Smith, T-A and Fouseki, K. (submitted) *Participatory practices in museums: a seismic shift?* **in McSweeney, K. and Kavanagh, J.** *Museum Participation: Engaging and Involving Audiences.* **MuseumsEtc.**

1. Introduction

This paper questions whether 'large museums'[1] are able to be genuinely participatory. The article aims to map perceptions of heritage professionals in national museums whose work involve working with external partners (including communities). It will be shown that, overall, national museums are hierarchically structured without providing opportunities for internal and external collaboration. More importantly, governing bodies in this type of museums are often involved in participatory projects.

Participatory practices in museums imply sharing decision making and power (Arnstein 1969; Wilcox 1999). One of the fundamental principles of such practices is attributing social justice to socially excluded communities through the provision of space for their voices to be heard. For this to succeed, willingness to share power should underpin the culture of an organization. Indeed, often, in our personal experience, museum staff has felt disempowered, unheard or trapped in deeply political internal power struggles. As a result, understandably, they find it difficult to facilitate participation with external partners. However, successful examples (such as the Glasgow Museums Staff Ambassadors Programme and the Royal West of England Academy Art) show that once internal collaboration and empowerment are boosted, participatory work with external partners can be greatly facilitated. It is worth noting that the Glasgow Museums designed the 'Staff Ambassadors' programme, which offered opportunities for staff to learn about meaningful community involvement practices. This programme provided the opportunity for internal collaboration which then fed to pursuing successful external collaborations (Bienkowski 2014).

The ability to empower an organization internally presupposes vocal and active leadership where policy and strategy support change. Griffin and Abraham have already pointed that 'successful organizational reform' requires 'transformational leadership' (2000:352) which transcends leaders' self-interests for the good of the group (ibid: 338). In addition, governance (especially, in relation to the ways in which boards of trustees are put together) can be critical in participatory practices. If governance is directly influenced by the everyday politics, then the influence of transformative leadership will be reduced. A balance between projects valued by external groups and museum staff should be sought through a 'responsive museum governance' that 'requires continuous and creative efforts for fulfilment of the active functions of a museum through exhibitions, seminars and education programmes without hampering its internal functions and values assigned by the professional audience (Herguner 2015: 793).

Hierarchies, organizational cultures, leadership and governance have been extrapolated as four key factors driving or prohibiting participatory practices in large museums.

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[1] For the purpose of the study the 'large organisation' was determined on the basis of annual expenditure (see Questionnaire attached in the Appendix).

2. Hypotheses

This section outlines the hypotheses on which the analysis of this article is based. The hypotheses were informed by our personal experience and the relevant literature.

The first hypothesis (*Hypothesis 1*) is that large, national museums are characterised by hierarchical organizational structures, which hinder participatory practices. This was based on the hypothesis that restrictive hierarchical structures prevent organizational change and transformation (Abraham et al. 1999). The second hypothesis (*Hypothesis* 2) is that participatory practices in large museums are hindered because internal collaboration is not encouraged. Evans (2012), for instance, demonstrates how in the case of the Columbus Museum of Art, developing relationships with colleagues and bringing cross-departmental knowledge resulted in dynamic experiences for visitors. This participatory, visitor-centred model could apply in the case of community involvement, although it does challenge the role and responsibilities of curators.

The third hypothesis (*Hypothesis 3*) argues that participatory practices are viewed as a peripheral activity in large, heritage organisations which is not shared across the various departments nor it is part of the organization's vision. This hypothesis is being built upon McGall and Gray (2013, p. 24) who stated that often there are elements of polarization in museum services where staff are divided into two schools – the 'old' traditional school that focuses around collections and the 'new' school which is people-oriented.

The fourth hypothesis (*Hypothesis 4*) argues that participatory practices are not adopted by the governing bodies of large organisations. This hypothesis was developed on the basis of personal observations. Finally, the fifth hypothesis (*Hypothesis 5*) underlines that staff at large museums prioritise preservation and research over the need to involve communities. McGall and Gray (2013) have indicated a strong interrelationship between the values held by museum workers and how they relate to their activities at the ground level. For the development of the questionnaire, we utilised their museum functions framework in order to examine the degree to which personal values over certain museum functions clashed with organizational values. The museum functions included preservation, research, communication and contribution to civic society.

3. Methodology

The aforementioned hypotheses were tested through an anonymous online survey carried out in September and October 2015 via the UCL Opinio system. We targeted heritage professionals who have experience with participatory practices in museums or other organisations. 70 respondents participated in the survey. The questionnaire comprises of attitudinal (Likert style) statements accompanied by open boxes for qualitative elaborations (Brace 2008). The attitudinal statements revolved around the themes governance, leadership, hierarchy and organizational structure (see Appendix).

4. Profile of respondents

70 respondents participated in the anonymous survey of whom 65 stated that their work involves participatory practices. This article will focus on these respondents only. More than half of the respondents (58.5%) work in the museum sector (Table 1) while 4 in 10 of the respondents are middle managers (41.5%) with 3 participants representing executive teams.

Do you currently work for…

		Frequency	Percent
Valid	Archive	6	9.2
	Consultant	1	1.5
	Funder	1	1.5
	Gallery	3	4.6
	Heritage body	1	1.5
	Heritage Charity	1	1.5
	Heritage city project	1	1.5
	Heritage site-property	4	6.2
	Institute of Education	1	1.5
	Local authority	1	1.5
	Museum	38	58.5
	Museum & Gallery	5	7.7
	National body	1	1.5
	Other (please state)	1	1.5
	Total	65	100.0

Table 1: Profile of respondents

The significant majority of the respondents work for large organizations (81.2%) the annual expenditure of which exceeds £950,000. Almost half of the respondents (47.69%) work for a national organisation and about a third (29.3%) in a local authority. In view of this, the responses derive from a rather homogenous group of participants who hold experience in participatory practices, work in middle-management positions at large, mainly national, museums. Consequently, while the current data will enable mapping the experiences of heritage professionals in large, national museums, statistically significant variations between large and smaller or medium-size heritage organizations will not be established. This will constitute part of our future research.

5. The impact of hierarchical organizational structures on participatory practices *(Hypothesis 1 and 2)*

For the purpose of this study, the term 'hierarchy' refers to a vertical organizational structure that ranks job roles according to relative authority and power in strategic decision-making. All respondents viewed their organization as hierarchical regardless the type or size of the organization. About one third of the respondents (35.4%) stated that hierarchical structures hinder participation while 20% of the participants thought that hierarchical structures were not related to participatory practices. 18.5% viewed hierarchical structures as enablers of participatory work (Table 2). A significant percentage (16.9%) stated that this was dependent

on other factors, such as the values of the individuals, and that hierarchical structures were not the main barrier to the adoption of participatory practices (Table 2).

In my opinion hierarchical structures

	Frequency	Percent
Valid	13	20.0
Are irrelevant to participation	12	18.5
Help participation	5	7.7
Hinder participation	23	35.4
It depends	11	16.9
Unsure	1	1.5
Total	65	100.0

Table 2: Attitudes towards hierarchies as a barrier to participation

A similar attitude was noted towards the perceived impact of hierarchical structures on internal collaboration. Hierarchical structures were viewed by 46%% of the respondents as hindering internal collaboration while only 19% believe that such structures facilitate internal collaboration.

The results indicate that our hypothesis is validated within the profile of respondents but we should note that multiple factors should also be taken into account. As one of the respondents mentioned, "every organisation has one form of hierarchy but in the end it will depend on the individuals".

Organisational structure/resources *(Hypothesis 3)*

Respondents were asked to comment on the extent to which resources are equally shared across the organization. 42% of the respondents believe that resources are not shared equally across the organization but a further 40% states there is an equal distribution of the resources.

In addition, 38% of the respondents believe that departments don't work towards shared objectives, while 36% believe they do. However, the significant majority (74%) stated that the departments have their own agenda. Since the responses derive largely from national and large museums it was not possible to draw statistically significant results regarding possible variations between different types of institutions.

Organisational attitudes towards participatory approaches *(Hypothesis 3)*

78% of the respondents believe that the principles of participatory practice and community engagement are not well known in some parts of the organisation. Participatory work sits for most of the respondents within one department (64%) while only 2 in 10 respondents stated that this type of work underpins more than one department. More than half of the respondents feel that their organisation as a whole does not believe in participatory approaches (58%) and

only 24% has the opposite view. 64% argued that the majority of the staff is not aware of such work.

Enabling factors for participation

8 of 10 of the respondents believe that participatory work could be facilitated if it was part of the vision of the organization and if it was part of a job description. Only 3 in 10 respondents feel that community engagement is strategically supported across every department.

What the above results indicate is that -although hierarchies *per se* are not significant in determining the level and quality of participatory practices in museums- the degree to which internal collaboration is facilitated across and within departments is of vital importance for enabling participatory practices in museums.

6. Governance and Leadership *(Hypothesis 4)*

The data reveals that half of the respondents (48%) do not know the names of the trustees while 84% of the respondents state that the trustees either don't actively promote participatory community engagement (42%) or are neutral (32%). In addition, the following figure shows that it is staff occupying lower levels in the hierarchy that are perceived as being very active in participation, while heads of departments or staff from upper hierarchical levels are perceived as unengaged with participation.
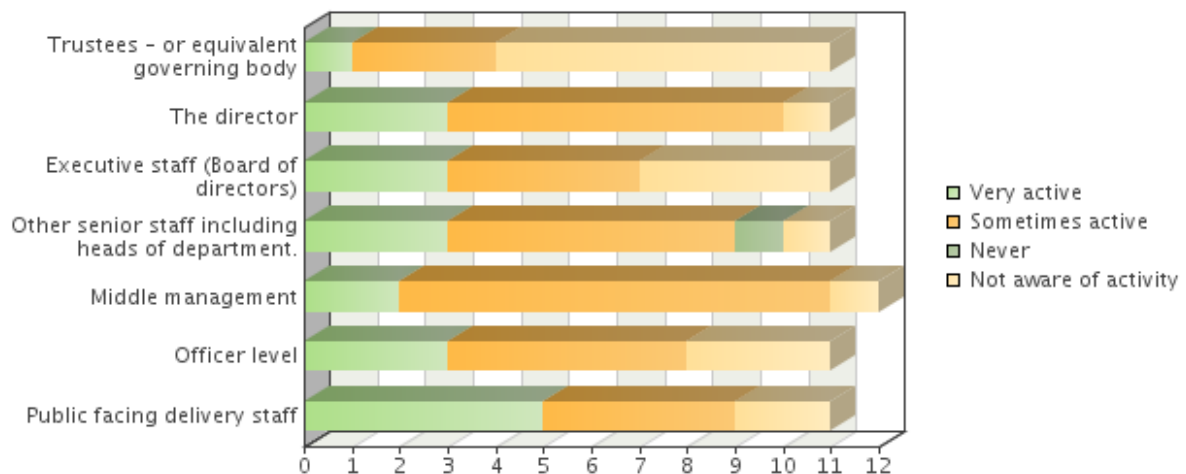
7. Values *(Hypothesis 5)*

One of the most interesting findings which requires further exploration is the polarization between personal and organizational values related to a museum's functions. Building upon McCall's and Gray's model of values (2014) we explored how personal and professional values differentiate in large, national museums. As shown in the table below, the respondents tend to believe that the organization values preservation and research over communication and contribution to civic society while the opposite is true for the museum staff who responded to the questionnaire (Figure 1).
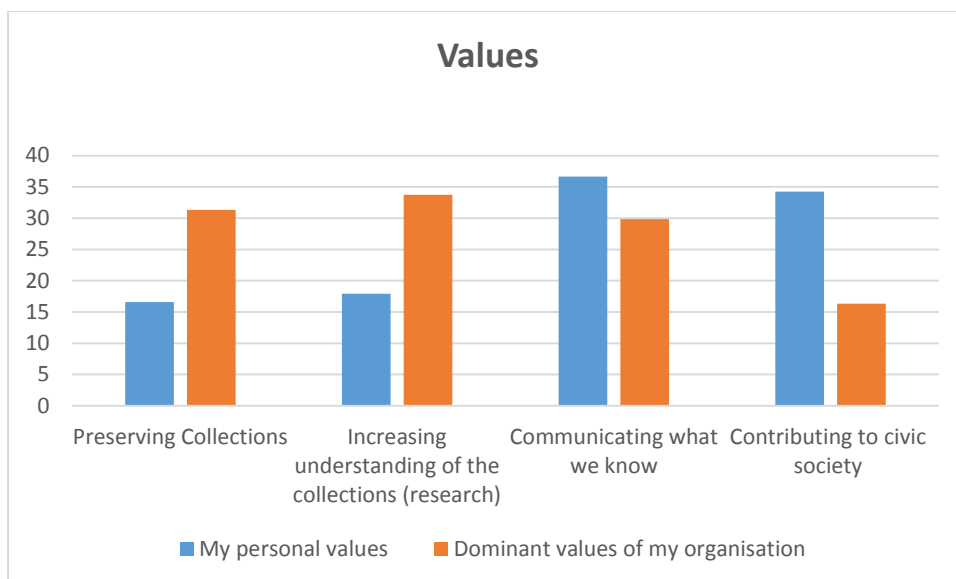
Figure 1: Personal and Organizational Values towards Museum Functions

8. _Conclusion_

This opinion chapter aimed to explore our personal hypotheses formulated through our work experience in the sector. The chapter maps the perceptions of middle managers who are based in large, national museums. It was shown that large museums do still have a long way to embed participatory practices into their organizational culture. We argue that the main reason for this relates to the organizational values and prioritizations adopted by executives that are often in clash with perceptions and values adopted by middle managers. We further argued that if internal collaboration is encouraged across departments, chances are that participatory work with external stakeholders will be of higher quality. One of our immediate area of research is distribute the questionnaire to heritage professionals working for medium and small size heritage organizations. We would also like to diversify the type of organizations (including libraries etc) in order to draw statistically significant variations. We hope that this research will offer a critical insight into the factors that enable and the factors that prohibit participatory work in the heritage sector informing organizational policies and strategies for audience engagement and community involvement.

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Appendix

ABOUT YOU

1. **Definition:** Genuine participatory practice involves sharing decision making, acting together facilitating the participants' agenda. Participation is a method used to collaborate. Here we refer to it in terms of engaging communities although as a method, it can be applied to any group.

   Does your role involve participatory work?
   Yes
   No
   Other please state:

2. **Which of the following best describes your role?**
   a. Governing body
   b. Executive board/team
   c. Senior management
   d. Middle management
   e. Officer (non-management, not public facing)
   f. Other

3. More public interaction

    The size of your current organisation:

    Annual expenditure less than:

- Small: Less than 150,000

- Medium: Between 150,001 to 915,000

- Large: More than 915, 000

4. **Do you currently work for a** *(When programming survey allow check more than one box)*

    a. Museum

    b. Gallery

    c. Heritage site or property

    d. Archive

    e. Library

    f. Other please state

5. **Is your organisation**

    a. National

    b. Local authority

    c. University

    d. Independent

    e. Regimental

    f. Other please state

Organisational structure

Definition: For the purpose of this study, 'hierarchy' refers to a vertical organisational structure that ranks job roles according to relative authority and power in strategic-decision making.

6. **Would you say that your current organisation is structured as a hierarchy?**

    [Yes / No]

7. **In my opinion hierarchical structures:**

    a. Help participation

    b. Hinder participation

    c. Are irrelevant to participation

    d. Other please state

8. In my opinion hierarchical structures

   a.   Help internal collaboration

   b.   Hinder internal collaboration

   c.   Are irrelevant to internal collaboration

   d.   Other please state

Any other comments on organisational structure?

Organisational culture

Strongly disagree, disagree, neither agree nor disagree, agree, strongly agree

9. I am free to network across the organisation with people in any role and level

10. I can network easily with people on a similar pay and grade to me and below

11. I regularly meet with people senior to me

12. It is harder to network with people on a higher pay and grade, because it might be seen as undermining my boss.

13. It is harder to network with people on a higher pay and grade to me because I lack confidence to approach them

14. In my organisation, departments share information and resources willingly.

15. In my organisation, there is competition between departments for example for kudos or resources.

16. In my organisation, most of the time all departments work well together towards shared objectives

17. In my organisation, sometimes it feels like each department has their own agenda

18. The principles of participatory practice and community engagement are well known in some parts of my organisation but other departments have barely engaged with it yet.

19. I feel that I am involved in critical decision-making stages appropriate to my skills in my organisation.

20. Responsibility for participatory practice sits with one team or department (the community engagement/outreach or equivalent team) in my organisation.

Any other comments on organisational culture?

Participatory practice and community engagement

21. The *majority* of the organisation feels a shared sense of responsibility for community engagement although there is a specialist team to support us.

22. The *majority* of staff in the organisation understands participatory methods and how they are used in museum community engagement.

23. We *often* use the skills of community partners/networks to enhance the skills of our staff.

24. Participatory practice in my organisation would be helped by
    a. A clear commitment to participatory practice in the vision, strategies and policies.
    b. Adding participatory ways of working into everyone's job descriptions.

25. My organisation supports community engagement strategically across every department.
    a. Largely agree/ largely disagree

26. 'For community engagement to be truly embedded and sustained, all staff need to understand its relevance to their own work and to the museum overall, how they can contribute, and how to work with communities'[2]. *[When programming survey if there is a way to reference this but keep it out of the way of the question that would be great – maybe at the bottom of the page or something]*

    This statement is true for…
    a. Less than 10% of staff in my organisation
    b. Less than 25%
    c. Less than 50%
    d. Between 50 and 80%
    e. Above 80%

Any other comments on participatory practice and community engagement?

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[2] Communities and Museums as Active Partners: Emerging learning from the Our Museum initiative, Bienkowski, 2014, http://ourmuseum.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/Our-Museum-emerging-learning.pdf

GOVERNANCE

27. I know the names of the trustees/governing body for my organisation.

28. The trustees or governing body/councillors actively promote participatory community engagement.

29. The trustees/ governing body have been engaged in participatory work in the past five years (by engaged we mean more than receiving information).

30. Our trustees have been trained in the following areas,

    a. participatory practice,

    b. community engagement,

    c. equality and diversity.

Any other comments on governance?

LEADERSHIP

31. We want to find out more about the level of active, vocal support and championing occurring at different levels of a large organisation. Please rate the championing role of the following people in your organisation:

	Very active	Sometimes active	Never	Not aware of activity
Trustees – or equivalent governing body –				
The director				
Executive staff (Board of Directors)				
Other senior staff including heads of department.				
Middle management				
Officer level				
Public facing delivery staff				

Any other comments on leadership?

VALUES

32. Thinking about your personal values and the dominant values of your organisation. Please distribute 100 points evenly between the four options.

Museum function	My personal values	Dominant values of my organisation
Preserving Collections		
Increasing understanding of the collections (research)		
Communicating what we know		
Contributing to civic society		