compartmentalise these demands to reduce conflict between people generating different kinds of value, for instance in different departments. They can consider closer integration through 'selective coupling' – combining organisational elements which individually address the expectations of one constituency, but collectively create new synergies. Finally, organisations can support all staff in 'wearing different hats' and considering different value propositions at different times in their work. This empowers all staff to transcend tensions and create distinctive new value.

Miron-Spektor, E., A. Ingram, J. Keller, W. K. Smith, & M. W. Lewis (2018). Microfoundations of organizational paradox: The problem is how we think about the problem. Academy of Management Journal, 61(1), 26-45.

Simsek, Z. (2009) Organizational ambidexterity: Towards a multilevel understanding. Journal of Management Studies, 46(4): 597-624.

Smets, M., P. Jarzabkowski, G. T. Burke, & P. Spee (2015) Reinsurance trading in Lloyd's of London: Balancing conflicting-yet-complementary logics in practice. Academy of Management Journal, 58(3): 932-970.

Photo by Rov Camato/Pexels

Becoming entrepreneurial

'I want us to think of this museum as a social enterprise
so that we're business-minded, we're happy to take risks,
but we have a really strong sense of social purpose.'

In the face of increasingly scarce resources, many museum leaders talked about the need to become entrepreneurial – not in the limited sense of making money, but in a broader sense of being innovative and enterprising about all aspects of the organisation.

'Entrepreneurship is the pursuit of opportunity without regard for the resources currently controlled.'[1] By this definition, museums are very entrepreneurial places, precisely because they are often resource-constrained. Many museum leaders strive to take advantage of this constraint, to inspire their organisations to a positive and opportunity-focused attitude instead of an overly managerial one. The matrix in Figure 9 shows how the right balance of opportunity- and managerial-focus constitutes an entrepreneurial mode of leadership:

Making money is certainly important, but many leaders' attitude towards it is opportunistic: money is a means to a cultural end.

'I think that inevitably there will be more focus on the people with business skills because that's the way things are going… they'll have to be more entrepreneurial, more commercial to make ends meet.'

Also, most leaders said that they had already cut costs as far as they felt they could without undermining their cultural mission. Their attention was now on earning and raising money rather than seeking to achieve further cost reductions.

Several interviewees reflected that independent trusts had been able to respond far faster than other museum governance types to funding cuts through overcoming 'the culture of dependency' (i.e., the expectation of government support and other forms of outside funding). They observed also that becoming more commercially oriented and increasing self-generated revenue could give desirable levels of freedom, and imbued the organisation with increased willingness to embrace opportunity and change.

There was a strong feeling that museums are in a uniquely responsible position to prioritise their cultural mission with commercial imperatives, and to harness commercial opportunities for enhancing the cultural mission. Leaders expect the whole organisation to become capable of balancing the need for generating income with all aspects of the museum's mission, including caring for collections.

There was also a sense that the challenges of broadening focus, new audiences, and new technologies demanded a more outward-oriented response than the way many museums conducted themselves in the past. In operating along the dimensions of community, as well as culture and commerce, museum leaders seek to innovate how they can engage with communities and make their institutions relevant. They and their organisations are acting in particularly entrepreneurial ways.

Figure 9: Entrepreneurial leadership matrix

Opportunity focus	Managerial skill	
	Low	High
High	Innovator	Entrepreneurial leader
Low	Inventor	Trustee
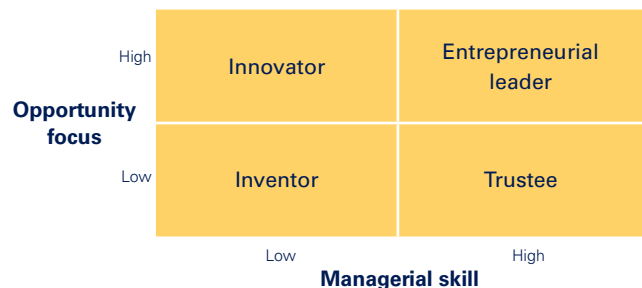
1 Stevenson, H., and D. Gumpert (1985) "The Heart of Entrepreneurship" Harvard Business Review, March, 85-94.

What the management scholars say

Entrepreneurial leadership: What is it and how should it be taught?

'Entrepreneurial leadership is about combining, exploiting and maintaining the particular capabilities of entrepreneurial teams, especially balancing creativity, influence, a particular attitude to risk, and an ability to access scarce resources strategically. These capabilities are best developed in socially interactive, reflective and experiential ways, by which teams can become proficient in exploiting opportunity, pursuing innovation, and operating effectively in uncertain environments.'

Roomi, M. A., & P. Harrison (2011) International Review of Entrepreneurship. 9(3): 1-43.

Strategic Reframing and Scenario Planning

'Scenario planning is based on the principle that there are multiple futures and multiple strategic contexts. Rather than the usual predict-and-control approaches to strategy development, scenario planning is more accurately viewed as a creative and disciplined process of discovery – which is, of course, very appropriate in a museum context. Strategists adopt the mentality of learners as they work in groups to develop and critique a number of 'stories' about plausible future contexts. This enables them to look with new eyes at their own interests and options in the present, as well as the interests and options of others.'

Ramirez, R. and A. Wilkinson (2016) Strategic Reframing, Oxford University Press.

Articulating distinctive value

Museum leaders are practised in articulating the value that their institutions deliver and collectively defend culture as a social good. By presenting museums as spaces for debate and places of identity for the nation and communities, they place an emphasis on relevance, story-telling, and the possibility of exploring big questions. Museums communicate and create value in ways that other types of organisation would find difficult, perhaps impossible, to maintain.

'One of the first things I did was to introduce a manifesto to the organisation that made it clear that I wanted collections to be at the heart of everything we do but recognising that we need to generate more money, be more commercial, be more entrepreneurial. I'm a curator by training, I believe that I'm quite entrepreneurial but there are new skills that I need to learn and I need then to disseminate those across the organisation.'

Encouraging risk-taking

In fostering an entrepreneurial mind-set, leaders again avoid making either/or decisions to resolve tensions. Instead they provide space to promote debate and air conflict among seemingly competing organisational units and staff, for example balancing the interests of conservation with those of exhibiting. They encourage employees to take collaborative risks and have the confidence to build innovative responses that address both issues.

'We should be eighty percent cautious and twenty percent risk-taking. There are times where we've done projects where they're not fully-funded when we start, but we've decided to take the risk because we think the idea is bold enough and in virtually every case we've done that, we've raised the money. […] Because we've built up prudent reserves on one level, it then encourages risk-taking in another.'

Opportunism

One of the most interesting aspects of the museum leaders' entrepreneurial attitudes is the way they perceive and respond to challenges. Many of the global trends that leaders in other sectors viewed as threats are viewed by most of the museum leaders as 'opportunities' (see Figure 3 on page 15). This opportunism, combined with an ability to motivate an organisation to pursue its mission – whether it is cultural, commercial, community-oriented, or all three – is a classic characteristic of entrepreneurial leadership.

'We have a collection of material which suddenly has a new audience and because our purpose is to improve the quality of life fundamentally, then there's an audience to whom we can offer something which we wouldn't have been able to afford if they weren't attracted to our collection. So again, it's very much a silver lining thing […] for a museum which covers the whole world.'

Creating partnerships

Entrepreneurial leaders innovate by creating partnerships with organisations and individual experts both within and outside the cultural sector.

'We should be talking to Amazon, to people who know about logistics, people who know about digital technology. We've got to talk to people that we would never have conceived would have anything to offer us as a museum, and that involves reaching out.'

Our respondents especially emphasised the need to learn from others and to transfer knowledge and skills acquired in this cross-fertilisation process.

'Looking to other parts of the cultural sector is a way of learning and innovating within the museum sector. And I think because of the way the cultural secure is currently developing, there will be more interchange between different segments of the cultural sector when we're looking for leaders. I think we've got a greater appreciation of transferable skills. I'm hoping that will actually create a lot of innovation. I think we will become much more permeable as a sector to people moving in and out of it.'

Overall, leaders suggest that the boundaries of the cultural sector will become more permeable, as new kinds of knowledge are transferred, and new types of talent interact in the sector.

Agility

Rather than wondering how they can deal with trends that are difficult to influence, museum leaders focus on developing the agility to deal with quickly changing situations. In this context, leaders also talked about the use of tools such as scenario planning and strategic reframing to better understand and respond to environmental changes and the impact on their organisations.

'We're much more agile and able to respond to those challenges than we've ever been. I'm not going to worry about Brexit, I'm going to deal with it, all of that scenario planning is within the organisation.'

Supporting and developing individual leaders

'I think what museum directors need now is a certain kind of grittiness - a kind of business awareness in numeracy certainly matters and also a kind of impresario streak that you need in order to do this job these days, because it's a very noisy world out there.'

Museum leaders talked about how they responded to the personal challenges of their roles. Leaders described having to build sources of support for themselves, because there is no systematic provision in the sector for top-level leadership development, and they point to this as a risk limiting the effectiveness of future leaders. We have identified a number of shared concerns, and common methods through which leaders secure a supportive environment for themselves.

Acknowledging doubt

Leaders talked about 'doubt' as both a symptom of the difficulties of decision-making and a tool for responding to them – if they acknowledge doubt and empower others to advise and assist. Research on CEOs in other sectors highlights the importance for senior leaders everywhere of harnessing the productive power of doubt. Acknowledging doubt helps to reduce uncertainty, mitigate risk, sharpen perception, and tame anxiety. Leaders acknowledge this readily.

'It's a really good thing to worry. When I was recruiting I'd look for people who seemed to me to worry well… If you worry well you are openly and flexibly thinking aloud, exposing yourself to as many factors as possible. I think it's not so much some guilty secret that leaders have to confess to, but the absolute emblem of what leadership is.'

A trusted team

Museum leaders work to find the best information possible to guide their decisions, often from experts and stakeholders who will be affected. Leaders provided examples of how they successfully draw on a team of trusted senior managers to access diverse views to inform their decision-making. Many leaders specifically commented on the value of having top team members who come from a variety of backgrounds in terms of experience, skills and qualifications, to provide new and differing insights. Significantly, they emphasised a need to build teams of experts and enable them to do their jobs without directive leadership.

'My job [is to] work with [my team] and hopefully support them in a way that they feel that they have the autonomy, resources, collective direction to do the best job that they can, and invariably they do an outstanding job. So I don't direct, I rarely intervene.'

Professional and personal support networks

Finding sources of support from peers with similar challenges and responsibilities is certainly important for leaders in any sector, but the complexity and diversity of organisations within the cultural sector make this harder to achieve. Leaders expressed various ways in which they have found – or even founded – networks of peer support. Notably, many describe their 'peers' as being outside the sector: leaders of comparable levels of responsibility in almost any industry, also facing, sharing, and comparing the challenges of senior leadership generally.

'It's very important that you have some respite, whether that's through family, through church, through holidays, you have to find ways to in a sense put your job in the right place in your work life balance.'

Networks outside the sector were particularly prized as a means of accessing differing perspectives and overcoming feelings of loneliness. Support from family, friends and private networks was mentioned as important for leaders to overcome feelings of anxiety and to cope with the rapid changes and difficult decision making inherent in their role. In particular, mentors – often former leaders – were described as key sources of advice and support. Physical and mental practices to maintain health, such as exercise, hobbies and socialising, were presented as integral to leaders coping with their professional challenges.

Finally current leaders take responsibility for developing future leaders. They see this as a duty that helps them to become more effective leaders themselves, and also allows them to scale their impact through the influence they have on the new generation of cultural leaders.

Shaping future leadership

'I have no expectations of what tomorrow will look like because I just realise that we're in an inherently very volatile, extremely fast-moving environment for which there's no political certainty, there's no funding certainty, and things are happening at breakneck speed all the time.'

Museum leaders of the future will be coping with highly complex challenges. The complexity of their institutions complicates the connections between the past and the future which are necessary in order to maintain stewardship in an uncertain long term future. Attracting people with the right capabilities will be key to the health of the sector for the long term, just as their responses to these challenges, and the tools and skills necessary to meet them, must suit a landscape quite different from both today and the recent past.

New capabilities

Across the cultural sector, there is a rising need for specific skills to meet the challenges of the future. Some of these are well recognised in the sector (and indeed many other sectors), while others will need to be developed:

Commercial capabilities

Museum leaders anticipate funding challenges will continue. However most agree with one leader who said, 'I think the next generation of leaders needs to forget about dependency and actually get some joy from generating their own money.' This is what most leaders feel will best equip the sector and its institutions for the future.

Digital capabilities

As museums develop digital collections and interact with visitors and other stakeholders in a virtual space, their leaders need to steer the organisations through the process of digitising content and other core functions, and of finding the right people to do this. Also, museum leaders recognise that they need to interact with wider groups, often very far beyond the boundaries of the organisation, through digital and social media; and again, find and manage the right people to make this happen.

Experiential capabilities

The 'experience economy'[1] requires different responses than those of the service, industrial, or agrarian economies; leaders who are sensitive to public expectations for immersive experience, for engagement mediated through real-world and virtual media, and for involvement in co-creation processes will be best equipped to steer their organisations to embrace these new patterns of consumption.

Partnering capabilities

Organisations that can work with partners to enrich their interaction with familiar audiences, and extend their engagement activities to involve new audiences and stakeholders, will be more effective at meeting the multiple purposes of their organisations. Leaders are very conscious of the importance of developing or expanding this partnering capability, and of operating far beyond the boundaries of their own organisations.

Identity capabilities

Museums provide platforms for important social conversations, especially in relation to current questions about identity that look likely to influence future generations. Leaders who can empower people to engage with questions of identity will find ways of stimulating those conversations through collections, spaces, and networks; they will invite people and communities to discuss and debate and learn. The skills to facilitate and enable these conversations are varied. With the right skills it is possible, in museums, to tell stories that cannot be readily explored through other types of organisation. Leaders who embrace these opportunities make their museums strongly relevant, and by doing this so, ensure they are places of sustainable value.

By improving commercial, digital, experiential, partnering, and identity capabilities, leaders and their organisations can be centrally involved in large-scale current trends – not merely responding to challenges, but leading the process of change.

1 Pine, J. and J. Gilmore (1999) The Experience Economy, Harvard Business School Press, Boston

What the management scholars say

Gender and Leadership

Women who take active ownership of their careers as part of a self-acceptance process where both feminine and masculine leadership behaviours are embraced, translate gender-based behaviours to develop a unique leadership style.

Athanasopoulou, A., A. Moss-Cowan, M. Smets, & T. Morris (2018). Claiming the corner office: Female CEO careers and implications for leadership development. Human Resource Management, 57(2), 617-639.

'The three actions we suggest to support women's access to leadership position are (1) educate women and men about second-generation gender bias, (2) create safe 'identity workspaces' to support transistions to bigger roles, and (3) anchor women's development efforts in a sense of leadership purpose rather than in how women are perceived.'

Ibarra, H., R. Ely, & D. Kolb (2013). Women rising: The unseen barriers. Harvard Business Review, 91(9), 60-66.

Embracing debate

Leaders pointed to opportunities that arise from engaging with a new and enriched awareness of post-imperial politics and values. As the provenance of many collections is increasingly problematised, so too are the leadership responsibilities of exhibiting them and making them more accessible. Museums need to facilitate and accommodate debate. Future leaders will be adept at using the discomfort these debates provoke, both institutionally and personally, to elicit new institutional strategies and ways of engaging with audiences.

'There's some quite provocative imagery there that tackles subjects that traditionally a government department would try and avoid. Things like gender identity, things like race relations, colonialism. It's not a hardship because it helps to elevate the strategy.'

Attracting diverse future leaders

Interviewees talked about attracting talent for tomorrow – including their own successors. A talent 'pipeline' is a commonly used metaphor, suggesting a set of capabilities already flowing toward future responsibility. At the same time, leaders acknowledge that there are no predictable routes to the most senior roles, nor a required set of specific skills, experiences, or qualifications. Future leaders will (and perhaps ought to) come from many more places than they have in the past.

'I think [we need] people from all sorts of different backgrounds who are much more prepared to be more public-facing, be more inclusive, work much more with communities, do a lot more networking.'

Achieving this leadership diversity will require dismantling or skirting the structural obstacles relating to class, wealth, gender, ethnicity, and other demographic factors, working far beyond the boundaries of the organisation to change these adverse conditions in the future.

Current leaders are taking a variety of approaches to improve diversity in the leadership of their organisations, for example, through active recruitment measures and leadership development.

Qualities and qualifications

When asked about formal qualifications, most leaders expressed some ambivalence: having some sort of professional qualification seems to be important, but then not necessarily so, and there is no agreement about what sorts of qualifications matter.

'If I was doing a museum Director job of a comparable sort of size in [city], I doubt I would look credible without the PhD. So I think academic qualifications are useful. Would I say that academic qualifications are essential in the museum sector? Overall I'd say far from it.'

There is a sense that diverse qualities of attitude, skill and experience are necessary to maintain vitality in museum leadership, and that identifying the most pressing challenges for tomorrow's leaders will enable the development of a sustainable supply of flexible leadership talent from many sources that can adapt to present and future challenges.

'Most Boards of Trustees would say if they've not got a PhD, we're not interested. If you approach it that way you will always get people from a certain background.'

Working with Boards and other influential stakeholders to change attitudes towards qualities and qualifications, and then working with talented individuals – present and future – to develop appropriate skills and capabilities, will fill the talent pipeline appropriately.

Leadership for the long term

'Good leaders of the future will be chameleons, they'll be able to adapt to a variety of different circumstances'

Leaders typically have a long tenure and a wealth of experience within the cultural sector in the United Kingdom. However, only about half of NMDC leaders have significant work experience outside the cultural sector, and only 30% have significant international work experience (see Figure 10). In the long term, this raises the question of whether museums could benefit from leaders with a different set of experiences.

Senior leaders in the cultural sector stay in post considerably longer than those in most other sectors and industries. The average tenure of museum leaders in the UK is 6.9 compared to 4.8 years in other sectors.[1] In the cultural sector, there is a sense of a longer game; leaders are joining organisations that have lasted much longer than most corporations and human lifespans, and therefore stand in a position of service and stewardship. Attracting leaders by explicitly emphasising the importance of this sensibility will ensure a sustainable future.

Succession planning

Succession planning and the talent development necessary to support it will depend upon understanding the attractiveness of the sector, and on identifying the skills necessary for responding to future leadership challenges.

Interviewees suggested that succession planning will have to change in order to meet the constantly evolving challenges of diversity, identity, inclusion, and engagement. Given the generally long tenures of culture-sector leaders, there is time for every institution to think carefully about how to plan for each leader's successor, seeking support from within and outside the sector. The right leadership talent can be identified and found anywhere, but continuing to motivate and enable leadership development within the sector will remain critically important.

'I'd love to kind of think that the next museum leader might be somebody who had forged a perfectly successful career as an architect or as a ceramicist or as a carpenter or as someone who's actually been in the kind of game that we are supposed to be trying to serve'.

The sector can become more attractive by positioning leadership roles as opportunities to influence and interact on par with the leaders of other prominent institutions. Leadership roles should be presented as positions of considerable civic responsibility – reaching beyond the immediate cultural remit and commercial responsibilities to embrace multiple communities of interest.

'I think there's a responsibility on leaders to develop people where it's right. I'm not saying everybody must be a leader, but for an opportunity for those people that want to do it and have the ability to do it, and some of that is some freedom to take on things and do things and try things out.'

---

1 Cornish, C. (2017) UK chief executives spend less than five years in the job, Financial Times, https://www.ft.com/content/ded1823a-370e-11e7-99bd-13beb0903fa3, accessed 01/02/18.

Figure 10: Leader tenure and experience

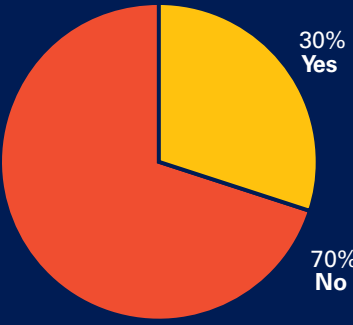**Distribution of leader tenure in current position in years**

0   2.5   5   7.5   10   12.5   15   17.5

Distribution of leader tenure in the sector in years

0   2.5   5   7.5   10   12.5   15   17.5   17.5   20   22.5   25   27.5   30   32.5   35   37.5   40   42.5

Leader work experience outside the sector

50% Only cultural sector

20% Academia

15% Business/Finance

7% Politics

4% Media

4% Education
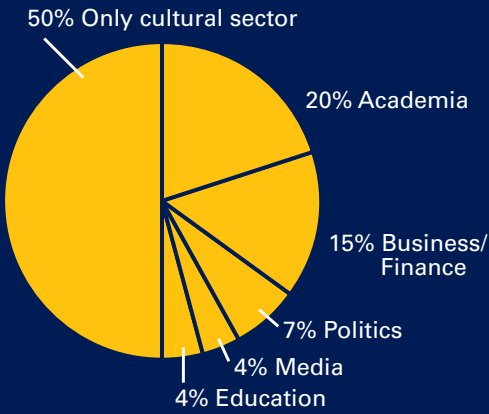
Leader international work experience

30% **Yes**

70% **No**

Data on leader tenure and work experience were collected from annual reports, museum websites, and LinkedIn profiles. Only date found in those sources were classed as 'significant' experiences, while other data was not taken into account.

Purpose

Museum leaders face multiple challenges and respond in ways that shape opportunities for their organisations. They combine ability, credibility and resources to lead with purpose.

Museums are increasingly multi-purpose organisations, and the bigger the job, the bigger the toolkit required. In this study, rather than address this reality with a laundry list of tools and skills, or repeat excellent work by earlier researchers on skills needed in museums for the immediate future,[1] we analysed our interview data to systematise categories, and to visualise three key ingredients that converge to form multi-purpose museum leadership. Purposes are defined by culture, commerce and communities, and achieved by ability, resources and credibility:

Figure 11: Purpose emerging from multiple overlapping challenges & responses

Ability: Necessary, but not sufficient

To date, the sector has placed a lot of emphasis on formal qualifications as a signal of technical ability. In essence, many museum leaders are specialists, gradually broadening their skills into areas like finance, marketing, human resources etc. Digital skills and commercial savviness are top of the list of abilities to develop for the future. And yet, museum leaders caution:

'I'm absolutely not saying that everybody has to suddenly become a retail expert, that's ridiculous and you need the cultural content, you need to knowledge base in the organisation. But you also need the right people and enough of the right people driving the commercial business side. Running a large museum is running a business.'

This caveat is important: museum leaders are not expected to have all abilities, but they are expected to ensure that their organisation does. For many museum leaders, we therefore noted, leadership is something 'we' do, not 'I'. Personal ability is undoubtedly necessary, but it can never be sufficient, because expert ability is typically limited to a narrow field and there are many areas of expertise museum leaders need to lead to generate value.

Resources: In the sector, not just your organisation

Resources for the present are certainly located in organisations: collections, people, funds, reputation, to name but a few. Resources for the future seem to reside much more in the sector, especially agility and learning. Many respondents noted the learning opportunities that arise from the variety of the sector. Especially to address the need some have felt to respond to funding cuts and overcome 'the culture of dependency' earlier than others creates different experiences and opportunities for mutal learning.

Table 2: Leaders' organisations positions on the culture–commerce continuum, now and in five years, per museum type (0 = commerce; 100 = culture)

Governance type	Today	In 5 years	Change
Local Authority	77	64	-14
National	73	61	-12
University	78	69	-9
Trusts	48	41	-7
Total	**70**	**59**	**-11**

1 Character Matters: Attitudes, behaviours and skills in the UK Museum Workforce (2016) ACE, Museums and Galleries Scotland, Museums Association, Association of Independent Museums, accessible at http://www.artscouncil.org.uk/sites/default/files/download-file/ACE_Museums_Workforce_ABS_BOP_Final_Report.pdf.

As illustrated in Table 2, local authority, national, and university museums, as well as independent trusts, have moved towards the commercial side of the culture-commerce spectrum. The results indicate a decelerating shift, in that leaders of independent trusts now predict the slowest further move among all museum types towards 'commerce' in the next five years. Arguably, as they moved further earlier, they have already gathered more experience in this field. Conversely, leaders foresee local authority and national museums making the biggest step towards commercialisation; university museums, with the second lowest predicted shift; are perceived as being slightly more insulated against pressures to commercialise. These differences in predicted shifts reflect both the funding situation of different museums, and also the opportunity for different museum types to learn from each other – especially in the area of resourcing.

The sector offers ample opportunity to support needs for adaptability and future orientation. Learning from others who have walked on your path before helps avoid old mistakes, and the diversity of the sector means that many paths are well trodden.

Credibility: Empathy and enthusiasm go a long way

Harnessing resources – both internal and external to the organisation – critically depends on leaders' credibility. Leaders can only deliver value along all dimensions if they are accepted as credible by the different expert constituencies and resource holders. Interviewees told us that they are most effective at building their credibility, especially with expert staff, when they focus less on developing ability and more on building empathy. Listening skills, genuine enthusiasm, and the ability to recognise the value people with different skills bring to the organisation are key.

'Be genuinely enthusiastic because all experts respond to people who like their subject. I think that cuts a lot of ice actually, that you don't have to know more than them about the subject, but it needs to be based on a sympathy. So the chap who comes in and doesn't know about the subject but wants to run the place properly has got to be prepared to deal with people probably of the type he's never met before, but recognise their value to the organisation.'

It is this broad, cross-constituency credibility that allows museum leaders to communicate 'both…and' visions – and to do so with purpose. It is also central to one of the key skills for the future our respondents mentioned: people management. Genuine credibility allows museum leaders to influence and guide people to do their best, rather than 'manage' them.

In short, we argue that leaders respond to the overlapping challenges in the environment with overlapping means of achieving purpose.

Conclusion

While it is clear that the sector faces challenges, the responses of its current leadership are increasingly empowered and empowering. Maintaining this momentum will ensure that the UK cultural sector, with its glittering array of institutions, will continue to shine as an example to the world: not just in the superb richness of its collections, but in the evolving excellence of its leadership.

This research points to clear implications for the sector, its current leaders, and the future. There are also areas of uncertainty. The recommendations and provocations below are offered in the entrepreneurial spirit so evident among the leaders interviewed. There are ample opportunities to enhance and expand the value of the sector, and to enrich the lives of all who engage with it – both professionals within and the public they serve.

Leaders that embrace the challenges they face, in this sector as in any other, will be more effective. Leaders that can inspire similarly opportunistic responses throughout their organisations and the stakeholders they interact with, will achieve greatest impact. Leaders that look out, look in, look in the mirror, and look ahead – all at the same time – will be difficult to find and develop. But with such "both/and" vision, they will be able to lead their complex institutions into a sustainable future.

Provocations

- Embrace the opportunities that funding cuts represent.
- Find people with the right qualities, enable your organisations to seek potential talent anywhere, and develop it.
- Museums are about people. Art and objects and collections are about people, too.
- Museums are already well positioned to be powerful agents of social change. Galvanising people, organisations, funders, policy, and popular understanding to embrace this notion of the purpose of a museum, will ensure sustainability more strongly than mere money.
- Invest in senior leadership development opportunities, tailoring programmes that meet the specific leadership issues outlined in this report.
- Many issues in this report will benefit from further research.

Recommendations

Look inward	The leader facing the organisation	Get the right people around you, from wherever you can find them, to help in the collective endeavour of representing, maintaining and expanding the mission of your organisation.
Look in the mirror	The leader facing the self	Seek support from your peers, whomever you consider them to be; from your colleagues, who will be empowered by the opportunities you make; and from your own personal and professional networks.
Look ahead	The leader facing the future	Constantly scan the horizon for trends that will influence your organisation, and your effectiveness. Turn the eyes of your organisation to the future, even as you collect, preserve and exhibit the past.
Look outward	The leader facing the world	Be opportunistic, not managerial or defensive. Articulate purpose, find the resources to support it, and engage with the widest possible variety of external stakeholders.

1888

2015

Mini Museum

Birmingham Museum staff, then and now. Current staff celebrated the 130th anniversary of the museum. Photo courtesy of Birmingham Museums Trust

Method and Sample

The Museum Leaders' Report is based on individual conversations with members of the National Museum Directors' Council (NMDC) representing a wide range of museums and cultural institutions in the UK, making it one of the most comprehensive in-depth studies of how cultural leaders lead.

Assured of their anonymity, the leaders reflected openly on their leadership challenges and experiences. Open-ended questions allowed them to elaborate freely and gave us a glimpse of the UK cultural sector through the eyes of its most senior leaders. We therefore let leaders 'speak for themselves' in order to present our analysis in this report.

We studied NMDC-affiliated museum leaders (46 total), and conducted surveys with 39. In parallel, we collected ~1,500 additional organisational and leader level data points from publicly available annual reports for all 46 leaders, museum websites, and LinkedIn profiles. We surveyed 39 leaders on 48 items with regards to culture and commerce, trends and accountabilities.

We then interviewed 42 (of 46) NMDC affiliated museum leaders (Response rate = 91.3%), at an average of 65 minutes per interview, for a total of 45 hours of audio. Each interview was anonymised prior to analysis by researchers at Saïd Business School, in accordance with the research ethics standards of the University of Oxford. We then conducted several rounds of in depth analysis of ~345,000 words of text using NVivo 11. The interview data were coded according to a purposefully simple scheme deriving from earlier studies of cohorts of senior leaders, most immediately those used in Oxford research for the CEO Report (Oxford 2016) and World Economic Forum data on trends (2017).

About our sample

The museum leaders in our sample have the following characteristics:

- A combined total of 1,007 years of sector experience, with an average of 23 years.

- A combined total of 678 years of leadership experience, with an average of 15.4 years.

- A combined total of 317 years of tenure in their current position, with an average tenure of 6.9 years, as compared to an average tenure of 4.8 years for CEOs in other sectors in the UK.

- A combined total of 12,488 employees, with an average of 431.

- A combined total of 85.7 million visitors per year, with an average of 2.1 million.

- A combined total of £1.3 billion in revenues, with an average of £29.3 million.

- A combined total of assets over £7.1 billion, with an average of £237.5 million.

We covered a broad range of museums: national 46%, local authority 24%, independent trust 20%, and university museums 5%.

Acknowledgements

For further information

For further information about the Museum Leaders' Report, please contact:

Saïd Business School
Dr Michael Smets or Dr Pegram Harrison
michael.smets@sbs.ox.ac.uk
pegram.harrison@sbs.ox.ac.uk
Park End Street
Oxford OX1 1HP

**Oxford University
Gardens, Libraries & Museums**
Lucy Shaw
lucy.shaw@museums.ox.ac.uk
Wellington Square
Oxford OX1 2JD

Digital report

To download a copy of the Museum Leaders' Report, please visit: www.sbs.oxford.edu/MLR

About Saïd Business School at the University of Oxford

Oxford Saïd blends the best of new and old. We are a vibrant and innovative business school, yet deeply embedded in an 800-year-old world-class university. We create programmes and ideas that have global impact. We educate people for successful business careers, and as a community seek to tackle world-scale problems. We deliver cutting-edge programmes and ground-breaking research that transform individuals, organisations, business practice, and society. We seek to be a world-class business school community, embedded in a world-class University, tackling world-scale problems.

For more information, please visit www.sbs.ox.ac.uk

About Oxford University Gardens, Libraries and Museums

The Gardens, Libraries and Museums (GLAM), formerly known as Academic Services and University Collections (ASUC) comprise the four University museums (Ashmolean Museum of Art and Archaeology, Museum of the History of Science, Museum of Natural History and Pitt Rivers Museum of Anthropology and World Archaeology), the Bodleian Libraries and the Botanic Garden & Harcourt Arboretum. The collections embodied within these departments are an essential part of the University's wider nature and mission. They are part of its heritage as the country's oldest university and now form a resource of national and international importance for teaching, research and cultural life; they also make a major contribution to the University's outreach and access missions.

For more information, please visit www.glam.ox.ac.uk

About National Museum Directors' Council

The National Museum Directors' Council represents the leaders of the UK's national collections and major regional museums. Its members are the national and major regional museums in England, Northern Ireland and Scotland, the British Library, the National Library of Scotland, and the National Archives. While members are funded by government, the NMDC is an independent, non-governmental organisation. It was founded in 1929 and today provides its membership with a valuable forum for discussion and debate and an opportunity to share information and work collaboratively.

The NMDC is funded by its membership institutions, the directors of which give their time voluntarily to the organisation.'

For more information please visit www.nationalmuseums.org.uk

For further information about the Museum Leaders' Report, please contact:

Saïd Business School
Dr Michael Smets or Dr Pegram Harrison
michael.smets@sbs.ox.ac.uk
pegram.harrison@sbs.ox.ac.uk
Park End Street
Oxford OX1 1HP

Oxford University
Gardens, Libraries & Museums
Lucy Shaw
lucy.shaw@museums.ox.ac.uk
Wellington Square
Oxford OX1 2JD

www.sbs.oxford.edu