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Museums and their Visitors

Eilean Hooper-Greenhill



London and New York

Museums and galleries are institutions with an almost unimaginable potential for enabling learning and enjoyment. Some museums have exploited some aspects of this, others have concentrated their efforts on other approaches. Many museums have achieved very little. In most institutions at the present time, money is short, and hard decisions have to be made over priorities. What structures need to be in place to manage effective museum communication and to identify useful actions?

Managing museums for visitors

A SWOT analysis for the future of museums

A number of forces demanding the development of the museum as a communicator were discussed earlier. Increased competition from within the museum industry and from other parts of the leisure industry, greater demands from audiences, especially the school audience, and increased accountability to government and museum governing bodies, all emphasise the need to develop new ways of demonstrating relevance and value for money, and new ways of attracting and satisfying audiences. What are the Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats that will influence the ways in which museums will respond to these demands?

Museums have many strengths. They represent ideal learning environments, and they have enormous resources in their collections, buildings and staff. New methods in museum communication are being developed and within a close and collaborative profession are quickly shared. The public perception of museums is, on the whole, good: they are seen as places of worth, value and integrity.

There are also some weakness. Fear of getting too close to people is one of them; some museum workers find it difficult to contemplate incorporating either other museum professionals or representatives of the audience into work patterns. Lack of training is another; many museum workers are undertrained and this can lead to narrow horizons, lack of vision, lack of knowledge of alternative ways of doing things and fear of change. The training that is required must enable museum professionals to expand their horizons, to explore new and sometimes controversial ideas, and to act in problem-solving and creative ways.

Lack of strategies and forward plans, and lack of policies, particularly in the area of communication, is another area of weakness. This leads to a paucity of management information in relation to visitors and audiences in general. Without information, planning for exhibitions, education and marketing represents no more than a stab in the dark and a waste of resources.

The opportunities for museums are sometimes not perceived. In general, the early 1990s is felt to be a period of desperate survival in the face of decreasing

resources, and it is true that some museums are facing severe cutbacks, and lack of support. But what opportunities are there? Radical change must by its very nature stir things up, which offers possibilities for new practices and new partnerships. As structures change, so new potentials present themselves. Changes in the education curriculum offer enormous opportunities. The responses that most people have to handling objects is extremely encouraging. The uses families make of museums can be exploited. A greater 'green' consciousness in society in general emphasises the kind of values that underpin museums. An emphasis on quality and customer choice means that planning high-quality services for specific groups is likely to be successful.

What are the threats? These are easier to define. Inertia in museums and galleries at a time of vast structural and value changes in society will mean almost certain failure. Positive response to change, a proactive attitude, and seizing the initiative will give the museum the best chance of being part of processes of change, rather than being ignored and marginalised, later to be eradicated. Severe funding restrictions, lack of forward consensus in local authorities and reorganisation of many social structures means uncertainty, and can lead to short-term responses in local authorities, central government and elsewhere. Museums without clear visions of what they are and might become will be blown by the wind.

Writing in the depths of a very severe recession, when many social institutions are examining their financial and philosophical viability, it is clear that opportunities must be discovered, grasped hold of and exploited. They will not arrive unsolicited, and they may arrive in strange guises. One of the uses of a SWOT analysis is the demonstration that, through creative and lateral thinking, some threats can be turned into opportunities. In museums, as everywhere else, the fixed parameters are in flux, and new approaches are emerging all the time. In many ways, the nature of museums and galleries as we have known it for many decades is now changing radically, and it is important to be clear about what museums may be and when museums are no longer museums (Hooper-Greenhill, 1992a).

The management of communication: forward planning

The potential power of the museum as a communicator lies ultimately in the hands of the managers of the museum. It is the managers who must have the vision to see where this potential lies and how it may be achieved. It is managers who must have the courage and strength to experiment with new methods and to remain committed to the ideal of communication if or when failures occur. It is managers who must set up the internal structures to enable the best use of resources and the achievement of objectives, and it is managers that must empower their staff and audiences to initiate and sustain the variety of two-way communication processes that are required.

Museums are now required to be more customer-oriented. Local authorities in Britain are encouraged to review their museums and galleries through a process

of market research which will identify what the objectives of the museum are, and who it is trying to serve (Audit Commission, 1991: 29). Managerial arrangements of museums should identify responsibility for market research, attracting customers, delivering services and customer care (Audit Commission, 1991: 6-7).

In the United States the major report from the American Association of Museums, *Excellence and Equity: Education and the Public Dimension of Museums* (American Association of Museums, 1992) presents the findings of the Task Force on Museum Education that was established in 1989 following the American Association of Museums report *Museums for a New Century*. This report states unequivocally that there is an educational dimension in every museum activity, and insists on the range and depth of the public service role of the museum.

All museums and galleries in Britain are being encouraged to develop forward plans, and these will shortly be required in some areas as a precondition of grant-aid. It is in this context that museum communication should be developed. Forward plans take a variety of forms; they may be business plans, corporate plans or development plans (Ambrose and Runyard, 1991). Forward plans should cover collections management, interpretation and education, research, marketing, financial planning, staff training and future developments (Museums and Galleries Commission, 1991: 70). Issues relating to buildings, retail and catering and other areas may also be included. All aspects are discussed in relation to the history and current position of the museum. Objectives and methods are set out, targets and performance indicators identified and stated. The process of planning which underpins the forward plan should be carefully managed, call on experts where necessary and be realistic (Lord and Lord, 1991: 1-16).

The communication policies, strategies and action plans will form one tranche of the policies and plans contained within the forward plan and should consist of marketing, exhibition, education and customer care policies. Policies for the management of volunteers may be relevant in some museums or galleries. These policies will be informed by several sets of guidelines recently published by the Museums and Galleries Commission. These are *Quality of Service in Museums and Galleries: Customer Care in Museums - Guidelines on Implementation*, 1992; *Guidelines on Disability for Museums and Galleries in the United Kingdom*, 1992; and *Guidelines for the Use of Non-Sexist Language* (available from the Museums Association).

The communication policies are intimately related to the other museum policies and are informed by the overall objectives or mission of the museum (see Fig. 24). In some instances, especially where the museum or gallery is part of local authority provision, the museum policies will be linked into a larger Service Plan.

scholarship, while seeking to make contemporary art challenging and engaging to a broad spectrum of public audiences.

- 15 The MCA will seek to prevent, in all its activities, any exercise of discrimination on the basis of race, culture, creed, gender or sexual preference.

- 21 The MCA will support the spirit and intention of the following statement, from paragraph 18 of the Mexico City Declaration, UNESCO world conference on cultural politics, Mexico, 1982.

Culture springs from the community as a whole and should return to it; neither the production of culture nor the enjoyment of its benefits should be the privilege of *elites*. Cultural democracy is based on the broadest possible participation by the individual and society in the creation of cultural goods, in decision-making concerning cultural life and in the dissemination and enjoyment of culture.

(Museum of Contemporary Art, 1922: 2-4)

Marketing policies and plans

Marketing in museums is still in its first decade, and in some museums is conceptually limited to publicity. Marketing, however, involves more than mere advertising. This statement from the Marketing Plan 1991-1994 from the Museum of Science and Industry in Manchester, England, indicates the scope of marketing departments:

This Marketing Plan outlines the aims and objectives of the marketing function within the museum. It presents information on the current visitor profile, the marketplace within which the museum operates, the potential for development in the main segments of that market and the strategies which will be developed to increase the existing customer base and attract new audiences.

(Sharkey, 1992: 3)

Marketing policies evolve through careful assessments of the marketing needs of the museum and the resources available to meet them. The Museums and Galleries Commission in Britain will shortly be publishing *The Museum Marketing Handbook*, which will give guidance on how to produce a policy.

Market research into the perceptions of users and non-users of the museum is rapidly becoming a requirement for museums (Audit Commission, 1991: 37; Museums and Galleries Commission, 1993; American Association of Museums, 1992: 16), and, as we saw in Chapter 5, important results are being produced and are being acted upon. Marketing policies and plans are informed by the results of research, and these results in turn are fed into exhibition and education policies (Museums and Galleries Commission, 1991: 106).

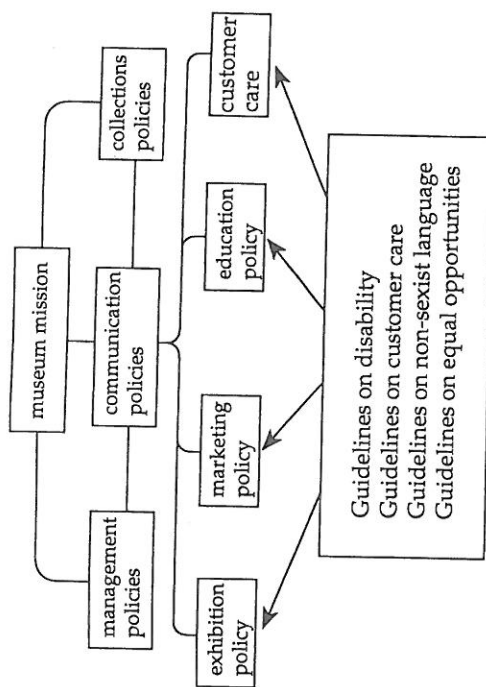


Figure 24 Communication policies are intimately related to other museum policies and are informed by a range of guidelines that should underpin all the museum's activities

The Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney, Australia, a public university museum that has recently been reorganised as a 'not-for-profit' company (The Museum of Contemporary Art Limited) provides an excellent example of one way of presenting integrated policies. The collection/exhibition/education policy is contained in one document (Museum of Contemporary Art, 1992), and is managed by a committee of representatives from each of these programme areas, the CEE Committee. The three policies for the three programme areas, preceded in the written statement by a General Policy, where the objectives, functions and obligations of the gallery are stated, key words (contemporary, artist) are defined, visions and philosophies are set down. The document is available to the public. Some short excerpts follow from the General Policy:

- 1 The MCA affirms the power of art and creative activity, and will seek, in all its activities, to communicate this to a wide and varied audience.
- 5 The MCA, in accordance with its commitment to embrace the 'most recent' ideas, theories and works of art, will critically assess its own values, concepts and practices in relation to changes occurring within the institutional and cultural formation of art.
- 6 The MCA will address a wide range of educational objectives in the field of contemporary art. ... The MCA will foster criticism and

A marketing plan describes the key objectives of the marketing department of the museum, which might relate to increasing visitor numbers, increasing a particular target audience, carrying out specific research in the museum or the community or raising the museum's profile. The potential audience, within a given geographical area, and the current visitor profile are described, in the context of demographic trends and local or national population information. The results of any evaluation or research into visitor response are incorporated. Commercial and retail activities, and sponsorship, if part of the remit of the department, are discussed. The current promotion of the museum through leaflets, television advertising or free listings is outlined. Joint marketing initiatives with other museums, or tourism organisations, or other bodies are noted. The charging policy is laid out. Specific relevant factors (such as, for example, particular grants, events or other influencing matters) are specified.

Following these statements which outline the present position, proposals for future action are outlined, perhaps over a three-year period. Broad aims are stated and specific objectives or targets to be achieved are set out. These are related to particular sites if relevant. Strategic projects, such as the development of a new house-style, or work with focus groups in relation to a proposed exhibition are described. Links with other museum departments, perhaps on evaluation, for example, are indicated. Campaigns in relation to specific audience sections are discussed. The role and functions of the Friends group might be included here.

An action plan set out as a simple chart over at least the next year is useful. Budgets and allocation of funds should be specified over the period covered in the plan. The staffing levels of the department, with any planned increases, should be described. Other resources, such as space, for example, might also be mentioned to give a clear operational picture.

Measures of performance need to be identified in relation to key objectives: for example, if the objective is to achieve greater use of a particular site through increased publicity and the removal of charges, performance might be measured by counting visitor numbers at the site before and after the proposed action, and by carrying out structured interviews with some visitors to research perceptions and attitudes.

Graphs with information on demographics relating to visitor figures, spend per head, for example, may be included. Quotes from qualitative audience research may be added.

The marketing policy should be reviewed annually as the marketing plans roll through. Changes may be necessary when circumstances change.

The exhibition policy

The exhibition policy describes the underlying principles on which exhibitions will be based, and sets out the intentions of a rolling programme of exhibitions.

The exhibition policy informs the exhibition action plan, which describes the actual exhibitions that are planned over a certain period. The policy may cover permanent and temporary exhibitions, and where relevant, travelling exhibitions and mobile museums.

The exhibition policy needs to address the following areas: target audience, resources, types of provision, roles and functions of temporary exhibitions and permanent displays within the museum, and in the community, research and evaluation. At one level these are practical questions, but at another they are deeply philosophical and relate to the very core of the identity of the museum.

In many museums, exhibitions occur for a variety of pragmatic reasons, rather than for a planned and carefully thought out purpose. Some museums do little except buy in temporary exhibitions from elsewhere. In some museums, the relationship between temporary exhibitions and permanent displays is tenuous, to say the least. The relationship between the two, the objectives of the one and the other and the resources allocated to each, should be part of the programmed and managed development of the museum.

The exhibition policy from the Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney, provides an interesting example. The policy is prefaced by the following philosophical statement:

The MCA exhibition programme constitutes its most immediate, varied and energetic interface with the community. All other MCA activities will be drawn together and pivot around the function of exhibiting works of art for direct engagement with a public audience.

It is through the exhibition programme that both 'the latest ideas and theories' and 'the most recent contemporary art of the world' (as conceptualised by the founding benefactor, J. W. Power) will be brought into prominent focus within the life of the MCA. It is through the exhibition programme that works of art will be experienced not only as discrete objects, but also as vehicles of more comprehensive and complex meanings, within the wider context of the production, interpretation and experience of culture within the community.

(Museum of Contemporary Art, 1992:11)

This statement provides a challenging intellectual context for the mounting of exhibitions. It goes beyond the functional organisation of objects in spaces, and acknowledges the social and cultural issues that arise when objects are placed within museums or galleries.

The policy goes on to discuss the scope and balance of temporary exhibitions (the responsibilities for the permanent collections are fully acknowledged in the General Policy), ethics, related events and support activities, audiences, sponsorship and funding and implementation of the policy.

Exhibition policies in Britain must acknowledge the guidelines on customer care, disability and the use of non-sexist guidelines produced by the Museums and Galleries Commission and the Museums Association. Approaches to

display bearing in mind the needs of audiences should be considered. Phased renewal of permanent displays should be set out, with costings and target dates. Potential themes for displays and exhibitions, issues in relation to local circumstances, current gaps and omissions should be identified.

The exhibition action plan specifies what developments are taking place within which time-frame and at what cost. This is generally planned over a three- or five-year period, with staff time, resources, use of space, employment of outside contractors or designers and educational use carefully considered.

In Britain, at the present time, exhibition *plans* are frequently to be found within forward plans, where actions to be taken are described. It is much rarer to find an exhibition *policy* that takes a philosophical stance in relation to the functions of exhibitions, and makes statements about the issues that should underpin any exhibition, such as a commitment to disabled access, avoidance of sexist, racist or other bias, approaches to the writing of accessible text. It might seem that these can be taken as given, but where things are taken for granted this often means they have not been fully considered and therefore they will not be fully implemented.

In considering the role of the audience advocate, the staff member responsible for promoting the needs of visitors, in developing, reviewing and revising exhibitions, D. D. Hille proposes that all exhibitions should be:

accessible to the widest possible audience (including those with visual, physical, auditory, and learning disabilities);
informative and relevant to the widest possible audience (e.g. beginners and scholars; browsers and students; first-time visitors and returning visitors; foreigners, non-native speakers and native speakers; visitors from diverse ethnic and other social backgrounds; children, teenagers and adults, etc.);

effective in communicating their messages;

structured to complement the natural learning strategies that visitors use;

supportive of a variety of learning styles;

supportive of the visitors' agendas as well as the museum's agendas;

supportive of individual and group experiences;

empowering, stimulating and fun;

comfortable, uncrowded, and not overly structured or sequential.

(Hille, n.d.)

These are excellent guidelines, and museums and galleries should be working towards ensuring that all exhibitions and displays conform to them. To achieve these objectives it is necessary first to have general information about, for example, the nature of the museum's audience, the needs of people with a range of impairments, or an understanding of the range of learning strategies and intelligences people bring with them to any exhibition; second to have information on specific matters relating to each exhibition, such as attitudes and possible misconceptions in relation to particular topics, likely reactions to specific exhibition vehicles and particular factors that will influence the use of the exhibition by any particular audience segment.

An exhibition policy should be written to include these audience-related matters, rather than simply as a matter of resource allocation.

Education policies

Many museums and galleries in Britain have produced education policies in the last two years and many more are currently being written. Education policies have been recommended by successive reports (Audit Commission, 1991; Museums and Galleries Commission, 1991; Museums Association, 1991a) and guidelines with representative case-studies have been produced (Hooper-Greenhill (ed.), 1991). These guidelines and case-studies are available free of charge from the Department of Museum Studies, University of Leicester. In the current situation, where opportunities are great, but funding structures are insecure and uncertain, educational policies have played their part in demonstrating the educational potential of museums.

An educational policy discusses the role of education in the museum, and outlines the current and planned future provision. The document should include the education mission statement, the education policy, the education strategy and the education action plan.

The mission statement relates closely to the museum mission statement, and explains how 'education' is to be understood in the context of the policy document. Although education is a museum-wide function, the document might in some instances be concerned only with organised provision for groups. The education policy sets out the intentions of the educational service and identifies priorities, and the action plan shows how the objectives will be met by carrying out certain activities over a specified time period.

The education policy discusses audience, budget and resources, types of educational provision, roles and functions within the museum, networks outside the museum, training, marketing and evaluation (Hooper-Greenhill (ed.), 1991).

Policies are likely to vary according to the resources of the institution, the expertise represented by the staff and the approach taken to the educational responsibility of the museum. Policies may state that the educational function

will be achieved through carefully planned and targeted displays supported by written materials for group leaders; or may set out the role of an education department in face-to-face teaching.

The *Policy on Education* from the Ulster Museum, Belfast, asserts first, quoting from the *Policy on Collections*, that collections and their acquisition, curation, conservation and interpretation constitute the central activity of the museum. The document continues with the 'Aim and strategic objectives', with a general statement on interpretation, a quotation from the museum mission statement, and then eight strategic objectives:

- 1 to enlist the active co-operation of all Museum staff in the educational process;
- 2 to establish the Education Service as the recognised centre for educational co-ordination in the Museum with primary responsibility for educational organisation and development;
- 3 to involve Museum education staff in the various approaches to interpretation and presentation since they serve as advocates for museum audiences;
- 4 to emphasise in interpretation and presentation, the unique characteristic of the museum experience which is the encounter with objects. It is about 'learning from things';
- 5 to maintain and expand the museum visitor base by all appropriate means;
- 6 to respond to the following challenges (followed by ten challenges covering developments in all educational sectors, demographic and social matters);
- 7 to ensure an appropriate commitment of financial and human resources so that the Museum realises its full education potential;
- 8 to keep educational needs in view in all future planning and development of the museum.

These broad strategic objectives are followed by a discussion of the role and function of the museum education service and then a detailed outline of the strategic plan. This covers issues related to the curriculum in Northern Ireland, and plans for gallery development, on-site museum education services, outreach museum education services and staffing and resourcing the education service. The document concludes with a reiteration that museum education is a responsibility shared by all museum staff, with the Education Service acting as the centre of educational co-ordination and taking the lead in educational development.

The Education Service acts as audience advocates within the museum, and also as museum advocates in the community (Ulster Museum, 1992: 2-3).

Customer care policies

All museums and galleries need to consider their customer care policies. Guidelines published by the Museums and Galleries Commission are based on the 'National Code of Practice for visitor attractions' developed by the English Tourist Board, which is mandatory for membership of a tourist board (Museums and Galleries Commission, 1993). The guidelines are not mandatory, but indicate the quality of service that all museums should strive to achieve. They amplify the English Tourist Board Code of Practice and place it in a museum and gallery context.

The Museums and Galleries Commission Guidelines acknowledge the Audit Commission's 1991 report *The Road to Wigan Pier?* and quote from it:

Scholarship and conservation are essential to a museum. Without them displays, though lively, may be superficial and uninformed and may even be misleading or incorrect. But scholarship and conservation have little point if people do not visit a museum or use its services.

(Museums and Galleries Commission, 1993: 1)

The Museums and Galleries Commission Guidelines also acknowledge and quote from the 1991 Office of Arts and Libraries *Report on the Development of Performance Indicators for the National Museums and Galleries*:

Spending money on service provision is of little value if the level, mix and quality of service is at odds with the requirements and preferences of those for whom the service has been provided and whose needs it has been agreed should be met.

(Museums and Galleries Commission, 1993: 1)

The Guidelines cover all those areas that impinge on visitors, including collections management, access, marketing, display and education, training, on-site care, safety, evaluation and the development of a customer care policy.

Volunteer policies

Many museums and galleries use volunteer staff to deliver their educational or interpretive services. On the whole these are very professionally managed in North America, and much less well managed in Britain. The North American pattern is to deploy volunteers as a matter of policy, to designate a member of the museum's staff as a volunteer co-ordinator and to develop extensive training and management arrangements. In many instances, large numbers of 'docents', volunteer teachers, deliver programmes that have been designed and piloted by paid staff; usually this is very successful, and is certainly built on a long and well-known tradition (Newsom and Silver, 1978: 242-55). There is no shortage of guidance on how to develop and manage volunteers to work usefully and successfully with visitors (Wilson, 1976; Grinder and McCoy, 1985; Groff and Gardner, 1989).

In Britain, volunteers are not always used as part of a policy decision. In many cases, individual staff members adopt volunteers to work with them, and little training or management ensues. In some museums or galleries, the use of volunteers is closer to the North American model, but this is rare. Policies are essential for the successful integration of volunteers into the museum culture. There are suggestions, particularly in the Independent sector, that many museums will depend more heavily on volunteers in the future, although at the same time, the enhanced status of volunteering may mean that museums will be competing with other sites (Millar, 1991a). The development of better volunteer management should be a priority (Millar, 1991b).

Conclusions

Museums and galleries are vital to the educational and cultural health of society. This, however, is not always either seen or understood, and as long as this is the case, the continued existence of museums will be tenuous.

The future for museums and galleries lies in the hands and the hearts of their users; those social institutions that cannot demonstrate a real and perceived need for their continued viability will not last for long in the climate of radical change that are we are currently experiencing.

In this chapter we have considered the type of policy that is necessary to enable museums and galleries to maximise their use in society, and to develop new approaches that will broaden their appeal. However, policies alone can achieve nothing. Without a genuine and heartfelt conviction, a passion, on the part of museum staff to reach out to the people who will pay for their futures, those futures will not come into being. Without visitors who are contented, fulfilled, and eager to return, museums and galleries will perish.

Glossary

Area Museum Services/Councils regional advisory bodies for non-national museums and galleries in the United Kingdom.

audience advocate the museum staff member that speaks on behalf of actual and potential museum visitors. He/she should sit on gallery planning teams, and carry out visitor research and evaluation. This role is sometimes played by an education specialist.

customer care comprehensive attention to the needs of visitors, which includes a welcome on arrival, intellectually and physically accessible displays and events, adequate facilities and a safe environment.

discovery room a space within the museum or gallery where artefacts and specimens may be handled and investigated.

easy-to-read text initially devised for adults with reading difficulties, this has now been adapted for museum use.

evaluation assessment of exhibitions, projects or almost anything.

Formative evaluation takes place as the project or exhibit is being developed and aims to test it before major resources are invested.

Front-end evaluation takes place before a project begins, is sometimes goal-free or open-ended, and acts as preliminary research before the project is finally agreed.

Summative evaluation takes place at the end of a project and assesses its success. Lessons are learnt for future projects.

face-to-face communication communication between two people in the same place at the same time; also known as interpersonal communication. focus groups groups of between six and twelve people of similar characteristics. Often used in market research, or in the collection of qualitative data.

goal-free evaluation open-ended assessment

which uses questions which are not devised in relation to previously defined criteria or standards. Allows for unforeseen outcomes and the generation of new ideas.

goal-referenced evaluation assessment where criteria and standards have been devised, and where outcomes will be measured against these goals. Tests hypotheses.

holistic considers the complete phenomenon rather than parts of the whole.

mass communication communication with a mass audience, generally used of advertising, newspapers, television and cinema.

Museums and Galleries Commission central government body in the United Kingdom with responsibility for overseeing the welfare of museums, administering grants, and developing guidelines for good practice.

naturalistic evaluation assessment and research using methods adapted from human and social sciences, such as ethnography and sociology.

Office of Public Censuses and Surveys central government department in the United Kingdom responsible for collecting and publishing general social data. A few museum visitor surveys have been produced for national museums.

outreach taking the museum or gallery out into the community, through workshops or exhibitions in community centres such as hospitals or libraries, mobile museums or exhibitions, loan services.

performance indicators measures developed to assess how specific areas of an institution have performed in relation to established criteria, which may be qualitative or quantitative.

piloting trying out a small sample before deciding to go ahead.

qualitative research research based on qualitative data, i.e., small-scale but very detailed investigations, where small amounts of in-depth