

COVID-19, digital inclusion, and the Australian cultural sector

A Research Snapshot

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Indigo Holcombe-James

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Project contact:

Indigo Holcombe-James
indigo.holcombe-james@rmit.edu.au

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Overview and summary of findings

We cannot afford to produce high quality [digital] material without appropriate equipment, without adequate staffing
– Public Gallery C, capital city

As cultural institutions closed their doors in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, we saw a massive and rapid shift to digital service delivery (ICOM, 2020; UNESCO, 2020). But making this shift required digital access, abilities, and resourcing; all of which are unevenly distributed. With just under half the world's population (ITU, 2019), and 2.5 million Australians (Thomas et al., 2020) still offline, digital inclusion is an urgent and pressing challenge that, in the context of the cultural sector, creates distinct institutional inequalities (UNESCO, 2020, p. 15).

Following the Australian Digital Inclusion Index (Thomas et al., 2020) framework, we can define a digitally included cultural institution as one that:

- can access the digital connectivity, devices, data, and platforms necessary;
- has the ability or skills to use those devices and platforms; and
- can afford to access and resource this use.

Existing research tells us that the cultural sector's experience of digital inclusion is determined by both the type of institution and its location. National institutions and those based in capital cities, for example, tend to be 'more digitally active, experience fewer barriers, [and] have better access to [digital] skills [...] than the arts and culture sector as a whole' (Nesta & Arts Council England, 2017, p. 7). The type of internet access available to the institution, the devices and technologies required, the existence or lack of digital skills within individual staff members, and the costs associated with resourcing this work are all influential (Holcombe-James, 2019; Kidd, 2014; New Media Consortium 2015; Parry, 2008; Parry et al., 2018; UNESCO, 2019).

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the critical need for digital inclusion within the cultural sector. **Digital service delivery enabled ongoing activities and engagement, but the ability to do so required the existing experience of digital inclusion.** For institutions that had 'invested heavily' (UNESCO, 2020) prior to the pandemic, digital activities provided a vital resource. Those that had not faced significant barriers.

This snapshot reports on the preliminary findings from research that asked how digital inclusion affected the Australian cultural sector in the wake of COVID-19. Drawing on qualitative research with representatives from 73 Australian cultural institutions, ranging from Artist Run Initiatives (ARIs), public, council-run¹, and university galleries, as well as state and national institutions, this report presents four key findings:

- 1. The cultural sector experiences digital exclusion, but not all institutions are excluded in the same way.** State and national institutions had far greater capacity than council-run, public, and university galleries, and ARIs.
- 2. Access to connectivity alone is not enough.** Although most participating institutions reported adequate internet access, accessing appropriate devices and platforms proved difficult.
- 3. Creating and sharing digital cultural content requires specialised abilities** that are not yet evenly distributed within, nor accessible to, all institutions.
- 4. Digital activities are now part of everyday operations** and require funding as such.

¹ Many council-run galleries are also public galleries. I differentiate between the two here as working within the structure of local government influences digital inclusion.

Methods and participants

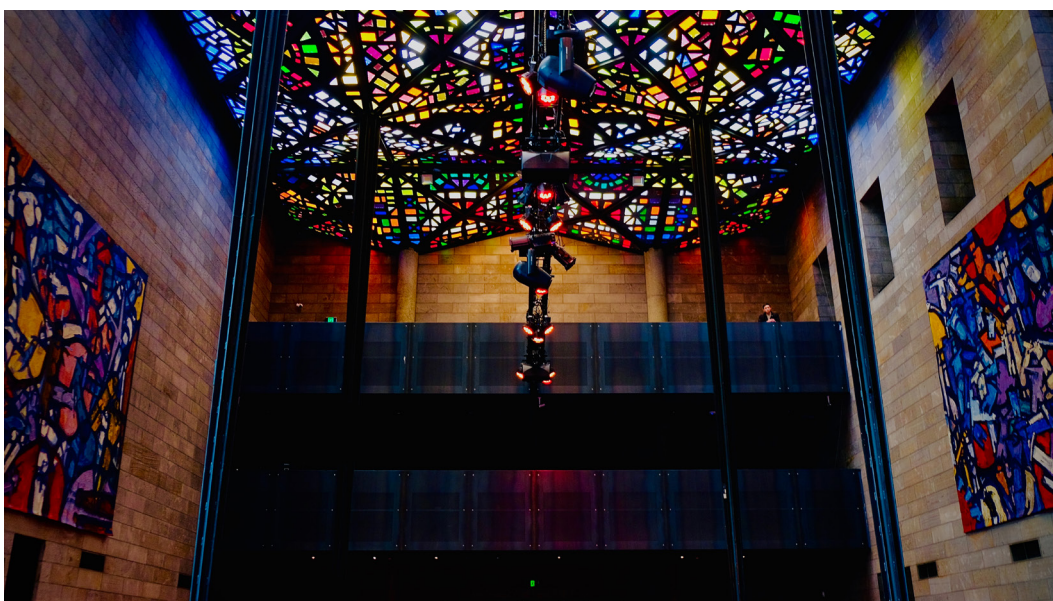
Representatives from Australian cultural institutions were invited to participate in the research by completing a semi-structured interview or brief survey². The invitation was distributed via publicly listed institutional email addresses. In total, the research engaged with 73 institutions. 39 took part in a semi-structured interview, 29 provided a survey response, and 5 completed both. This snapshot presents preliminary findings across the entire cohort. Future outputs will explore the influence of digital exclusion by institutional category and location.

Table 1: Number of participating institutions by category and location

Category	Capital City	Non-capital city	Total
ARIs	9	5	14
Council-run	10	11	21
Public	8	5	13
State/national	10	1	11
University	11	3	14
Total	49	25	73

Table 2: Number of participating institutions by state

State/Territory	Total
ACT	4
NSW	15
NT	2
QLD	11
SA	6
TAS	6
VIC	25
WA	4
Total	73



² This research was approved by the RMIT Human Research Ethics Committee (22893).

Findings

FINDING 1: THE CULTURAL SECTOR EXPERIENCES DIGITAL EXCLUSION, BUT NOT ALL INSTITUTIONS ARE EXCLUDED IN THE SAME WAY.

Not surprisingly, state and national institutions had far greater capacity to make the pivot to digital service delivery than ARIs, council-run, public, and university galleries. State and national institutions described teams comprised of multiple staff members who were not only highly digitally skilled, but who, even preceding the pandemic, were entirely oriented towards digital activities.

[S]o we have a team of graphic designers, there's three of those. We've got a video team with, again, three people at the moment. We have our comms team, so there's three people there. There's a marketing team as well, so there's three people in that component. And we also have a website coordinator and a social media expert

— State or National G, capital city

This level of investment is in stark contrast to that reported by other institutions. ARIs, for example, relied on volunteers to undertake and champion digital activities, ensuring that institutional digital capacity was determined by the volunteer's existing experience and ability.

We're all volunteers [and] nobody is a technical specialist. The [volunteer] who's doing our website content at the moment is a contemporary art photographer. So, it's really whoever we bring in [... and] it depends on the skillset of the volunteers that are there at the time as to how those digital channels are managed

— ARI B, capital city

While council-run, public, and university galleries tended to have at least one employee dedicated to digital activities, the time allocated these roles and the digital abilities held by those employed constrained the institution's capacity to make the pivot to digital service delivery.

I am four days a week and sometimes we have assistance [for digital activities] from a visitor services team member, but that has been the challenge [during COVID-19]. All our communications with our audience right now go through me, and there's only so much I can do, and there are only so many skills I have.

— Public Gallery F, non-capital city

The institutional experience of digital inclusion – and therefore the institutional capacity to pivot to the digital service delivery required by the COVID-19 pandemic – is directly tied to issues of access, ability and affordability. Importantly, these issues are experienced differently by each institutional category, ensuring that although the cultural sector experiences digital exclusion as a whole, not all institutions are excluded in the same way.

FINDING 2: ACCESS TO CONNECTIVITY ALONE IS NOT ENOUGH.

Although most participating institutions reported adequate connectivity, access to suitable devices and platforms (such as websites, social media accounts, or software) remained problematic. Institutions were unable to access specialised devices such as cameras, microphones, and recording equipment which restricted the types of online services they were able to deliver.

[We started] learning how to use SketchUp to potentially present [an upcoming exhibition] as a virtual tour [...A]nd then [we] realised we didn't have a 3D camera, so that's something we couldn't do

— University B, capital city

Lack of device access restricted not only the types of online services institutions were able to deliver, but the quality of those services. For some, the stresses associated with the digital pivot were exacerbated by comparing their services to those distributed by other, better resourced institutions.

We don't have good enough video cameras to be producing good enough content. When you have institutions like [state institution], who have a great little video production team, interview[ing] someone with good lighting [...] That becomes a benchmark or a standard or something and you go, "[ours] looks really bad"

— Council-run D, capital city

While some institutions were able to access personal devices owned by staff members or volunteers – ‘a lot of what we do at the moment, I do on my personal laptop that I bring in’ (Council-run E, non-capital city) – accessing suitable platforms was not so easy to manage. Institutions described websites that were already at breaking point prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. For some, the new requirement to host online (and especially data intensive video) content proved insurmountable.

[T]here are fundamental problems behind the website - it uses WIX, we're not hosting any of the video artworks because we can't work flexibly enough to get it up in the back end

— Council-run E, non-capital city

Even institutions that had invested in website redevelopments in the past year reported barriers stemming from the requirements of digital service delivery.

We didn't anticipate when we redesigned [the website] last year, that we now need it to also be the primary point of engagement as well. All this digital activity, you need to host it somewhere [...] that's the bit we didn't foresee. [...] We can't use our existing site to contain all this activity without working to redevelop the backend

— University D, capital city

Others described 'weird' technicalities that prohibited the efficacy of their digital platforms.

We have this weird problem with our website where it was designed in a way that Google can't properly index, so we're not searchable

— University R, capital city

Barriers to accessing appropriate devices and platforms hindered the pivot to digital service delivery. No matter how much content was created, the institutional inability to host this content and for it to be searchable and therefore accessible, directly impeded the possibilities for audience engagement.



FINDING 3: CREATING AND SHARING DIGITAL CULTURAL CONTENT REQUIRES SPECIALISED ABILITIES THAT ARE NOT YET EVENLY DISTRIBUTED WITHIN, NOR ACCESSIBLE TO, ALL INSTITUTIONS.

While state/national institutions described internal teams formed of highly digitally skilled staff members, these digital abilities were often not distributed throughout the institution itself.

Our registration, curatorial and conservator teams [...] None of them, they won't like hearing this, were particularly digitally literate at all. None of them.

— State or National F, capital city

In contrast, ARIs, council-run, public, and university galleries described an often complete lack of internal staff members with the digital abilities that online service delivery required. As one participant from a university gallery explained:

Internal expertise has been a real challenge [...] Part of it is about existing capacity. And I don't mean in terms of workload, but actually in terms of skills. And our marketing and comms person [... they have] no expertise in social media [...] it's not [their] forte

— University C, capital city

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, council-run and university galleries had benefited from their position within larger organisations. Although digital abilities were often lacking within their immediate staff, this was resolved through making use of the broader marketing and communications teams within council or the university. This solution, however, proved difficult during the pandemic. Cultural institutions suddenly found themselves at the end of a very long list of priorities.

From COVID, all of that changed and those resources weren't available anymore because everybody at Council suddenly needed them, and we had to, and we are still having to, do a lot of the online programming and facilitating all of that, creating all of that content and actually posting it or updating websites and so on; we're having to do it ourselves at the moment. It's been a steep learning curve for us

— Council-run D, capital city

In the same way that lack of access was sometimes resolved through the personal devices owned by staff members, institutions relied on their employees' extracurricular experiences and willingness to work outside their position descriptions.

[I] had a background of doing things like [videography at] \$20,000-60,000 budgets [...], and so I knew what I wanted, but had to try and learn how to do it without any of those resources at all. [...] So in a way, I had a lot of the skills to do it [from my old job], but completely at the wrong level

— Council-run T, non-capital city

Crucially, the existing abilities of staff members were often in tension with the expectations of institutional leadership.

There's a non-understanding at this point of how difficult it is to make a professional online product. It's not as simple as flipping the phone around. [...] [I]t's a whole new skillset and it must be treated as such

— Council-run F, non-capital city

The ability to create and share digital cultural content was not available to all institutions. In addition, these abilities remain misunderstood and under supported, particularly financially.



FINDING 4: DIGITAL ACTIVITIES ARE NOW PART OF EVERYDAY OPERATIONS AND REQUIRE FUNDING AS SUCH.

Prior to the COVID-19 closures, digital activities had been considered by some institutions as 'add ons' or 'nice to haves' that were focussed on marketing channels such as social media platforms and websites.

We are a small team so we engaged with the digital platforms less before COVID than we do now because staff capacity and resourcing was directed to physical exhibition programming and events

— University I, capital city

The pandemic has repositioned digital activities. They are now crucial to the daily operation of cultural institutions. During the lockdowns this work was typically funded through repurposed budgets. Expenditure on cancelled exhibitions, for example, was reoriented to support digital outcomes.

During and post-COVID we have had to reallocate resources to make best use of digital platforms and technologies

— Public Gallery G, capital city

Institutions with access to greater budgets turned to external consultants to fill the gaps within their own teams, but this came at a price.

[W]e went with the external consultant [...] But I would be the first to say, it's not ideal in terms of cost. And that has been something that we've just had to bear

— University C, capital city

While most participants valued their new digital offerings – particularly from an accessibility perspective – this was always followed by concerns. Participants worried they would be expected to maintain this digital work alongside their physical services under the same, already strained, funding structures.

One of the things that is of great concern to us now [...] is the expectation from funding bodies that we will continue to be able to deliver both in physical and digital form. Although we are obviously getting better and more capable of delivering [digitally], our resources were stretched before we even added that digital layer

— Public Gallery C, capital city

The affordability of digital activities – and, in turn, how they are funded – has critical implications for how the cultural sector operates into the future.

Conclusion and recommendations

This research snapshot provides a preliminary insight into the impact digital exclusion has had on the Australian cultural sector in the wake of COVID-19. Institutions struggled to access the digital devices, data, and platforms needed to successfully negotiate the pivot to digital service delivery. The abilities to use these devices and platforms were not evenly distributed within, nor accessible to all, institutions. And the costs associated with resourcing this use, while generally affordable due to the cessation of physical activities, threaten to cause future stress.

Digital exclusion determined which institutions were able to make the pivot to online service delivery, and how that delivery occurred. The sector's rapid digital transformation has thus been unevenly felt. If we do not address this unevenness, we run the risk of further disadvantaging underfunded and under-resourced institutions, and neglecting diverse perspectives and practices.

Addressing the impact of digital exclusion on the cultural sector will require engagement and investment from government, researchers, and the sector itself.

RECOMMENDATION 1:

Digitally upskilling the cultural sector must be made a policy priority. Updating the Commonwealth Government's *Digital Transformation Strategy* (2018) to include the sector provides one avenue for doing so.

RECOMMENDATION 2:

Digitally upskilling the sector requires infrastructural investment. As argued by the Australian Museums and Galleries Association (2020), digital activities do 'not come cheap' (p. np). Enabling access to the digital devices, data, and platforms required must be made a policy priority.

RECOMMENDATION 3:

Expenditure data on digital activities and resourcing must be collected and made publicly accessible. Understanding how cultural institutions fund and resource digital activities is vital if we are to identify best practice and set benchmarks.

RECOMMENDATION 4:

Further research into how digital exclusion operates within and around cultural institutions is urgently needed. Digital inclusion literature and museum studies are 'two bodies of research that are rarely brought together' (Mihelj et al., 2019, p. 1466). If we are to understand and address the impact of digital exclusion on the sector, significant research efforts must focus at this intersection (Holcombe-James, 2020).

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