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Bachelor thesis

The Social Impact of Free National Museums on Sustainable and Inclusive Urban Cultural Tourism:

A Case Study of The National Gallery in London.

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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the social impact of free national museums on sustainable and inclusive urban cultural tourism through a case study of The National Gallery in London. It addresses a research gap concerning the relationship between free access, public value, social inclusion, audience diversity, and the contribution of museums to urban cultural life and tourism development. The study adopts a mixed-methods approach that combines secondary documentary and quantitative material with qualitative questionnaire data from 11 museum and cultural heritage professionals working across learning, curatorial practice, collections, archives, visitor experience, exhibitions, education, digital access, and community heritage. The secondary evidence includes attendance statistics, policy documents, institutional reports, and tourism-related sources that situate the National Gallery within wider debates on accessibility, museum funding, and sustainable urban tourism. The qualitative data were collected through an open-ended questionnaire and analysed using thematic analysis in order to identify recurring perspectives on free access, paid entry, participation barriers, inclusivity strategies, staff capacity, digital access, and funding sustainability. The findings indicate that free access is strongly associated with enhanced public value, increased repeat visitation, broader accessibility, and a stronger sense of civic openness. However, the study also demonstrates that free admission alone does not eliminate deeper barriers to participation, including language, representation, cultural distance, opening hours, transport, and perceptions of exclusion. Overall, the thesis argues that free access constitutes an important basis for inclusion, but its social impact depends on stable funding, inclusive institutional practices, and sustained investment in mediation, outreach, and public engagement.

1. Introduction

1.1. Presentation of the topic

Museums occupy a central position in contemporary urban cultural tourism, functioning simultaneously as heritage institutions, educational spaces, and major visitor attractions. Authoritative definitions emphasise that museums are non-profit, permanent institutions serving society and its development by acquiring, conserving, researching, communicating, and exhibiting the tangible and intangible heritage of humanity for education, study, and enjoyment (ICOM, 2007, p. 3; Sandahl, 2019, pp. 27–29). In cities, they act as "anchor institutions" that are spatially rooted and mission-driven, drawing residents and tourists, generating employment, and stimulating demand for hospitality and creative services, thereby contributing to urban competitiveness and place-based development within growing cultural-tourism markets (Urban Pamphleteer, 2019, pp. 4–6; McKercher & du Cros, 2002, pp. 104–106; OECD & ICOM, 2019, pp. 11–13). By offering structured, interpretive encounters with art and history, museums help shape destination images and soft power, positioning cities as attractive, culturally vibrant places to live and visit (Evans, 2003, pp. 417–419; OECD & ICOM, 2019, pp. 19–21).

At the same time, debates on social inclusion and accessibility highlight that the benefits of urban cultural tourism are unevenly distributed, and that museums must actively work to remove barriers that prevent certain groups from participating. Accessibility in museum practice is understood across physical, financial, social, and cognitive dimensions, encompassing not only admission fees and infrastructure but also how welcome, represented, and able to understand content different visitors feel (Sandell, 2002, pp. 7–9; Hooper-Greenhill, 2007, pp. 25–27; European Parliamentary Research Service, 2025, pp. 2–3). Cultural-rights and policy frameworks argue that all individuals and communities should have opportunities to define, interpret, and enjoy heritage, urging museums to move from "for" to "with" communities through co-curation, participatory programmes, and inclusive narratives (Council of Europe, 2016, pp. 6–8; UNESCO, 2015, paras. 33–35; ICOM, 2025, paras. 8–10). In an urban tourism context, ensuring that free or low-cost cultural attractions are genuinely accessible and relevant to diverse residents and visitors is therefore a key condition for culturally and socially sustainable development.

Within this broader landscape, The National Gallery in London offers a particularly relevant case because of its long-standing free-entry policy and high profile within the city's cultural

tourism offer. Conceived as a public gallery “for the use of the nation,” the Gallery has historically resisted admission charges and today maintains free entry to its permanent collection while charging only for certain temporary exhibitions and events, operating within a funding framework that combines DCMS grant-in-aid with self-generated and philanthropic income (Centre for Public Impact, 2024, paras. 5–8; DCMS, 2011, paras. 3–5; National Gallery, 2024, pp. 12–14). Located in Trafalgar Square, it receives several million visits annually, with a substantial proportion from overseas tourists, making it both a flagship tourist attraction and an everyday cultural resource for Londoners (National Gallery, 2024, pp. 6–8; Statista, 2024, paras. 1–3). This combination of symbolic centrality, free access, and mixed funding makes the National Gallery a suitable site for examining how free national museums can contribute to inclusive, sustainable urban cultural tourism while navigating operational and social challenges.

Underlying this case is the broader dual mission that contemporary museums are expected to pursue: balancing economic sustainability with their educational and cultural roles as public institutions. On the one hand, pressures to diversify income—through shops, cafés, ticketed exhibitions, sponsorship, and philanthropy—require museums to operate with increasing financial discipline, especially in the wake of public-funding cuts and crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic (OECD & ICOM, 2019, pp. 32–36, 40–41; Prokůpek et al., 2023, pp. 6–8). On the other hand, international ethical and policy instruments stress that museums have a responsibility to guarantee broad public access, support lifelong learning, and promote social inclusion, embedding equity and participation at the core of their mandates (UNESCO, 2015, paras. 20, 33–35; ICOM, 2017, Principle; McGhie, 2019, pp. 18–21). In a free-entry national museum like The National Gallery, this tension is particularly visible: free admission symbolises a commitment to cultural rights and shared heritage, yet the institution must still secure sufficient and stable resources to maintain high-quality collections care, education, and visitor services for both residents and tourists. Against this background, the thesis explores how free access shapes the Gallery’s social impacts and how it can align its dual mission with the goals of sustainable and inclusive urban cultural tourism.

1.2. Justification for choosing the topic

Choosing this topic is justified by the growing policy and academic focus on inclusive urban cultural tourism, the relative lack of work on the social effects of free-entry museum policies, and the strong links to key Sustainable Development Goals. Inclusive urban cultural tourism is increasingly promoted as a way to combine economic benefits from visitor flows with cultural rights, social cohesion, and community wellbeing, stressing that residents as well

as tourists should be able to participate in and benefit from cultural life (McKercher & du Cros, 2002, pp. 27–29; UNESCO, 2025, pp. 18–20). International reports emphasise that museums in city centres act as anchor institutions that can either reinforce inequalities or foster more equitable access depending on how they design pricing, programming, and outreach, making inclusivity a central criterion for sustainable tourism strategies (OECD & ICOM, 2019, pp. 18–20; European Expert Network on Culture and Audiovisual, 2017, pp. 15–17). In a context where cultural tourism accounts for a large and growing share of international travel, examining how free national museums contribute to inclusive, sustainable city tourism is therefore both timely and practically relevant.

Despite substantial literature on museum funding and attendance, there is still a clear gap regarding the specific social impacts of free museum access, particularly in terms of who actually benefits and how. Research on admission fees shows that free entry removes a major financial barrier but does not automatically resolve deeper issues of cultural capital, representation, or perceptions that museums are “not for people like us,” meaning that inequalities in participation often persist even when tickets are free (Kirchberg, 1998, pp. 57–60; CultureCase, 2013, paras. 5–7). UK participation data and sector commentaries confirm that free national museums, including those in London, have not fully closed socio-economic and ethnic gaps in attendance, pointing instead to additional obstacles such as travel costs, working patterns, caring responsibilities, and lack of culturally relevant content (Museumnext, 2023, paras. 6–10; Museums Galleries Scotland, 2024, paras. 3–6). Much of the existing work either evaluates free-entry policies in terms of overall visitor numbers or focuses on economic impacts, leaving comparatively little empirical analysis of the social outcomes of free access in a specific institution such as The National Gallery—especially regarding audience diversity, sense of belonging, and local community use.

Finally, the topic aligns closely with the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, particularly SDGs 4, 10, and 11, which strengthens its international relevance and policy significance. SDG 4 (Quality Education) highlights inclusive and equitable quality education and lifelong learning; museums contribute by offering informal learning opportunities and partnerships with schools and communities that extend education beyond the classroom (UNESCO, 2015, paras. 33–35; UNESCO, 2024, pp. 11–14). SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities) calls for reducing inequalities within and among countries; cultural-policy frameworks explicitly interpret this as requiring action to close gaps in cultural participation across income, ethnicity, disability, and other axes, which directly implicates free national museums in efforts to democratise access to heritage (UNESCO, 2022, paras. 3–6; ICCROM, 2022, paras. 3–6). SDG 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities) stresses making cities inclusive, safe, resilient, and sustainable, with a specific target (11.4) on

protecting and safeguarding cultural and natural heritage; free, accessible museums in central public spaces like Trafalgar Square are key infrastructures for achieving this goal by linking heritage protection with inclusive public use (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2024, paras. 2–4; McGhie, 2019, pp. 18–21). Studying The National Gallery as a free national museum in London therefore provides a concrete way to explore how cultural institutions can operationalise these SDGs in the field of urban cultural tourism.

1.3. Objectives of the thesis

The objectives of this thesis are to critically analyse the social and cultural impacts of free access at The National Gallery, to identify persistent barriers associated with paid-entry models, and to examine the Gallery's contributions to London's image and sustainable tourism strategies.

The first objective is to analyse the social and cultural impacts of free access at The National Gallery, focusing on how the policy shapes visitor diversity, perceptions of belonging, and the institution's role in everyday cultural participation. This involves assessing both quantitative patterns (for example, attendance demographics and repeat-visit rates) and qualitative experiences (for example, how different groups feel represented and welcomed), building on the premise that free entry lowers financial barriers but requires complementary strategies to achieve genuine inclusion (AIM, 2024, pp. 8–12; Kirchberg, 1998, pp. 57–60). By drawing on mixed methods—visitor surveys, interviews, and secondary data—the analysis will evaluate whether free access democratises culture and fosters social cohesion in a flagship urban institution.

The second objective is to identify barriers to paid-entry museum attendance, using comparative evidence from charging institutions to contextualise the National Gallery's free model. This includes mapping financial, logistical, perceptual, and cultural obstacles that deter potential visitors, such as ticket costs, travel expenses, "not for me" attitudes, and lack of relevant content, drawing on participation studies that show pricing interacts with socio-economic status, cultural capital, and lifestyle (CultureCase, 2013, paras. 5–7; Museumnext, 2023, paras. 6–10). The aim is to highlight how free access mitigates some barriers while others persist, informing recommendations for more equitable cultural participation.

The third objective is to examine the National Gallery's contributions to city image and sustainable tourism strategies, assessing how its free, accessible model supports London's branding as a culturally vibrant and inclusive destination. This involves linking visitor data and policy documents to tourism-impact studies that position flagship museums as anchors

for economic multipliers, soft power, and civic identity, while considering challenges such as overcrowding and resource pressures (London & Partners et al., 2015, pp. 6–8; OECD & ICOM, 2019, pp. 22–24). The analysis will explore how the Gallery balances tourist appeal with resident access in line with sustainable urban tourism principles.

These objectives together provide a comprehensive framework for understanding free national museums as instruments of inclusive, sustainable cultural tourism, addressing both institutional practice and broader policy implications.

1.4. Hypotheses and research questions

This thesis is guided by three interconnected hypotheses and a set of targeted research questions, which frame the empirical analysis of free access at The National Gallery and its implications for inclusive urban cultural tourism.

Hypothesis 1: Free access democratises culture and fosters inclusion. Free admission to national museums such as The National Gallery lowers financial barriers, increases overall attendance (particularly among local residents and repeat visitors), and supports a more diverse visitor profile, thereby advancing social inclusion and cultural participation in line with cultural rights principles (AIM, 2024, pp. 8–12; Centre for Public Impact, 2024, paras. 5–8). This hypothesis builds on evidence that reinstating free entry in the UK doubled visits at charging institutions and is expected to hold where complementary strategies address non-financial obstacles.

Hypothesis 2: Barriers remain despite free access (location, awareness, accessibility). Even with free entry, structural and perceptual barriers—such as transport costs, opening hours, cultural capital deficits, lack of awareness, and feelings of not belonging—persist and limit participation among lower-income, minority ethnic, and other under-represented groups (Kirchberg, 1998, pp. 57–60; Museumnext, 2023, paras. 6–10). This hypothesis anticipates that while free access mitigates price-related exclusion, full inclusivity requires proactive measures beyond admission policy.

Hypothesis 3: The National Gallery's free model aligns with SDGs in the urban tourism context. By providing free, high-quality cultural experiences in a central public space, the Gallery contributes to SDG 4 (quality education through lifelong learning), SDG 10 (reduced inequalities via equitable access), and SDG 11 (sustainable cities through heritage protection and inclusive public use), while supporting London's image as a vibrant, accessible cultural destination (McGhie, 2019, pp. 18–21; UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2024, paras. 2–4).

1.5. Methodology overview

This thesis adopts a comparative case study approach centred on the National Gallery, selected because of its importance as a free-entry national museum, its hybrid funding structure, and its prominent role in London's urban cultural tourism system. The case study is examined in relation to wider debates on government-funded, ticket-based, and hybrid museum models in order to assess how different funding structures influence accessibility, audience diversity, and financial sustainability.

Methodologically, the study uses a mixed-methods design that combines qualitative and quantitative forms of evidence. The qualitative component is based on the author's Questionnaire for Museum and Cultural Heritage Professionals (2026), which gathered open-ended responses from 11 museum and cultural heritage professionals working in roles such as education, curatorship, collections, archives, visitor experience, exhibitions, and community heritage. The quantitative component relies primarily on secondary material, including attendance figures, financial reports, and comparative sector data used to contextualise the National Gallery and related funding models.

The analytical strategy combines thematic analysis and statistical-descriptive interpretation. The questionnaire responses were interpreted through thematic analysis in order to identify recurring patterns related to public value, financial barriers, non-financial barriers, inclusion, hybrid funding, digital access, and sustainable cultural tourism. The quantitative and documentary material was analysed descriptively and comparatively to support the case study and to situate the National Gallery within broader funding debates. Together, these methods make it possible to connect institutional evidence with professional perspectives and to evaluate how museum funding models shape both access and sustainability in practice.

1.6. Structure of the thesis

This thesis is divided into seven chapters, organised to move from the theoretical and methodological foundations of the study to the empirical analysis and final conclusions. The structure follows a logical progression from context and conceptual framing to case study analysis, discussion, and reflection.

The first chapter introduces the topic, justifies its relevance, presents the objectives and hypotheses, and outlines the methodological approach of the study. The second chapter develops the conceptual framework, focusing on museums, accessibility, social inclusion, funding models, and their relationship with urban cultural tourism and sustainable

development. The third chapter explains the research methodology, including the case study approach, data collection techniques, sample, and analytical methods.

The fourth chapter presents The National Gallery in London as the central case study and examines its historical development, institutional profile, and access model. The fifth chapter analyses the empirical findings, with particular attention to questionnaire results and the main themes that emerged in relation to access, barriers, inclusion, and museum funding. The sixth chapter discusses these findings in relation to the research questions, the theoretical framework, and the broader field of sustainable and inclusive urban cultural tourism. Finally, the seventh chapter presents the main conclusions, limitations of the study, and recommendations for future research and practice.

2. Conceptual Framework: Museums, Accessibility, and Social Inclusion

2.1. The Role of Museums in Urban Cultural Tourism

2.1.1. Museums as cultural institutions and urban anchors

The International Council of Museums defines a museum as a non-profit, permanent institution in the service of society and its development, open to the public, which acquires, conserves, researches, communicates, and exhibits the tangible and intangible heritage of humanity and its environment for the purposes of education, study, and enjoyment (International Council of Museums [ICOM], 2007, p. 3). This definition positions museums as organisations that combine collection-based work with a broad societal mandate, emphasising their responsibility to manage heritage for public benefit rather than for private gain (Sandahl, 2019, pp. 27–29). Policy briefs on museums and cultural tourism further underline that museums are expected to act as centres of knowledge, preservation, and public communication in contemporary societies (ICOM Ukraine & UNESCO, 2011, pp. 4–6).

From this perspective, museums are key spaces of education, preservation, and cultural transmission, providing informal and lifelong learning opportunities that complement formal education systems (ICOM Ukraine & UNESCO, 2011, pp. 7–9). By mediating access to historical artefacts, artistic works, and scientific collections, museums help to construct and transmit collective memory and cultural values across generations, while also enabling critical reflection on contested pasts and present social issues (Fontal Merillas, 2016, pp. 35–37; Sandahl, 2019, pp. 30–32). In the context of cultural tourism, this educational and heritage-preserving function is closely linked to tourism development, as museums provide structured, interpretive experiences that make local culture legible and attractive to visitors (Kudrein, 2011, pp. 5–7).

In urban environments, museums often act as “anchor institutions” that are spatially rooted, mission-driven, and unlikely to relocate, thereby stabilising neighbourhoods and serving as focal points for cultural, social, and economic activity (Urban Pamphleteer, 2019, pp. 4–6). As major attractions within urban cultural landscapes, they draw residents and tourists, generate employment, and stimulate demand for hospitality and creative services, making them important drivers of urban cultural tourism and place-based development (Kamel, 2011, pp. 10–12; Okhahlamba Municipality, 2025, paras. 1–3). Beyond their economic role, museums contribute to city identity and place-making by symbolising local heritage, shaping urban narratives, and offering public spaces for community interaction, intercultural

dialogue, and participation in cultural life (Okhahlamba Municipality, 2025, paras. 4–6; Urban Pamphleteer, 2019, pp. 8–9).

2.1.2. Museums and cultural tourism dynamics

Cultural tourism is commonly defined as a type of tourism activity in which the visitor's essential motivation is to learn, discover, experience, and consume cultural attractions and products, both tangible and intangible (McKercher & du Cros, 2002, pp. 6–7; UN Tourism, 2018, p. 15). International surveys indicate that cultural tourism is one of the fastest-growing segments of global tourism, accounting for an estimated 39–40% of international tourist arrivals and featuring as a priority area in the tourism policy of most countries (Richards, 2018, pp. 12–13; UNESCO, 2021, paras. 7–8). This sustained growth is linked to changing visitor preferences towards more experiential, knowledge-intensive forms of travel and to destinations' efforts to differentiate themselves through culture-based products and narratives (McKercher & du Cros, 2002, pp. 18–19; European Expert Network on Culture and Audiovisual, 2017, pp. 8–10).

Within this wider trend, museums often operate as primary motivators for city visits, especially in destinations where flagship institutions such as major art museums, history museums, or science centres form part of the core tourism offer (McKercher & du Cros, 2002, pp. 104–106). Case studies of major European and North American cities show that visits to museums and heritage sites represent a significant share of urban tourists' activities and frequently constitute the main purpose of cultural trips (de la Nuez Urbín, 2020, pp. 45–47; Pagán & Peiró, 2020, pp. 3–4). By curating distinctive collections and exhibitions, museums provide emblematic cultural experiences that shape destination image and influence travellers' choice of city, thereby reinforcing their role as anchor attractions in urban tourism systems (OECD & ICOM, 2019, pp. 11–12).

The relationship between cultural tourism and urban competitiveness is increasingly recognised in policy and research, as cities use museums and cultural institutions to attract visitors, investment, and talent in a context of global inter-city competition (OECD & ICOM, 2019, pp. 11–13). Cultural tourism can enhance urban competitiveness by diversifying local economies, stimulating innovation in creative sectors, and supporting the regeneration of historic neighbourhoods and industrial areas (UNESCO, 2025, pp. 18–20; European Expert Network on Culture and Audiovisual, 2017, pp. 15–17). In this regard, museums not only generate visitor expenditure but also contribute to the symbolic capital of cities, strengthening their positioning as attractive places to live, work, and visit in the long term (McKercher & du Cros, 2002, pp. 27–29; OECD & ICOM, 2019, pp. 19–20).

2.1.3. Museums and city branding

Flagship museums such as the Louvre in Paris, the Prado in Madrid, and the British Museum in London are frequently used as central icons in destination marketing campaigns, where they function as “emblem” attractions that summarise and promote the cultural offer of the city (Evans, 2003, pp. 417–419; Furtună, 2012, pp. 77–79). Studies of cultural flagship strategies show that high-profile museums and their iconic architecture or collections are deliberately positioned as visual and narrative anchors in city branding, appearing in logos, promotional materials, and international media coverage (Evans, 2003, pp. 420–422; ArchDaily, 2025, paras. 3–5). In this way, institutions such as the Guggenheim Bilbao or the Louvre have become powerful marketing assets that help cities differentiate themselves in a crowded global tourism marketplace (Wong, 2020, paras. 5–7).

Museums also operate as instruments of soft power and identity symbols, projecting values, histories, and aspirations that shape how cities and nations are perceived internationally (Nisbett, 2013, pp. 571–573; Shah, 2020, paras. 3–4). As sites of cultural diplomacy, they host international exhibitions, collaborations, and exchanges that foster dialogue and mutual understanding, thereby contributing to city diplomacy and broader foreign-policy objectives (Kakalis, 2025, pp. 2–4; USC Center on Public Diplomacy, 2018, paras. 4–6). Acting as “identity machines,” museums translate complex local narratives into accessible cultural experiences, reinforcing both internal identification among residents and external images aimed at visitors and global audiences (Konovalova, 2021, pp. 14–16).

Through these branding and soft-power functions, museums significantly enhance the global visibility of cities by generating media attention, tourism flows, and symbolic associations that extend far beyond the museum walls (OECD & ICOM, 2019, pp. 19–21). Flagship projects such as the Guggenheim in Bilbao or the Louvre’s international branches have demonstrated how a single museum can reposition a city on the global map, stimulate urban regeneration, and attract investment in related creative and service industries (Evans, 2003, pp. 423–425; ArchDaily, 2025, paras. 6–8). In this sense, museums contribute not only to local cultural life but also to the strategic branding of cities as competitive, culturally vibrant destinations in the global urban hierarchy (Nisbett, 2013, pp. 574–575; OECD & ICOM, 2019, pp. 22–23).

The British Museum provides a particularly salient example of how government-funded museums can function as instruments of soft power and national identity projection, with its world-famous collections of Egyptian, Greek, and Mesopotamian artefacts serving as visual anchors in UK cultural diplomacy and London branding (Barrett, 2012, pp. 571–573; OECD & ICOM, 2019, pp. 19–21). As a free-entry public institution located in central London, it

attracts millions of international visitors annually, projecting an image of British cultural leadership and global heritage stewardship while generating substantial secondary economic benefits for the city (Evans, 2003, pp. 420–422). However, this soft-power role also raises ethical tensions, as the Museum's collections—many acquired during the colonial era—are used to symbolise national prestige even as debates about restitution, decolonisation, and source-community representation intensify, highlighting the complex interplay between cultural diplomacy, heritage ethics, and public funding mandates (Kakalis, 2025, pp. 2–4; Shah, 2020, paras. 3–4).

At the same time, the British Museum's prominent role in projecting UK soft power through its global collections raises ethical questions about the use of publicly funded cultural institutions for national branding, particularly given ongoing debates about the restitution of objects acquired during colonial eras (Kakalis, 2025, pp. 2–4). This tension complicates the Museum's alignment with SDG 10 commitments to reduced inequalities, as its status as a symbol of British cultural prestige may inadvertently reinforce symbolic hierarchies even while free entry expands physical access (McGhie, 2019, pp. 44–46).

2.2. Accessibility, Social Inclusion, and Audience Diversity

2.2.1. Concepts of accessibility and cultural democratisation

In the museum context, accessibility refers to the removal of barriers that prevent people from different backgrounds and with different abilities from fully using and benefiting from cultural institutions, and it is commonly described across physical, financial, social, and cognitive dimensions (Sandell, 2002, pp. 7–9; Yatsevich et al., 2023, pp. 16–18). Physical accessibility concerns the built environment and wayfinding, ensuring that entrances, circulation routes, exhibition spaces, and facilities can be used safely and independently by people with diverse mobility and sensory needs (COME-IN! Project, 2018, pp. 18–20). Financial accessibility addresses the cost of admission and related expenses, as high ticket prices and ancillary costs can exclude low-income groups from cultural participation (European Parliamentary Research Service, 2025, pp. 2–3). Social and cultural accessibility relate to how welcome and represented people feel in museums, including the presence of inclusive narratives, diverse staff, and community-based programmes, while cognitive accessibility focuses on how information is presented so that visitors with different educational levels, languages, and cognitive profiles can understand and engage with content (Hooper-Greenhill, 2007, pp. 25–27; O'Neill, 2024, paras. 4–6).

Building on these dimensions, the notion of cultural democratisation emphasises making heritage available and meaningful to all social groups, rather than only to traditional, highly

educated museum publics (Council of Europe, 2016, pp. 6–8). A rights-based approach to culture frames access to museums and heritage as part of broader cultural rights, arguing that all individuals and communities should have opportunities to participate in defining, interpreting, and enjoying cultural resources (Tveit, 2009, pp. 13–15). Contemporary museology, therefore encourages institutions to move beyond offering access "for" communities towards working "with" them through co-curation, participatory projects, and sustained partnerships that redistribute cultural capital and voice (ICOM, 2025, paras. 8–10; Jensen, 2024, pp. 32–34).

Historically, many museums functioned as elite institutions that reflected and reinforced dominant social groups' tastes and perspectives, limiting participation by marginalised communities through both material and symbolic barriers (Sandell, 2002, pp. 3–5). Current debates on inclusion argue that museums must consciously transform into inclusive cultural spaces by diversifying collections and narratives, revising interpretive frameworks, and adopting policies that recognise plural identities and experiences (NEMO, 2020, pp. 4–6; UNESCO, 2015, pp. 8–10). In this shift from elite to inclusive institutions, accessibility and cultural democratisation become core principles of museum practice, positioning museums as active actors in promoting social justice, equality, and democratic participation in cultural life (ICOM, 2015, pp. 4–5; Aksamija & Pop, 2023, pp. 9–11).

2.2.2. Theories of social inclusion and cultural participation

Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital helps explain why participation in museums and other high-culture activities is unevenly distributed across social groups, as it emphasises that competencies such as familiarity with "legitimate" art, confidence in cultural settings, and mastery of dominant language codes are learned through family, schooling, and social environment rather than being naturally shared by all (Bourdieu, 1984, pp. 2–6; Walker et al., 2022, pp. 3–5). Empirical studies show that museum visiting correlates strongly with education, income, and occupational status, suggesting that those with higher stocks of cultural and economic capital are both more likely to access museums and to feel that these institutions are "for people like them," whereas others may perceive them as intimidating, exclusive, or irrelevant to their lives (DiMaggio & Useem, 1978, pp. 142–144; Hajibayova, 2017, pp. 507–509). From this perspective, social inclusion in cultural participation requires not only tackling practical obstacles such as cost or distance but also addressing symbolic boundaries and power relations that determine which cultural forms are valued and whose experiences are reflected in museum narratives (Ramsey, 2025, paras. 10–12; Sandell, 2002, pp. 3–5).

At the policy level, UNESCO frameworks stress that inclusive access to culture is a cultural right and a precondition for equitable participation in cultural life, calling on states and cultural institutions to remove structural barriers linked to social origin, gender, disability, ethnicity, or economic status (UNESCO, 2015, pp. 8–10; UNESCO, 2022, paras. 3–6). The UNESCO Framework for Culture and Arts Education identifies access, inclusion, and equity as strategic objectives and encourages cooperation between schools, museums, heritage sites, and community organisations to ensure that all learners—including those in vulnerable situations—can participate in, and contribute to, cultural activities (UNESCO, 2024, pp. 11–14). In parallel, global monitoring of cultural policies highlights persistent participation gaps, underlining the need for targeted measures such as outreach programmes, inclusive curricula, and participatory governance that connect cultural rights, education, and social inclusion agendas (UNESCO, 2022, paras. 7–9).

These principles are operationalised in practice through audience development and participation models that seek to broaden, deepen, and diversify engagement with museums and the arts (Culture Action Europe, 2017, pp. 5–7; Ayala Aizpuru, 2024, pp. 9–11). Audience development is increasingly understood as a strategic, long-term process of building and sustaining relationships with different public groups by understanding their needs, removing barriers, and co-creating relevant cultural experiences, rather than simply increasing visitor numbers in the short term (Hill et al., 2018, pp. 17–19; Lin, 2015, slides 6–8). Contemporary models integrate marketing segmentation with participatory approaches and learning theories—such as Falk and Dierking's contextual model of the visitor experience—to design programmes that attract new audiences, support repeat visitation, and empower communities to see themselves reflected in museum narratives and decision-making (Waltl, 2014, pp. 3–5; Know Your Audience, 2023, pp. 10–12). In this way, audience development becomes a key operational tool for translating abstract commitments to social inclusion and cultural democracy into concrete institutional practices.

2.2.3. Barriers to museum access

Financial barriers remain a major obstacle to museum participation, as admission fees and associated costs such as transport, food, and childcare can make visits unaffordable for low-income individuals and families even when basic entry is free or discounted (European Parliamentary Research Service, 2025, pp. 2–3; Kids in Museums, 2023, paras. 3–5). Initiatives like "Museums for All" in the United States, which offer free or reduced admission to people receiving food assistance, explicitly recognise that standard ticket prices can deter those on limited incomes and seek to normalise regular museum use among these groups (Museums for All, 2025, paras. 1–3). Studies on cultural participation more broadly show

that transport costs and the need to purchase meals or equipment can further limit access, particularly for those advised to attend cultural activities for health or educational reasons but unable to bear the cumulative expenses (Baxter et al., 2022, paras. 76–80).

Social and cultural barriers relate to how people perceive museums as spaces, with many potential visitors—especially from minority ethnic or working-class backgrounds—describing them as exclusive, elitist, or "not designed for us" (Dawson, 2014, pp. 5–7; Mrak, 2022, pp. 3–4). These perceptions are closely linked to the distribution of cultural capital, as lack of familiarity with museum norms, specialised language, and interpretive codes can make people feel out of place or fear being judged for "not understanding" the exhibits (Hajibayova, 2017, pp. 507–509; LinkedFrame, 2024, paras. 9–12). Language barriers and the under-representation of certain histories and communities in collections and displays can further reinforce the sense that museums primarily serve established, majority publics rather than reflecting diverse identities and experiences (UNESCO, 2022, paras. 3–6).

Physical and logistical barriers include the location of museums, limitations in transport infrastructure, architectural obstacles, and restrictive opening hours, all of which can make access difficult for people with disabilities, older visitors, or those living far from cultural centres (Mrak, 2022, pp. 4–6; Šebová, 2024, pp. 7–9). Research shows that historic buildings often pose particular challenges for step-free access, while insufficient resources for adaptations and staff training can delay the removal of architectural and sensory barriers (Šebová, 2024, pp. 10–11; Sheidin et al., 2023, pp. 2–4). In addition, limited evening or weekend opening hours may exclude people who work irregular shifts or have caring responsibilities, thereby entrenching inequalities in who can participate in cultural life (Mrak, 2022, pp. 8–9).

Psychological barriers refer to feelings of intimidation, anxiety, and the "not for me" syndrome, where people anticipate discomfort or rejection in museum environments and decide not to visit (Dawson, 2014, pp. 7–9; Incluseum, 2015, paras. 4–6). Qualitative research with low-income and minority visitors indicates that worries about "not knowing how to behave," fear of being judged, and memories of negative experiences in group or institutional settings can significantly deter museum engagement, even when practical barriers have been reduced (Baxter et al., 2022, paras. 90–93). These emotional and perceptual obstacles highlight that improving access requires attention not only to cost and infrastructure but also to the affective climate of museums—how welcome, respected, and represented visitors feel when they consider entering or moving through these spaces (Mrak, 2022, pp. 9–10; Cardona et al., 2021, pp. 4–6).

2.2.4. Audience diversity in museums

Audience diversity refers to the extent to which museum visitors reflect the demographic, social, and cultural composition of the wider population, and is increasingly seen as essential for institutional relevance, legitimacy, and public value (Blooloop, 2021, paras. 4–6; Museums Audience Report, 2024, paras. 2–4). Recent visitor surveys show that museum audiences in many countries remain disproportionately white, highly educated, and middle-class compared with national populations, revealing persistent participation gaps for ethnic minorities, lower-income groups, and some migrant communities (American Alliance of Museums, 2024, paras. 6–8; GOV.UK, 2021, paras. 3–5). Ensuring diverse representation in visitor profiles is therefore not only a question of fairness but also a strategic imperative, as museums that engage a broader cross-section of society are better positioned to fulfil their public mission and maintain social and political support (Blooloop, 2021, paras. 10–12).

Access policies and funding models have a direct impact on visitor segmentation, shaping who is more likely to visit and how frequently different groups engage with museums (AIM, 2024, pp. 5–7; Cellini & Cuccia, 2013, pp. 3–5). Research comparing free-entry and ticketed institutions indicates that free general admission tends to increase overall attendance and can broaden socio-economic reach, although travel costs and secondary spending still limit access for some lower-income groups (Artnet News, 2025, paras. 4–6; ArtsProfessional, 2024, paras. 8–10). At the same time, museums facing cuts in public funding may respond by raising ticket prices or reducing programmes, which risks narrowing their audience base and reinforcing inequalities in cultural participation unless offset by targeted subsidies, outreach, and partnerships (Museums Journal, 2020, paras. 3–5; AIM, 2024, pp. 10–12).

To reach underrepresented groups such as youth, minority communities, and low-income populations, museums increasingly adopt proactive audience-development strategies that combine programming, partnerships, and changes in institutional practice (Smithsonian Institution, 2001, pp. 12–14; Open House Europe, 2024, pp. 18–20). Successful case studies highlight measures such as co-created exhibitions with local communities, targeted marketing in relevant languages and media channels, free or low-cost family events, youth councils, and collaboration with schools, community organisations, and faith groups to build trust and relevance over time (AIM, 2025, pp. 6–9; GEM & Arts Council England, 2025, pp. 11–13). Structural changes—including diversifying museum staff and governance, embedding equity goals in strategic plans, and using data to monitor who is reached and who remains absent—are also emphasised as crucial for moving beyond one-off projects

towards sustainable, long-term diversification of museum audiences (Blooloop, 2021, paras. 18–21; Diversity Is Key, 2023, pp. 22–24).

2.3. Museum Funding Models and Their Implications

2.3.1. Government-funded/free-access models

Government-funded museums with free or subsidised entry rely primarily on public budgets from national, regional, or municipal authorities, often complemented by smaller streams such as sponsorship, donations, or commercial income, while offering either free general admission or low, uniform ticket prices to visitors (OECD & ICOM, 2019, pp. 32–34). These institutions are typically mandated to provide broad public access to collections and learning opportunities as part of cultural rights and national heritage policies, which makes universal or heavily subsidised entry a core instrument for fulfilling their public mission rather than a purely commercial decision (UNESCO, 2015, pp. 8–10). In many European countries, national museums receive stable baseline funding to cover essential operating costs, enabling them to maintain free entry to permanent collections while charging selectively for temporary exhibitions or special services (OECD & ICOM, 2019, pp. 36–37).

A key advantage of government-funded, free-access models is their contribution to accessibility and inclusivity, as the removal or reduction of admission fees lowers financial barriers and can encourage visits from people who might otherwise be excluded on economic grounds (Gall-Ely et al., 2007, as cited in Pyykkönen, 2025, pp. 6–7). Comparative studies of free-entry policies show that these museums often record higher overall attendance and greater use by local residents, supporting their role as everyday cultural resources rather than occasional luxury attractions (Burch et al., 2015, as cited in Pyykkönen, 2025, pp. 10–11). Moreover, publicly funded museums are generally expected to prioritise education, community engagement, and social inclusion, meaning that free or subsidised entry aligns closely with policy goals to democratise culture and strengthen museums' functions as civic institutions rather than market-driven entertainment venues (OECD & ICOM, 2019, pp. 18–20; ICOM, 2015, pp. 4–5).

However, these models also involve disadvantages, notably a strong dependency on political will and macro-economic conditions, which can make museums vulnerable to budget cuts and shifting policy priorities (OECD & ICOM, 2019, pp. 40–41). Reports from Europe and the United States indicate that reductions in public grants have led some museums to scale back free-access programmes, cut community and education initiatives, or postpone maintenance and capital projects when alternative revenues were insufficient (Hyperallergic, 2025, paras. 5–8; Museums Journal, 2020, paras. 3–5). Crises such as

economic downturns or pandemics can exacerbate these vulnerabilities, as falling visitor numbers, rising operating costs, and simultaneous public-funding cuts create financial stress that may threaten the sustainability of free-admission policies or force institutions to introduce or increase fees, potentially undermining previous gains in accessibility and inclusivity (OECD, 2019, pp. 52–54; Artnet News, 2025, paras. 6–8).

Although this section distinguishes government-funded and ticket-based models as ideal types, most large museums today operate with mixed income structures that combine public subsidy, market-based revenue, and donations. In many national museums, baseline grant-in-aid from culture ministries underwrites core operating costs and guarantees free or heavily subsidised access to permanent collections, while admissions to special exhibitions, retail, catering, venue hire, and fundraising generate additional resources for exhibitions, capital projects, and audience services (OECD & ICOM, 2019, pp. 32–37; ICOM, 2025, pp. 9–12). From this perspective, The National Gallery is treated as a government-funded case because a stable public subsidy and a statutory public-service mandate underpin its free-entry policy and legal status as an executive non-departmental public body (DCMS, 2025, Section 27; National Gallery, 2025, pp. 50–53). At the same time, its reliance on substantial earned income from shops, cafés, and ticketed temporary exhibitions clearly reflects market and donation logics, which are expected to cross-subsidise the public mission rather than replace it (OECD & ICOM, 2019, pp. 40–41; Prokůpek et al., 2023, pp. 6–8). Therefore, The National Gallery can be conceptualised as a hybrid public-service model, in which the state anchors universal access while commercial activities and philanthropy are strategically mobilised to support growth, resilience, and programming.

2.3.2. Ticket-based/self-financing models

Ticket-based or self-financing museum models are characterised by a higher reliance on earned income, particularly through admission fees for permanent and temporary exhibitions, as well as revenue from ticketed events, venue hire, merchandising, memberships, and other commercial activities (RECHARGE, 2025, pp. 3–5; Bernelot Moens, 2014, pp. 18–20). In these models, public subsidies often cover only part of operating costs, so institutions adopt more explicitly market-oriented strategies, using pricing, packaging, and product diversification to stabilise budgets and reduce dependence on government grants (OECD & ICOM, 2019, pp. 32–34; ICOM, 2025, pp. 6–7). This approach frequently involves dynamic pricing, premium experiences, and expanded retail and catering offers, turning visitor expenditure into a central pillar of financial planning (RECHARGE, 2025, pp. 6–9).

A core advantage of ticket-based models is the potential for greater financial independence and resource generation, as diversified earned income can provide flexibility to invest in new exhibitions, capital projects, and audience services without waiting for public-funding decisions (Bernelot Moens, 2014, pp. 34–36; Cultural Enterprises, 2024, paras. 6–8). Museums that successfully develop income streams from admissions, commercial activities, and partnerships may be better positioned to weather moderate public-funding fluctuations and to plan long-term projects with more autonomy (OECD & ICOM, 2019, pp. 40–41). Studies of admissions pricing also suggest that introducing differentiated ticket types, season passes, and bundled offers can increase total admissions income and, in some cases, maintain or even expand overall visitor numbers and geographic reach, especially when coupled with strong marketing (Cultural Enterprises, 2024, paras. 9–11; AIM, 2024, pp. 8–10).

At the same time, ticket-based models can create exclusionary barriers and risk reducing audience diversity if admission fees become a significant obstacle for lower-income visitors and some local communities (Independent Travel Cats, 2020, paras. 14–16; Cultural Enterprises, 2024, paras. 3–5). Research on admissions charging in Europe and the UK indicates that introducing or increasing entrance fees tends to reduce total visitor numbers—particularly among local and repeat users—and can have a negative impact on the demographic mix of visitors unless accompanied by targeted mitigations such as free days or concessionary schemes (AIM, 2024, pp. 5–7; Museums Journal, 2024, paras. 4–7). Critics argue that strong pressure to self-finance may push museums towards programming and services that prioritise paying, often tourist, audiences over socially inclusive or experimental work, potentially undermining their public mission and reinforcing social inequalities in cultural participation (OECD & ICOM, 2019, pp. 18–20; ICOM, 2025, pp. 8–9).

2.3.3. Hybrid and alternative funding approaches

Hybrid and alternative museum funding approaches combine multiple income streams—typically public subsidies, earned income from ticket sales and commercial activities, and private support through sponsorships, philanthropy, and memberships—to reduce reliance on any single source and increase financial resilience (OECD & ICOM, 2019, pp. 32–34; Lifestyle Sustainability Directory, 2025, paras. 6–8). In these mixed models, government funding often provides a baseline for core functions, while ticket revenue, retail, catering, and venue hire generate additional operating income, and private contributions support specific projects, capital campaigns, or endowments (Global Leaders Institute, 2024, paras. 3–6; GLAMMONS, 2024, pp. 8–10). The rationale is to balance the stability of public

investment with the flexibility and innovation potential of market-based and philanthropic income, aligning financial strategy with both public-service and entrepreneurial goals (OECD & ICOM, 2019, pp. 40–41).

Across Europe and beyond, hybrid funding models take diverse forms, including public-private partnerships, arm's-length foundations, and endowment-supported institutions that blend state and private capital (Choi, 2024, pp. 4–6; Aninver, 2025, paras. 12–16). For example, some national or city museums operate as publicly owned organisations with long-term management contracts that explicitly encourage fundraising, sponsorship, and commercial development alongside continued public subsidies (Choi, 2024, pp. 7–9). Others have established endowment funds where initial state contributions are matched by private donations and invested to generate a steady annual income stream, as in the case of the Louvre's endowment fund or regional cultural endowments in North America and Europe (Aninver, 2025, paras. 29–33; Artnet News, 2025, paras. 6–8). These examples illustrate how hybrid models can help museums cope with tightening public budgets while maintaining a public-service orientation.

Within this mixed-economy landscape, philanthropy, corporate sponsorship, and membership schemes have gained prominence as complementary pillars of museum finance, particularly where public funding has stagnated or declined (Observer, 2025, paras. 3–7; European Parliament, 2011, pp. 10–12). Philanthropic giving from individuals, foundations, and charitable trusts often supports major capital projects, acquisitions, and educational initiatives, sometimes incentivised by tax benefits or public-matching mechanisms that multiply the impact of private gifts (European Parliament, 2011, pp. 18–21; Artnet News, 2025, paras. 6–8). Corporate sponsorships and partnerships provide project-based funding and marketing synergies but also raise ethical and reputational questions, prompting a shift towards more values-based collaborations and "joint venture" models that share risks and responsibilities (Lewandowska, 2010, pp. 22–24; Apollo Magazine, 2025, paras. 8–10). Membership programmes, meanwhile, offer a relatively predictable revenue stream and foster long-term relationships with audiences by providing benefits such as free entry, exclusive events, and behind-the-scenes access, making them a cornerstone of many hybrid funding strategies (Global Leaders Institute, 2024, paras. 7–9; American Alliance of Museums, 2025).

2.3.4. Implications of funding models for accessibility and diversity

Funding models have direct implications for accessibility and audience diversity, because pricing structures, subsidy levels, and targeted funds shape both who can afford to visit and what kinds of programmes museums can sustain.

Evidence from large visitor surveys shows a close relationship between admission pricing and the socio-economic profile of museum audiences. The 2024 Annual Survey of Museum-Goers in the United States reports that among adults who visit museums only occasionally, 41% cite cost as the main barrier to more frequent visits, with concern about admission fees markedly higher among households without a college graduate than among those with higher educational attainment (American Alliance of Museums [AAM], 2024, pp. 3–5). Analyses of Italian museums similarly find that when free admittance is replaced or supplemented by paid tickets, total visits—and especially visits from local and repeat audiences—decline, indicating that price increases have a stronger negative effect on residents than on tourists (Cellini & Cuccia, 2013, pp. 224–226). UK research for the Association of Independent Museums shows that charging policies interact with local income levels and competition; while some charging museums maintain broad audiences, the “Taking Charge” evaluation notes that concerns about reduced attendance among nearby low-income residents are justified by visitor-verdict data, which record lower proportions of local visitors after price rises (AIM, 2024, pp. 18–20; AIM, 2016, pp. 6–7).

Because admissions revenue, public subsidies, and project grants are interdependent, museums must balance the need to generate income with commitments to inclusive access. A Finnish study on “what free really costs” shows that free-entry museums often report lower cost per visitor and higher levels of repeat visitation, but also depend heavily on stable municipal or state funding to avoid cutbacks in staff, conservation, and programming (Pyykkönen, 2025, pp. 608–610). The study concludes that free admission is sustainable when embedded in a mixed funding model that combines core public support with diversified earned income and external project funding, rather than being treated as a stand-alone audience-building tool without adequate financial backing (Pyykkönen, 2025, pp. 612–614). Admissions-pricing guidance from AIM similarly argues that effective strategies “maximise income from those able to pay” while still offering concessions, free opportunities, and low-cost options for target groups, explicitly warning that decisions made solely on revenue grounds risk undermining accessibility and engagement goals (AIM, 2016, pp. 3–5; AIM, 2024, pp. 22–24). Complementary funding from accessibility and innovation grants allows museums to invest in ramps, captioning, tactile resources, and outreach programmes that would be difficult to finance from operating budgets alone,

thereby widening participation without fully sacrificing admissions income (CaptioningStar, 2025, pp. 4–7; European Parliamentary Research Service, 2025, pp. 6–8).

Different funding configurations also influence programming, exhibition choices, and outreach, as institutions respond to the expectations and priorities of funders, donors, and paying audiences. Studies on museum sustainability argue that business models relying strongly on earned income tend to favour large-scale, popular exhibitions and "blockbuster" programming that can attract high visitor numbers and secondary spend, sometimes at the expense of riskier, locally focused, or socially engaged projects that are less lucrative (Stylianou-Lambert et al., 2014, pp. 64–66; Pyykkönen, 2025, pp. 615–616). Conversely, where public or philanthropic funding explicitly incorporates social-inclusion and cultural-rights objectives—such as programmes aligned with the Faro Convention or targeted diversity funds—museums are better positioned to develop long-term outreach, co-curated exhibitions, and participatory projects with communities that may not generate substantial ticket revenue but significantly broaden and diversify engagement (Council of Europe, 2016, pp. 9–11; COME-IN! Project, 2018, pp. 22–25). Case studies of UK museums participating in the "Open Up" initiative show that when accessibility, diversity, and community impact are written into funding criteria and evaluation frameworks, institutions allocate more staff time and resources to partnerships with schools, youth groups, and minority organisations, leading over time to more representative visitor profiles and deeper use of collections by previously underrepresented audiences (Open Up Case Studies, 2025, pp. 10–13; AAM, 2024, pp. 6–8).

2.4. Museums, Cultural Tourism, and Sustainable Urban Development

2.4.1. Educational, social, and cultural impacts on local communities

Guidance on museums and the Sustainable Development Goals highlights that museums "support and provide learning opportunities in support of the SDGs" by offering informal and non-formal education for people of all ages, thereby contributing directly to SDG 4 on quality education and lifelong learning (Curating Tomorrow, 2019, pp. 11–13). Museum-based learning includes school visits, family activities, adult education, and self-directed exploration, which can foster critical thinking, creativity, and global citizenship beyond formal curricula (Museums for Climate Action, 2022, pp. 2–4). Case material from university and city museums shows that free public exhibitions, public lectures, and workshops function as accessible learning resources for local residents, extending educational opportunities to those who may not be reached by higher education institutions (University

of Queensland Art Museum, 2025, paras. 5–7; University of Manchester, 2024, paras. 8–10).

Community outreach and educational programmes allow museums to take learning beyond their walls and into neighbourhoods, schools, and community venues. A guide on localising the SDGs through museums and libraries notes that partnerships between museums, schools, NGOs, and local authorities are particularly effective for integrating sustainability topics into education and for reaching learners who seldom visit formal cultural spaces (Curating Tomorrow, 2023, pp. 16–18). Studies on education for sustainable development emphasise that collaborative projects with museums—such as co-designed workshops, project-based learning, and interdisciplinary activities—help teachers connect abstract sustainability agendas with tangible objects, stories, and local environments, increasing students' engagement and sense of agency (ZEMOS98, 2025, pp. 5–7). Toolkits for education for sustainable development in museums recommend using ESD pedagogy across school programmes, adult courses, and exhibition planning so that environmental and social themes become integrated into everyday learning experiences rather than confined to one-off events (Museums for Climate Action, 2022, pp. 4–6).

Beyond education, museums contribute to social cohesion and civic pride by providing shared spaces where people from different backgrounds can meet, dialogue, and recognise their histories in the public sphere. Research on the social impact of local museums finds that residents value them as places that "develop pride in local traditions, involve people in local projects, and promote social networks across different cultures and age groups," with survey respondents strongly agreeing that museums strengthen the social fabric of their communities (Kelly, 2006, as summarised in NEMO, 2020, pp. 8–10). The OECD–ICOM guide similarly argues that museums enhance social capital by fostering a sense of belonging, supporting intercultural understanding, and offering safe spaces for dialogue on difficult issues, which can be particularly important in diverse or divided cities (OECD & ICOM, 2019, pp. 18–20). Contemporary practice examples—such as civic forums, co-curated exhibitions on local histories, and museums serving as gathering places after crises—illustrate how institutions can function as "community front porches," expanding their role from display venues to hubs of civic engagement and collective reflection (AAM, 2024, pp. 12–14; NEMO, 2020, pp. 11–13).

2.4.2. Economic contributions

As key attractions within urban cultural tourism, museums stimulate direct spending on tickets, guided tours, and on-site services, as well as indirect and induced effects in the

wider visitor economy. Economic impact studies describe how tourist expenditure linked to cultural attractions generates a “multiplier effect,” whereby money spent on accommodation, restaurants, transport, and shopping circulates through local supply chains and employee wages, supporting multiple rounds of economic activity (Mathouraparsad, 2016, pp. 25–27; Alliance Work & Travel, 2025, paras. 8–10). High-profile museum projects such as the Guggenheim Bilbao or the Grand Egyptian Museum have been shown to increase international arrivals, lengthen visitor stays, and raise average per-visitor spending, thereby boosting revenue for hotels, food and beverage businesses, transport providers, and small enterprises in surrounding neighbourhoods (McKercher & du Cros, 2002, pp. 52–54; Fahmy, 2025, paras. 7–9).

Museums and the wider cultural and creative sectors are significant sources of employment, aligning their activities with SDG 8 on decent work and economic growth. An OECD–G20 report on culture and creative sectors notes that these industries provide millions of jobs globally across a range of skills and occupations, including curatorship, conservation, education, visitor services, marketing, and digital production, often with higher-than-average added value and spillovers into tourism and other services (OECD, 2024, pp. 7–9). A “Museums and the SDGs” guide similarly highlights that museums contribute to SDG 8 by offering stable employment, apprenticeships, and volunteering opportunities, and by supporting local creative ecosystems through commissions, collaborations, and partnerships with artists, designers, and cultural entrepreneurs (McGhie, 2019, pp. 26–28). In urban contexts, the clustering of museums and heritage attractions can anchor cultural districts that attract related businesses—such as galleries, creative hubs, and cultural events—further expanding employment in the cultural economy (OECD & ICOM, 2019, pp. 22–24).

Within contemporary tourism, museums increasingly operate as central actors in the experience economy, where visitors seek memorable, immersive, and emotionally engaging encounters rather than solely passive viewing of objects (Pine & Gilmore, 2011, pp. 45–47; Salzburg Research, 2020, paras. 3–5). Analyses of cultural heritage and ICT note that tourists are taking more but shorter trips and are looking for distinctive experiences that combine learning with entertainment, positioning museums as key providers of narrative, multi-sensory, and interactive offerings within urban destinations (McKercher & du Cros, 2002, pp. 82–84; Salzburg Research, 2020, paras. 6–8). In response, many institutions develop experiential exhibitions, participatory installations, and after-hours events that not only attract new audiences and media attention but also support local businesses through extended opening hours and cross-promotion with restaurants, shops, and cultural venues (Artnet News, 2019, paras. 4–7; OECD & ICOM, 2019, pp. 29–31).

While this raises debates about commercialisation, it also underscores museums' growing role as anchors of urban experience economies, generating both economic and social value in cities competing for visitors and talent.

2.4.3. Environmental and sustainability considerations

Funding models, visitor flows, and environmental commitments mean that popular museums increasingly have to consider not only cultural and economic outcomes but also environmental impacts and visitor wellbeing.

High-profile museums face growing challenges from overtourism, as visitor numbers exceed the design capacity of buildings and negatively affect both collections and visitor experience. The Louvre, for example, was originally designed to receive around four million visitors per year but recorded over 10 million visits in 2018, prompting the introduction of a daily cap of 30,000 visitors to address chronic overcrowding, long queues, and what its director described as a "physical ordeal" for visitors (The Independent, 2025, paras. 5–8). Staff strikes at the Louvre in 2025 highlighted how overcrowded galleries, especially around the Mona Lisa, raised temperatures and humidity in exhibition spaces, increased wear on historic infrastructure, and created stressful working conditions for employees, illustrating how overtourism can endanger both heritage and people (Travel Daily Media, 2025, paras. 6–10; Thred, 2025, paras. 4–7).

In response, museums are developing sustainable visitor-management strategies to balance access with preservation and quality of experience. Recommended measures include introducing timed-ticketing and daily visitor caps, dispersing visitors across less-known collections, using digital wayfinding to reduce congestion, and coordinating with city tourism authorities to promote alternative cultural routes and off-peak visits (OECD & ICOM, 2019, pp. 29–31; Lifestyle Sustainability Directory, 2025, paras. 11–14). Case studies of sustainable tourism at heritage sites show that museums can also educate visitors about responsible behaviour, for example by interpreting conservation issues in exhibitions, training guides to address overcrowding politely, and encouraging slower, more reflective visits that reduce pressure on iconic "must-see" objects (Formula D, 2023, paras. 9–12; ICCROM, 2021, paras. 4–6). A criteria framework for sustainable museum tourism further emphasises integrating environmental and social indicators into planning—such as monitoring crowding, carbon emissions, and local resident perceptions—so that visitor-management decisions support long-term community wellbeing as well as institutional goals (Ásványi, 2021, pp. 27–29).

Museums are also adopting greener operational practices to reduce their own environmental footprint, even as they host large numbers of visitors. Examples include investments in energy-efficient HVAC systems and LED lighting, such as the Prado Museum's LED retrofit, which reportedly reduced annual electricity use by 75% and cut CO_2 emissions by around 320 tonnes per year, demonstrating that conservation-grade lighting can be compatible with significant energy savings (ResourceSpace, 2025, paras. 5–7). Other institutions have experimented with sustainable architecture and circular-economy approaches, for instance using recycled municipal waste as building materials, minimising single-use exhibition construction, and prioritising recyclable or reusable components in exhibition design (Sabetrend, 2024, paras. 3–6; MuseumNext, 2025, paras. 4–7). Sector guidance on "greening museums" recommends combining these technological measures with broader sustainability strategies—such as reducing printed materials, improving waste separation, offering digital access to collections, and aligning museum shops and cafés with ethical sourcing—to position museums as visible leaders in climate action and environmental responsibility (Greenext, 2023, paras. 6–9; OECD & ICOM, 2019, pp. 34–36).

Similar dynamics are evident at other high-volume flagship museums, such as London's British Museum, which attracts over 6 million visitors annually and relies partly on high throughput to generate secondary revenue from retail and catering, even while maintaining free entry to permanent galleries. These institutions face parallel challenges of overcrowding, visitor experience dilution, and potential environmental strain from travel and operations, raising questions about the long-term sustainability of volume-dependent hybrid funding models in densely populated urban contexts (OECD & ICOM, 2019, pp. 52–54; McGhie, 2019, pp. 50–52).

However, the British Museum's business model—dependent on high visitor volumes to maximise secondary spending in shops, cafés, and ticketed exhibitions—also raises sustainability concerns typical of flagship attractions, including overcrowding that can diminish experience quality for visitors, increased operational strain on staff and infrastructure, and potential environmental impacts from concentrated tourist flows (OECD & ICOM, 2019, pp. 52–54; Prokůpek et al., 2023, pp. 6–8). These volume-dependent dynamics mirror challenges at sites like the Louvre, complicating the Museum's alignment with SDG 11's goals for sustainable, resilient cities even as it delivers substantial economic spillovers (McGhie, 2019, pp. 32–34).

2.4.4. Museums as drivers of inclusive and sustainable cities

SDG 11 calls for making cities inclusive, safe, resilient, and sustainable, and guidance on museums and the SDGs identifies several ways in which museums contribute to this goal, including protecting and safeguarding cultural heritage, enabling cultural participation, and supporting sustainable tourism (McGhie, 2019, pp. 18–20). Museums anchored in urban areas help preserve historic buildings and neighbourhoods, provide accessible public spaces, and act as platforms where residents, policymakers, and other stakeholders can meet to discuss and plan local sustainable-development priorities (OECD & ICOM, 2019, pp. 18–21; Curating Tomorrow, 2023, pp. 12–14). University and city sustainability strategies explicitly reference museums and galleries as tools for strengthening dialogue between heritage, science, and society, thereby supporting SDG 11 targets related to cultural heritage and inclusive public spaces (University of Coimbra, 2023, paras. 3–5; VSB–TUO, 2023, paras. 4–6).

UNESCO describes museums as places for intercultural dialogue, emphasising their potential to host encounters between people of different backgrounds and to facilitate conversations around shared and contested histories (UNESCO, 2023, paras. 2–4). The “Museums as Places for Intercultural Dialogue” (MAP for ID) project, which worked with 30 museums in Italy, the Netherlands, Spain, and Hungary, showed that co-curated exhibitions, multilingual interpretation, and community-based programmes can transform museums into active meeting points where migrants, minorities, and long-term residents engage in joint activities and storytelling, strengthening mutual understanding and social cohesion (UNESCO, 2023, paras. 5–8). Case examples gathered by Agenda 21 for Culture highlight initiatives such as “village” reconstructions and neighbourhood projects at open-air and city museums, where local and newcomer communities collaborate on building, programming, and animating spaces, thereby embedding museums within everyday urban life and fostering ongoing intercultural exchange (UCLG, 2025, pp. 22–24).

SDG 10 calls for reducing inequality within and among countries, and SDG-focused museum frameworks underline that museums can contribute by enabling cultural participation for all, challenging discrimination, and amplifying marginalised voices (McGhie, 2019, pp. 24–26; CIMAM, 2023, pp. 5–7). ICCROM’s “Our Collections Matter” platform stresses that accessible museums—through physical adaptations, inclusive communication, and co-governance with underrepresented groups—help reduce inequalities in access to culture, knowledge, and public debate, particularly for people with disabilities, migrants, and low-income communities (ICCROM, 2022, paras. 3–6). Institutional examples include universities and city museums that have commissioned

accessibility audits, developed targeted programmes for disabled visitors or marginalised artists, and used digital platforms to reach audiences in remote or disadvantaged areas, thereby widening who can see themselves represented and heard in cultural spaces (University of Canterbury, 2023, paras. 4–7; Lynn University, 2024, paras. 8–11). By combining these inclusive practices with their roles in education and heritage stewardship, museums help address structural inequalities in cultural participation and contribute to more just and cohesive urban societies.

2.5. Legal, Ethical, and Policy Frameworks

2.5.1. National and international museum policies

In the UK, the flagship policy of universal free admission to the permanent collections of national museums was introduced by the Labour government between 1999 and 2001, with entry charges removed first for children and older adults and then for all visitors in exchange for additional government funding to compensate for lost ticket income (Centre for Public Impact, 2024, paras. 5–7). The Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) continues to fund these arm's-length national institutions on the condition that they provide free general admission, while retaining the right to charge for special exhibitions and certain branch sites, a model that has been credited with significantly increasing visitor numbers and is explicitly framed as part of the national education system (DCMS, 2011, paras. 3–6; Museums Journal, 2025, paras. 4–6). Current debates over proposals to introduce tourist-only admission fees highlight the policy's symbolic status, with museum leaders and commentators arguing that charging overseas visitors at national museums would undermine the foundational principle of universal access to shared national collections (The Art Newspaper, 2025, paras. 2–4).

Continental European museum systems have traditionally followed a state-centred model characterised by high levels of direct public funding, centralised cultural administration, and relatively limited reliance on admissions income or private fundraising, although this is changing. Comparative research on European museum financing describes the "continental model" as one in which ministries of culture or regional governments provide the bulk of operating budgets, seeing museums as public services, whereas Anglo-Saxon systems place more emphasis on market mechanisms and philanthropy (Prokůpek, 2022, pp. 4–6). Since the financial crisis and, more recently, the pandemic, many European countries have reduced or stagnated public subsidies, encouraging or requiring museums to increase self-generated income through ticket sales, shops, space rental, and sponsorship, leading

to more hybrid models that mix public subsidy logic with market and donation logics (Prokůpek, 2022, pp. 8–10; ICOM, 2025, pp. 12–14).

International policy frameworks and comparative reports situate these national approaches within broader debates about museum funding, public value, and sustainability. The OECD–ICOM guide on culture and local development notes that, globally, museum funding typically combines varying proportions of public subsidies, own-resource generation, and donations, and that no single model is inherently superior; rather, policy choices should align with local objectives for access, inclusion, and economic impact (OECD & ICOM, 2019, pp. 32–36). A 2025 ICOM global report identifies three main funding "logics"—market, public subsidy, and donation—and documents a widespread shift towards hybrid models as governments in many regions encourage self-financing while museums seek to protect their public missions (ICOM, 2025, pp. 9–11). At the same time, European policy studies on museum fundraising caution that increasing corporate sponsorship and private giving raises ethical questions about donor influence, equity, and public trust, prompting some countries to adopt guidelines or regulations on sponsorship and philanthropic practices (Prokůpek & Ballarini, 2023, pp. 3–5). Across these international perspectives, a common thread is the need for legal and policy frameworks that safeguard museums' roles as accessible, public-interest institutions while allowing flexible, diversified funding strategies.

2.5.2. Ethical considerations in access and funding

Equity in cultural participation implies that people from all social, cultural, and economic backgrounds should have fair opportunities to access, shape, and benefit from museums, not just those with high income or cultural capital. Cultural-policy scholarship stresses that participation is not only about counting visitor numbers but about whose voices are represented, who feels welcome, and who has real influence over collections and narratives, challenging museums to address structural exclusions linked to class, race, disability, and migration (Coffee, 2008, pp. 435–437; Mamrud, 2023, pp. 6–8). The notion of cultural equity frames this as a justice issue: institutions should proactively dismantle barriers—financial, physical, linguistic, and symbolic—that prevent underrepresented groups from fully participating in and benefitting from cultural life (Lifestyle Sustainability Directory, 2025, paras. 10–14; Matthes, 2018, pp. 5–7).

Ethically, museums must balance commitments to accessibility with the need to remain financially and organisationally sustainable. Economic analyses note that admissions fees and commercial activities can be necessary to cover conservation, staffing, and building costs, especially where public funding is limited, but they also risk excluding lower-income

visitors and shifting institutional focus toward paying audiences (Frey, 2006, pp. 9–11; Frey, 2010, pp. 4–6). Recent work on “museum funding as critical practice” argues that funding choices are not neutral technical decisions but value-laden, and calls on museums to adopt transparent, diversified funding models—including sliding-scale pricing, cross-subsidies, and ethical fundraising—that safeguard access while avoiding over-dependence on any single source (Borger, 2025, pp. 3–5; Lead Impact Institute, 2024, paras. 6–9). Practical guidance suggests coupling income-generating measures with targeted concessions, free days, and community partnerships so that revenue strategies do not systematically disadvantage already marginalised groups (Powell, 2016, pp. 18–20; Frey, 2010, pp. 14–16).

The debate over commodification questions to which cultural heritage and experiences should be treated as marketable products. Critics argue that when museums are pushed to behave like businesses—monetising access to collections, experiences, and even digital reproductions—cultural values risk being subordinated to commercial ones, potentially distorting curatorial priorities and reinforcing inequalities in who can access certain forms of culture (Booth, 2016, pp. 21–24; Pawlikowska-Piechotka, 2014, pp. 37–39). Legal analyses note that practices such as charging for reproduction licences, restricting photography, or imposing high admission and usage fees can effectively commodify public collections, raising questions about the public’s right to access shared heritage (Xalabarder, 2014, pp. 92–95). At the same time, some economists contend that moderate pricing and commercial services can be ethically defensible if revenues are reinvested in public missions and if participation is protected through exemptions and alternative access routes, suggesting that the ethical challenge lies less in any commercial activity per se than in how it is governed and whose interests it serves (Frey, 2006, pp. 15–17; Borger, 2025, pp. 7–9).

2.5.3. Role of international organisations

UNESCO’s cultural instruments frame access to heritage as a cultural right linked to broader human rights obligations. The 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage redefines heritage as a living resource of communities and stresses their right to enjoy and access the traditions they create, maintain, and transmit, emphasising community participation in safeguarding measures (Blake, 2018, pp. 76–79). The 2015 Recommendation concerning the Protection and Promotion of Museums and Collections, their Diversity and their Role in Society builds on earlier texts such as the 1960 Recommendation on rendering museums accessible to everyone, calling on states to adopt legislative, technical, and financial measures that strengthen museums’ protection functions and “overall accessibility” to the public, including audience-development and inclusion

policies (UNESCO, 2015, paras. 20, 33–35). UNESCO's human-rights work also highlights the right of everyone "to participate in cultural life," which explicitly includes access to and enjoyment of cultural heritage and expressions, further anchoring access policies in international law (UNESCO, 2025, paras. 4–6).

The International Council of Museums (ICOM) Code of Ethics articulates professional standards that commit museums to care for collections while ensuring public access and social responsibility. The current Code states that museum governing bodies should ensure that museums "and their collections are available to all during reasonable hours and for regular periods," with particular attention to people with special needs, and affirms that museums have "particular responsibilities to all for the care, accessibility and interpretation" of the primary evidence they hold (ICOM, 2017, paras. 1.4, Principle). Draft revisions of the Code go further by stating that museums "serve society by being accessible and inclusive" and "should guarantee accessibility to all," explicitly calling for the elimination of physical, digital, and socio-cultural barriers and for proactive work against social exclusion (ICOM, 2022, pp. 5–6). These ethical principles shape national codes and institutional policies worldwide, providing a shared reference point for debates on admissions, inclusion, digital access, and community collaboration.

Broader international cultural-policy frameworks connect these legal and ethical commitments to agendas such as the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Guides on "museums and the SDGs" propose practical goal-based approaches in which museums protect and develop cultural and natural heritage, support education for sustainable development, enable cultural participation for all, and foster sustainable tourism, thus linking institutional strategies on access and inclusion to SDG targets on education, cities, inequalities, and partnerships (McGhie, 2019, pp. 18–21; Curating Tomorrow, 2024, paras. 7–10). Culture-focused SDG localisation frameworks, such as the Culture 2030 Goal report, encourage cities and countries to adopt cultural-access targets (for example, "guaranteeing cultural accessibility through sustainable cultural policy") and to integrate museums within policies on civic participation, diversity, and urban sustainability (Culture 2030 Goal, 2021, pp. 34–36; Ferran-Vila, 2022, pp. 12–14). UNESCO's 2025 Global Report on Cultural Policies similarly argues that closing gaps in cultural investment, gender equity, and digital access is essential for culture—including museums—to become a powerful force for diversity, resilience, and sustainable development, reinforcing the role of international organisations in setting norms and monitoring progress (UNESCO, 2025, paras. 8–11).

2.6. Museums and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

2.6.1. SDG 4 – Quality Education

SDG 4 calls for inclusive, equitable, quality education and lifelong learning, and SDG guidance recognises museums as key providers of non-formal and informal learning that complement schools and universities (McGhie, 2019, pp. 18–21). Museum education research describes museums as “public pedagogies” where visitors of all ages engage voluntarily with objects, stories, and critical issues, supporting skills such as critical thinking, historical understanding, and global citizenship that are central to education for sustainable development (Sjöström et al., 2022, pp. 3–5). Classic and contemporary work on informal education highlights that museum learning is typically self-directed, curiosity-driven, and social, providing rich environments where people can explore complex topics—from climate change to human rights—outside formal classroom settings (Screven, 2024, paras. 3–6; Museums for Climate Action, 2021, pp. 2–4).

Partnerships with schools and universities are central to museums’ contribution to SDG 4 because they connect collections and expertise with formal curricula. UNESCO notes that in several countries museum education is directly integrated into primary and secondary education systems, citing examples in China and Indonesia where museums work with schools on heritage- and skills-based learning, including crafts like batik that support both cultural continuity and livelihoods (UNESCO, 2024, paras. 7–9). University museum case studies similarly show how object-based teaching, joint research projects, and co-designed programmes allow museums to serve as interdisciplinary laboratories for students, teachers, and researchers, expanding learning beyond classrooms and contributing to teacher training and curriculum innovation (University Museums Group, 2023, pp. 4–6; Fachada, 2019, pp. 15–18). SDG-localisation guides for museums explicitly recommend building long-term partnerships with schools, universities, and adult-education providers so that education for sustainable development is embedded in formal and non-formal learning across entire communities (Curating Tomorrow, 2023, pp. 16–18).

Digital and hybrid learning have become crucial tools for museums to advance SDG 4, especially since the COVID-19 pandemic. Sector surveys report a dramatic expansion of online engagement—virtual tours, live-streamed talks, educational videos, and downloadable resources—which allowed museums to reach home-bound audiences, rural communities, and schools lacking easy physical access, often at lower cost per learner than in-person programming (ASTC, 2022, pp. 7–9; Palumbo, 2022, pp. 5–7). A NEMO working group on digital learning documents how digitised collections, virtual museums, and

live-streamed tours are now used as additional channels for curriculum-linked teaching in schools and higher education, and how hybrid formats—combining on-site visits with online preparation or follow-up—can deepen engagement and support differentiated learning (NEMO, 2022, pp. 10–13; Zollinger et al., 2021, pp. 3–5). At the same time, studies on the "digital divide" caution that museums must address inequalities in connectivity, devices, and digital skills, ensuring that digital strategies for SDG 4 do not inadvertently reinforce existing educational gaps but instead are designed through reciprocal partnerships with underserved communities (Zollinger et al., 2021, pp. 7–9; McGhie, 2019, pp. 50–52).

2.6.2. SDG 8 – Decent Work and Economic Growth

Within the broader cultural and creative sectors, museums are recognised as significant employers and contributors to economic output. An OECD–G20 report estimates that cultural and creative sectors account for up to 1 in 20 jobs in some OECD countries, with a particularly high concentration in major cities and capital regions where museums, galleries, and heritage sites are clustered (OECD, 2021, pp. 6–8). A national study for the United States found that museums directly employ more than 372,000 people and support a further 354,100 jobs through indirect and induced effects, meaning the sector has a jobs multiplier of roughly 2.0—higher than many other industries—while also generating considerable tax revenue at local, state, and federal levels (American Alliance of Museums [AAM], 2018, pp. 14–16). These findings align with SDG-oriented frameworks that highlight museums' roles in providing decent work, supporting local supply chains, and sustaining community economies (McGhie, 2019, pp. 40–42; ICCROM, 2025, paras. 3–6).

Museums create employment across a wide range of occupations, many of which involve specialised skills and knowledge. Eurostat data show that employment in "libraries, archives, museums and other cultural activities" (NACE R91) has followed a long-term growth trend in the EU, contributing to an overall increase in cultural employment and reflecting sustained demand for roles in collections management, conservation, education, visitor services, and administration (Eurostat, 2024, paras. 10–12). The AAM economic-impact study indicates that beyond curators and conservators, large numbers of jobs are generated in education and interpretation, security, retail, catering, marketing, and facilities management, illustrating how museums function as complex organisations that provide diverse employment opportunities (AAM, 2018, pp. 17–19). ICCROM's SDG 8 guidance for museums also emphasises vocational pathways, noting that many institutions offer apprenticeships, training schemes, and volunteer-to-employment routes that help young people and marginalised groups gain skills relevant to the wider cultural and tourism labour markets (ICCROM, 2025, paras. 7–9).

Beyond their direct payroll, museums contribute indirectly to economic growth and employment through cultural tourism and related spending. Reviews of the economic impact of museums and galleries in the UK and elsewhere show that visitor expenditure on accommodation, food and drink, transport, and retail linked to museum trips supports jobs in hospitality, transport, and other service sectors, with multipliers that extend the impact of each museum-generated visit across local economies (Morris, 2013, pp. 3–5; AAM, 2018, pp. 20–22). OECD analysis similarly stresses that museums anchor cultural districts and tourism circuits that attract visitors, stimulate inward investment, and encourage the development of creative clusters, thereby contributing to sustained urban and regional growth in line with SDG 8's focus on productive employment and sustainable economic development (OECD, 2021, pp. 10–12; Culture Action Europe, 2023, paras. 4–7). SDG-focused museum frameworks therefore recommend that institutions explicitly track and communicate both their direct and indirect economic contributions, while also working to ensure that jobs created—within museums and along their value chains—meet standards of decent work, fair pay, and non-discrimination (McGhie, 2019, pp. 40–44; ICCROM, 2025, paras. 10–12).

2.6.3. SDG 10 – Reduced Inequalities

SDG 10 calls for reducing inequalities in income and opportunity, and SDG-oriented museum guides explicitly identify "reducing inequalities in access to culture and heritage" as a core contribution museums can make through pricing, programming, and governance (McGhie, 2019, pp. 44–46). Free or low-cost admission is often presented as an intuitive tool for advancing cultural equity because it removes a direct financial barrier and symbolises a public commitment to accessibility, but recent philosophical and policy analysis argues that free entry alone is insufficient to reduce cultural inequalities if museum locations, programming, and outreach continue to favour already advantaged groups (Hume, 2025, pp. 6–8, 13–15). Evidence syntheses on equality of access to culture for lower socio-economic groups therefore recommend combining free or discounted access with targeted measures—such as community partnerships, outreach in low-income areas, and co-produced projects—to address structural barriers that go beyond ticket price (UK Government & Arts Council England, 2023, pp. 5–7).

Practical accessibility initiatives translate these equity goals into changes in buildings, services, and practices that focus on marginalised groups. ICCROM's SDG 10 guidance highlights programmes for people with disabilities, migrants, and low-income communities as key examples, noting that inclusive museums work to remove physical, sensory, cognitive, and attitudinal barriers and to involve target groups in decision-making (ICCROM,

2022, paras. 3–6). The SEND in Museums network in the UK, for instance, aims to embed a sector-wide commitment to audiences with special educational needs and disabilities by 2025, encouraging museums to adopt accessible exhibitions, quiet hours, sensory-friendly resources, staff training, and co-designed programmes as standard practice rather than add-ons, explicitly linking this work to SDG targets on inclusion and equal access to basic services (SEND in Museums, 2021, pp. 3–6). Collections of best practices and accessibility toolkits document similar initiatives worldwide, including tactile and audio-described tours, multilingual interpretation, targeted programmes for refugees and minority communities, and accessible websites, all aimed at ensuring that those historically excluded can meaningfully use and shape museum spaces (Ajuntament de Barcelona, 2019, pp. 4–7; MuseumNext, 2024, paras. 4–7).

Beyond technical accessibility, museums can help bridge social divides by fostering dialogue, representation, and shared spaces across lines of class, ethnicity, migration, and ability. ICOM's work on museums and inclusion stresses that proactively addressing inequalities and exclusion is "essential" to serving society, and highlights projects on migration, gender, and community museums that use co-curation, oral-history collecting, and participatory digital platforms to connect different social groups and give voice to those historically marginalised (ICOM, 2023, paras. 2–5, 12–14). Studies of the "inclusive museum" point out that when institutions move beyond a policy mantra to genuine power-sharing—with community advisory boards, participatory decision-making, and sustained partnerships—museums can function as safe spaces where contested histories, discrimination, and social conflict are openly discussed, supporting SDG 10 targets on social, economic, and political inclusion (Tlili, 2008, pp. 161–163; ICCROM, 2022, paras. 7–9). In this perspective, museums are not only reducing inequalities in access to culture but also helping to reshape narratives and relationships in ways that contribute to more just and cohesive societies.

2.6.4. SDG 11 – Sustainable Cities and Communities

SDG 11.4 emphasises protecting and safeguarding cultural and natural heritage as a key component of sustainable cities, and international guidance explicitly identifies museums as core elements of urban cultural infrastructure that provide accessible spaces for heritage, learning, and participation (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2024, paras. 2–4; McGhie, 2019, pp. 32–34). In city and university SDG strategies, museums, galleries, and heritage centres are described as "cultural anchors" that bridge science, art, and society, offering public access to collections and programmes that make local environments more liveable, attractive, and socially cohesive (VSB–TUO, 2023, paras. 4–6; Culture 2030 Goal, 2021,

pp. 113–115). Sector commentaries also note that by maintaining historic buildings and public spaces, museums contribute to the physical fabric of cities as well as to their symbolic and narrative infrastructures, which are essential dimensions of sustainable urban development (Agenda 21 for Culture, 2025, pp. 18–20).

Cultural-policy frameworks stress that heritage and cultural institutions play a vital role in community resilience, particularly in times of rapid change or crisis. UNESCO's SDG 11.4 materials describe cultural and natural heritage as "vital pillars of identity, community resilience, and sustainable development," noting that museums safeguard tangible and intangible heritage that communities draw on to make sense of their past and imagine shared futures (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2024, paras. 5–7). Guides on museums and community wellbeing emphasise that museums act as shared spaces where diverse residents can encounter their own and others' stories, strengthening collective memory, belonging, and social cohesion, which are key to resilience in the face of social, economic, or environmental shocks (Lifestyle Sustainability Directory, 2025, paras. 15–18; ICCROM, 2021, paras. 4–6). International Museum Day 2025, themed "The Future of Museums in Rapidly Changing Communities," likewise highlights museums' roles as cultural hubs that promote inclusion, resilience, and heritage preservation, aligning their work explicitly with SDG 11 (ICOM, 2025, paras. 3–6).

Major cultural investments in museums are frequently used as catalysts for urban regeneration, although their long-term social impacts depend on governance and community involvement. The Guggenheim Museum Bilbao is often cited as a paradigm of the "Bilbao effect," with early studies estimating that the museum generated hundreds of millions of euros annually for the local economy, attracted over one million visitors per year, and stimulated wider infrastructure improvements such as port relocation, metro development, and riverside renewal that transformed the city's image and urban fabric (McKercher & du Cros, 2002, pp. 120–122; Ainvest, 2025, paras. 10–13). Similar culture-driven regeneration projects around Tate Modern in London and in European cultural districts demonstrate how museums, when embedded in broader partnerships with local authorities, communities, and private actors, can revitalise neglected neighbourhoods, attract creative industries, and foster new public spaces, contributing to more inclusive and vibrant urban environments (British Council, 2020, paras. 5–8; Agenda 21 for Culture, 2025, pp. 20–22). At the same time, SDG-oriented cultural reports caution that regeneration strategies must address risks of gentrification and displacement, ensuring that cultural investments benefit existing residents and strengthen local rights to the city rather than merely enhancing cities' competitiveness for tourists and investors (Culture 2030 Goal, 2021, pp. 116–118; Nature, 2025, pp. 4–6).

2.7. Previous Research and State of the Art

2.7.1. Research on free vs paid-entry museums

Empirical studies broadly agree that removing general admission fees tends to increase overall attendance and especially repeat visits, but that free entry on its own does not automatically diversify audiences socio-economically. UK government data show that visits to national museums that removed charges between 1999 and 2001 more than doubled over the following decade, with London institutions that had previously charged seeing a 151% increase in visitors between 2000–01 and 2010–11 (BBC, 2011, paras. 4–7). The AIM "Taking Charge" research, based on surveys and Visitor Verdict data from UK independent museums, finds that free-entry museums report higher repeat-visit rates (39% versus 31% for charging museums) and more frequent "casual" short visits, supporting the view that free admission lowers psychological and financial thresholds to visiting (AIM, 2024, pp. 8–10). At the same time, AIM's executive summary and associated analysis emphasise that both free and charging museums tend to over-represent higher socio-economic groups and under-represent lower-income visitors, suggesting that price is only one among several barriers to inclusive participation (AIM, 2024, pp. 12–14; AIM, 2016, paras. 5–7). Comparative work on Finnish museums similarly concludes that free-entry institutions prioritise accessibility, participatory approaches, and local engagement, whereas ticketed museums often pursue more international and revenue-oriented strategies, but that inclusivity outcomes depend heavily on broader institutional practices and funding models (Pyykkönen, 2025, pp. 608–612).

Studies of visitor satisfaction indicate relatively small differences between free and paid-entry museums in perceived quality of visit, while revealing distinct participation patterns. AIM's analysis reports that average enjoyment scores are very similar—8.9 out of 10 for free museums and 8.7 for charging museums—suggesting that the presence or absence of an admission fee does not in itself determine satisfaction with the visit (AIM, 2024, pp. 10–11). Free-entry museums tend to have shorter dwell times but higher repeat-visit rates, indicating a pattern of frequent, opportunistic engagement, whereas charging museums often see fewer but longer visits, with higher per-capita spending in shops and cafés and greater opportunity to capture visitor data (AIM, 2024, pp. 9–12; AIM, 2016, paras. 8–10). Time-series and econometric analyses for Italian state museums and monuments show that introducing free days or periods boosts total attendance but can displace some demand from paid days, highlighting complex substitution effects between free and charged visits (Cellini & Cuccia, 2013, pp. 224–226; Cellini, 2018, pp. 3–5). Recent survey work in the US echoes these findings, showing that cost is an important self-reported

barrier, especially for lower-income households, but that eliminating fees alone rarely transforms the demographic profile of visitors without simultaneous efforts to address other access and relevance barriers (AAM, 2024, pp. 3–5; Hume, 2025, pp. 6–9).

2.7.2. Studies on museum funding models

Comparative research identifies three broad funding “logics” structuring museum finance globally: public subsidy, market (self-financing), and donation, which are combined in different mixes across countries and institutions (Mairesse, 2022, as cited in ICOM, 2025, pp. 9–11). Government-funded models—prevalent in many continental European systems—rely on direct public subsidies as the primary revenue source, treating museums as public services and generally allowing lower or no admission fees and a strong emphasis on access, education, and heritage protection (OECD & ICOM, 2019, pp. 32–36). In contrast, more self-financing models (common in parts of the UK, North America, and some private or foundation museums) depend heavily on earned income from ticket sales, shops, venue hire, and events, and on private philanthropy, which can encourage entrepreneurial practices but also increase exposure to market fluctuations and donor preferences (Prokůpek, 2022, pp. 4–6; Prokůpek et al., 2023, pp. 3–5).

During the COVID-19 pandemic, comparative case studies showed that heavily self-financing museums—such as Tate, which normally self-generated around 60% of its budget—were hit hardest by closures and the loss of tourism, while institutions with higher proportions of stable public funding were better able to retain staff and maintain core functions (Prokůpek et al., 2023, pp. 6–8; Prokůpek interview, 2022, paras. 4–7). Global surveys collated in ICOM’s 2025 funding-models report reinforce this pattern, concluding that reliance on admissions and commercial income creates greater short-term vulnerability in crises, whereas diversified mixes that include predictable public funding and donations are more resilient over time (ICOM, 2025, pp. 12–14; NEMO, 2025, paras. 3–5).

Financial-sustainability studies consistently recommend diversification rather than pure reliance on either state or market funding. A detailed analysis of the Field Museum in Chicago, for example, argues that long-term sustainability depends on broadening the income base across admissions, retail, programming fees, grants, and donations to avoid over-dependency on any one source and to stabilise finances through shocks (Hobbs, 2019, pp. 21–25). European work on “emergency or emerging” strategies similarly describes how large art museums adjusted their funding mix during the pandemic—expanding digital offers, strengthening membership and donor schemes, and experimenting with crowdfunding—while warning that declining public subsidies will increase pressure to

commercialise unless governments provide more predictable multi-year support (Prokůpek et al., 2023, pp. 8–11; ICOM, 2025, pp. 15–17).

In terms of audience composition, studies link funding models to pricing and programme choices that influence who visits. Government-funded models that support free or low-cost access tend to encourage higher overall attendance and more local, repeat use, aligning with social and educational missions but sometimes limiting resources for high-profile, revenue-generating exhibitions (Pyykkönen, 2025, pp. 608–612). Self-financing museums, by contrast, often target tourists and higher-spending visitors through ticketed blockbuster exhibitions and premium experiences, which can skew audience profiles toward more affluent and international publics and risk deprioritising programmes for underserved communities (OECD & ICOM, 2019, pp. 40–41; Lifestyle Sustainability Directory, 2025, paras. 8–11). Recent comparative work on European funding and ethical fundraising policies argues that as public support declines and private income becomes more important, institutions must explicitly safeguard inclusion and access in their funding strategies to avoid reinforcing social inequalities in cultural participation (Prokůpek & Ballarini, 2023, pp. 3–5).

2.7.3. Research on museums and sustainable tourism

Cultural-tourism theory frames museums as key cultural heritage assets whose management must integrate conservation, community benefit, and visitor experience to achieve sustainable outcomes. Du Cros and McKercher argue that sustainable cultural tourism requires aligning heritage-management objectives with tourism strategies so that museums both protect collections and contribute to local development, rather than being used solely as visitor attractions (du Cros & McKercher, 2015/2025, pp. 15–18). European mapping studies of sustainable cultural tourism similarly view museums as anchors in urban and regional cultural routes that can foster inclusive economic growth, social inclusiveness, and protection of cultural and natural heritage when tourism is carefully planned at an appropriate scale and in partnership with local communities (European Commission, 2017, pp. 7–9; Stylianou-Lambert et al., 2014, pp. 62–64).

Empirical and practice-based research highlights best practices for balancing inclusive access with economic viability in museum-based tourism. Case studies from northern Peru, for example, show community-based archaeological museums using co-governance, locally guided tours, and small-scale tourism products to generate income and jobs while keeping access affordable for local residents and safeguarding both tangible and intangible heritage (Repetto Málaga & Brown, 2019, pp. 64–68). A recent qualitative study of museum renovations finds that successful projects explicitly balance environmental sustainability,

social inclusivity, and financial performance, implementing measures such as accessible infrastructure, community consultation, and diversified revenue streams (e.g., cafés, shops, events) to ensure that expanded tourism does not compromise local needs or heritage values (Rivero-Moreno, 2024, pp. 7–10). Best-practice collections from Balkan museums describe how investing in accessibility—tactile and audio-described exhibitions, digital tools, and co-created programmes with disabled visitors—not only advances social rights but also broadens cultural tourism markets and encourages longer, higher-value visits, linking inclusion with economic growth (Balkan Museums Network, 2024, pp. 10–13).

Guides on “museums and sustainable cultural tourism” therefore stress that inclusive, sustainable practice rests on several recurring strategies:

- Co-designing tourism offers with local communities.
- Keeping basic access affordable while charging for value-added services.
- Managing visitor flows to avoid overtourism and protect heritage.
- Embedding environmental measures (energy, waste, mobility) in operations. When these elements are integrated, museums can act as drivers of sustainable tourism that support community wellbeing, heritage conservation, and long-term economic viability.

3. Research Design and Methodology

3.1. General description of methods and design

The research follows a comparative case study approach in which the National Gallery serves as the principal case because of its high international visibility, free-entry policy, hybrid funding structure, and importance within London's urban cultural tourism system. The case study is not treated in isolation, but is interpreted in relation to broader contrasts between government-funded/free-entry museums, ticket-based museums, and hybrid models discussed in the literature review and comparative analysis sections. This makes the design suitable for examining not only the National Gallery itself, but also the broader policy relevance of different museum funding models.

The study uses a mixed-methods design in a pragmatic sense rather than in a strictly equal balance between large-scale quantitative and qualitative primary datasets. On the quantitative side, the research relies mainly on secondary sources, especially attendance statistics, financial information, policy reports, and comparative sector data already integrated into the thesis draft. On the qualitative side, the study uses original empirical material from the author's Questionnaire for Museum and Cultural Heritage Professionals (2026), which gathered open-ended responses from professionals working in museum education, curatorial work, collections, archives, visitor experience, exhibitions, heritage interpretation, and community-based heritage practice. This combination allows the thesis to connect measurable institutional trends with practitioner perspectives on how those funding models work in practice.

In methodological terms, the design is primarily exploratory and interpretive, because it seeks to understand how funding structures are experienced and evaluated by professionals rather than to test causal relationships through experimental or highly standardised survey methods. At the same time, it includes descriptive quantitative evidence to contextualise the National Gallery case and strengthen the empirical basis of the argument. This is important because the thesis is concerned with institutional outcomes, such as access and financial sustainability, and with meanings, such as public value, symbolic inclusion, and the role of museums in the life of the city.

3.2. Sample

The empirical component of the study includes two different kinds of sample: a documentary sample and a respondent sample. The documentary sample consists of secondary sources relevant to the National Gallery and to the wider comparison of funding models, including

annual reports, attendance data, financial documents, cultural policy materials, and museum sector research already cited throughout the thesis. The respondent sample consists of professionals from the museum and cultural heritage sector who answered the author's questionnaire.

The target population for the questionnaire was not the general public, but rather museum and cultural heritage professionals with practical or conceptual experience relevant to access, funding, audience development, education, collections, or heritage interpretation. Although the broader thesis also discusses local visitors and tourists through secondary data, the original primary data collection focused on professionals rather than on visitors themselves.

The sampling method for the questionnaire is best described as purposive sampling, with elements of convenience and network-based access. The respondents were selected because they worked in museums or the cultural heritage sector and were therefore able to provide informed reflections on accessibility, public value, funding models, staff conditions, digital access, and tourism-related questions.

The final questionnaire sample consisted of 11 respondents. Their profiles show a diverse professional spread, including a Learning Assistant at the Victoria and Albert Museum (ID 1), a Curatorial Assistant at the Victoria and Albert Museum (ID 2), a Collections Assistant at a National Trust property (ID 3), a Visitor Experience Assistant at Tate Modern (ID 4), a Digital Collections Assistant at the British Museum (ID 5), an Archive Assistant at the British Museum (ID 6), an Exhibitions Assistant in Amsterdam (ID 7), a Heritage Assistant at a National Trust site (ID 8), an educator and moderator at MNAC Barcelona (ID 9), an educator with experience at MACBA in Barcelona (ID 10), and an anthropologist involved in community-based heritage organisations in Barcelona (ID 11).

In demographic terms, the questionnaire collected mainly professional background data rather than personal demographic variables such as age, gender, or nationality. Therefore, the sample is best characterised by institutional role, field of work, and geographic context rather than by standard sociodemographic categories. Geographically, the respondents are concentrated in the UK, Barcelona, and one Dutch case, with a stronger representation of large urban institutions than of smaller regional museums.

3.3. Data collection techniques

The study uses two main data collection techniques: secondary documentary data collection and a qualitative questionnaire. The secondary data collection involved gathering and analysing published material relevant to the National Gallery and comparative museum

funding models, including attendance statistics, annual reports, financial statements, sector research, and tourism-related evidence cited throughout the thesis. These documents were used to establish the institutional and policy context of the case study, especially in relation to accessibility, revenue structure, audience trends, and sustainable cultural tourism.

The primary empirical data were collected through the author's Questionnaire for Museum and Cultural Heritage Professionals (2026). The questionnaire was composed mainly of open-ended questions and was designed to gather informed professional reflections rather than short standardised responses. Its themes included the social role of museums, free access, paid entry, audience behaviour, financial and non-financial barriers, inclusion strategies, education, inequalities, sustainable cities, funding and sustainability, staff and operations, city image, digital access, best practices, and final reflections. This structure made it possible to collect nuanced responses on both practical and strategic dimensions of museum funding and access.

Methodologically, the questionnaire functioned more like a written qualitative expert survey than a purely quantitative survey instrument. The respondents were not asked mainly closed or scaled questions, but were invited to provide discursive answers based on their own work experience. That makes the material especially suitable for thematic analysis, because it captures how professionals interpret the effects of funding models in their own institutional settings. It also explains why the findings are rich in conceptual insight but limited in statistical representativeness.

3.4. Analytical methods

The thesis uses three main analytical methods: descriptive analysis of secondary quantitative data, thematic analysis of qualitative questionnaire responses, and comparative analysis of funding models.

First, the quantitative material was analysed through descriptive statistics, meaning the study examined and interpreted existing numerical data such as attendance figures, visitor trends, funding patterns, and related sector indicators drawn from reports and secondary sources. Because these data were mainly secondary and came from different institutional and documentary sources, their function was not to build an original statistical dataset but to provide contextual evidence for the case study and the comparison between funding models.

Second, the qualitative questionnaire data were analysed using thematic analysis. This means that the open-ended responses were read closely, coded by topic, and grouped into recurring themes such as free access and public value, the exclusionary effect of ticket

prices, non-financial barriers to participation, the importance of mediation and staff capacity, the role of digital access, hybrid funding models, and the relationship between museums and sustainable urban cultural tourism. Thematic analysis was appropriate because the questionnaire generated rich narrative material from professionals in different institutional roles, allowing patterns of agreement, tension, and variation to emerge across the responses. The use of respondent IDs in the discussion chapter also reflects this analytical approach, since it allows the interpretation to remain grounded in individual responses while still identifying broader themes.

Third, the study applies comparative analysis to examine different museum funding models in relation to accessibility, audience diversity, and sustainability. This comparative dimension operates at two levels: first, between the National Gallery and the wider categories of free-entry, ticket-based, and hybrid museums discussed in the literature; and second, between different professional viewpoints expressed in the questionnaire. The purpose of this comparison is not to claim strict equivalence between institutions, but to identify recurring patterns, tensions, and trade-offs that help answer the research questions.

4. Case Study: The National Gallery, London

4.1. History and development of The National Gallery

The National Gallery was founded in 1824 when the UK government bought 38 paintings from the banker John Julius Angerstein's collection, opening them to the public in his former townhouse in Pall Mall before moving to a purpose-built Neoclassical building on Trafalgar Square in 1838 (National Gallery, 2025, paras. 2–5; Burlington Magazine, 2020, para. 3). Its mission is to care for and enhance the national collection of Western European paintings from the 13th to the 19th centuries and to "bring the best possible art to the widest possible public," emphasising free public enjoyment, scholarship, and education as central to its role in British cultural life (National Gallery, 2025, paras. 6–9; IvyPanda, 2024, paras. 4–6). Today the Gallery is an executive non-departmental public body sponsored by the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS); its collection belongs to the government on behalf of the British public, and it is widely regarded as one of London's most important cultural institutions and tourist attractions (National Gallery, 2024, pp. 8–10; ArtnetNews, 2020, para. 2).

From its inception the National Gallery was conceived as a public gallery, free to enter, but charging policies have fluctuated over time in response to political and financial pressures. In the early 1970s the UK government allowed national museums to introduce admission fees; several institutions did so, but the National Gallery, like the British Museum and Tate, resisted and maintained free entry on principle, with parliamentary debates in the mid-1980s explicitly framing free admission as a matter of national pride and public right (Hansard, 1986, paras. 10–14). In the 1980s and early 1990s there were renewed pressures to raise income through charging, but the Labour government elected in 1997 made reinstating universal free entry to national museums a flagship policy to broaden access, first removing charges for children (1999) and over-60s (2000), and then restoring free admission for all visitors from December 2001 in return for compensatory government funding (Centre for Public Impact, 2024, paras. 5–8; DCMS, 2011, paras. 3–5). Since then, the National Gallery has maintained free admission to its permanent collection while charging for certain temporary exhibitions and special events, operating within a funding framework that combines DCMS grant-in-aid with self-generated and philanthropic income but keeps free access as a core principle of its public mission (National Gallery, 2024, pp. 12–14; DCMS, 2025, para. 4).

4.2. Visitor demographics and patterns

Press releases and sector statistics show that the Gallery receives several million on-site visits per year, with a substantial share from overseas tourists. In 2023 the Gallery recorded 3,096,508 visits to Trafalgar Square, within a global total of 4.29 million in-person visits to its London site and touring exhibitions, and in 2024 visits to Trafalgar Square rose slightly to 3,203,451 as part of 4.71 million worldwide in-person visits linked to its bicentenary programme (National Gallery, 2024, pp. 6–8; National Gallery, 2024b, paras. 3–6). Statista data indicate that in 2022/23 the Gallery welcomed roughly 1.3 million overseas visitors, a sharp recovery from pandemic lows but still below pre-COVID levels, while the National Audit Office notes that domestic visitation has largely recovered even as international tourist numbers remain depressed (Statista, 2024, paras. 1–3; NAO, 2023, pp. 18–20). UK-wide surveys suggest that around half of UK adults visit a museum at least once a year, but national participation data also reveal persistent demographic differences, with people from lower-income households and some minority ethnic groups visiting museums and galleries less frequently than more affluent and White groups, a pattern that likely applies to high-profile institutions such as the National Gallery (DCMS, 2020, paras. 6–8; GOV.UK, 2021, paras. 3–5).

National survey data and market research provide insight into how often people visit and what motivates them. The Taking Part survey for England reports that, in 2019/20, 0.5% of respondents had visited a museum or gallery at least once a week and 4% at least once a month, while 50.2% had visited at least once in the previous year—suggesting that frequent visitors are a small core, with most people engaging occasionally (DCMS, 2020, Figure 3.2). A London-wide market study found that intellectual and social motivations are the most significant drivers for museum and gallery visits, with respondents citing interest in the subject matter, enjoying time with friends or family, experiencing “major attractions,” and appreciating architecture or ambience as key reasons, while family visitors are particularly driven by children’s needs and educational benefits (Insight Research Group, 2011, pp. 12–15). Taking Part data similarly show that general interest in the subject (50%) and spending time with family or friends (40%) are the most commonly reported reasons for visiting museums and galleries, with “more exhibitions that interested them” and introducing or encouraging children’s interests cited as important reasons for increasing visit frequency (DCMS, 2020, paras. 19–22).

Although these studies are not limited to the National Gallery, they align with the Gallery’s own reporting that its audiences include a mix of tourists seeking iconic masterpieces, local and regional visitors attracted by blockbuster exhibitions such as “Van Gogh: Poets and

Lovers," and school and family groups participating in educational and public-programme offers (National Gallery, 2024, pp. 8–10; National Gallery, 2024b, paras. 4–7). Sector commentary also notes that high-profile free national museums like the National Gallery tend to have higher proportions of international tourists and more frequent casual visits than smaller, ticketed institutions, but that cost-of-living pressures and reduced tourism have affected visit patterns since the pandemic, with staff citing the drop in international visits as a key challenge (Museums Association, 2023, paras. 7–10; NAO, 2023, pp. 18–20)

4.3. Accessibility initiatives and strategies

The Visitor Admissions Policy states that "general admission to the Gallery is free" and that the national collection is open to the public 361 days a year, with charges applying only to some temporary exhibitions and events (National Gallery, 2025b, paras. 2.1–2.2). The Access Policy commits the Gallery to "provide the widest possible access" by addressing physical, sensory, intellectual, cultural, attitudinal, financial, and logistical barriers, including considering affordability for those on limited incomes and offering convenient opening hours (National Gallery, 2025a, paras. 3–5). A separate Display Policy reinforces that the permanent collection displays are free for everyone to access on-site and online, underscoring free access as a core institutional principle (National Gallery, 2019, para. 4.11).

Education and public engagement are central to the Gallery's access strategy. For schools, the National Gallery offers free or heavily subsidised tours, workshops, and programmes such as "Take One Picture" for primary schools and talks, workshops, and the national "Articulation" programme for secondary students, helping pupils develop confidence, communication, and critical-thinking skills (National Gallery, 2024a, paras. 2–5; National Gallery, 2024b, paras. 3–6). The Roden Centre for Creative Learning provides a programme of free activities for children, families, schools, and young people, alongside both free and ticketed events and courses for adults, extending learning opportunities across age groups (National Gallery, 2025c, paras. 1–4). Community-engagement initiatives include NG Citizens, a five-year UK-wide project that establishes a citizens' assembly and panel to involve people from all four nations—selected by civic lottery and reflecting the UK's diversity—in shaping the Gallery's purpose and priorities, embedding public participation in governance and programme development (National Gallery, 2024c, paras. 2–6; NEMO, 2025, paras. 3–5).

The Gallery has expanded digital and virtual access to reach audiences beyond Trafalgar Square. Its website offers high-resolution images of the collection, audio guides with more

than 60 stops, online courses such as “Stories of Art,” and other digital learning resources, enabling remote exploration of works and themes (National Gallery, 2024d, paras. 1–3; National Gallery, 2024e, paras. 2–4). Virtual-tour options include a Google 360° tour of key Renaissance galleries and the National Gallery Imaginarium, an immersive browser-based experience that combines soundscapes, guided interaction, poetry, and animation to create new forms of engagement with paintings, supported by the Gallery’s NG200 digital partners (National Gallery, 2025d, paras. 1–4; National Gallery, 2025e, paras. 2–5). The Access page also promotes online booking for free timed-entry tickets, access tickets with free companion tickets, and information about facilities, helping visitors with different needs plan their visits in advance (National Gallery, 2024f, paras. 1–5).

4.4. Social impact assessment

Policy documents frame cultural inclusion as a core objective: the Access Policy commits the Gallery to “provide the widest possible access” by tackling physical, sensory, intellectual, cultural, attitudinal, financial, and logistical barriers, and explicitly links this to serving diverse audiences across the UK. Community-focused initiatives such as NG Citizens—a citizens’ assembly and panel designed to reflect the UK’s demographic diversity and help shape the Gallery’s future direction—aim to embed under-represented voices in governance and programming rather than limiting participation to on-site visiting (National Gallery, 2024c, paras. 2–6). Wider UK evidence suggests that free national museums contribute to cultural inclusion by increasing overall visitation and participation opportunities, but also that gaps persist: lower-income groups and some minority ethnic communities still visit museums and galleries less frequently than more affluent and White groups, indicating that inclusion requires deeper, targeted strategies beyond ticket policy alone (DCMS, 2020, paras. 6–8; GOV.UK, 2021, paras. 3–5).

Visitor-studies research shows that museums generally achieve high satisfaction scores, driven by social, intellectual, and emotional experiences. Classic work on satisfying museum experiences identifies learning, aesthetic pleasure, social interaction, and introspection as key dimensions, and finds that these patterns are relatively stable across different art museums, suggesting that institutions like the National Gallery offer visitors opportunities for shared reflection, inspiration, and connection with heritage (Pekarik et al., 1999, pp. 11–15). UK survey data and sector analyses report that museums and galleries consistently rank among the highest-rated public services, with around 95% of visitors in one national survey saying they were satisfied with their experience, a level of approval that reflects effective core delivery but may mask differences between demographic groups and between first-time and repeat visitors (Museums Association, 2020, paras. 4–6; NIMC,

2023, pp. 2–4). Emerging work with user-generated reviews specifically for the National Gallery indicates high satisfaction with the overall visit and with associated experiences such as the shop and café, while also highlighting areas for improvement such as crowding, wayfinding, and interpretation, which can shape perceived quality and inclusivity of the visit (Kimola, 2023, paras. 3–7; Camarero-Izquierdo et al., 2015, pp. 8–10).

Research consistently shows that free admission reduces a major financial barrier but does not remove all obstacles to culturally inclusive participation. Studies of entrance fees as subjective barriers find that people in the lowest income brackets are far more likely to see admission costs as a deterrent than those with higher incomes, yet also show that lifestyle, educational background, and cultural capital strongly influence museum-going, so that even when entry is free many potential visitors still feel that museums are “not for people like them” (Kirchberg, 1998, pp. 57–60; CultureCase, 2013, paras. 5–7). UK participation data confirm that free national museums have not fully closed socio-economic and ethnic gaps in attendance, and recent commentaries on “poverty-proofing” museums point to additional barriers such as travel costs, caring responsibilities, precarious work patterns, and lack of culturally relevant content or welcoming environments, which can limit the ability of low-income families and marginalised communities to take advantage of free access (Museumnext, 2023, paras. 6–10; Museums Galleries Scotland, 2024, paras. 3–6). These findings suggest that while the National Gallery’s free-entry, education, and community-engagement strategies are important contributors to cultural inclusion, their full social impact depends on sustained efforts to address broader structural and cultural barriers beyond ticket price alone.

4.5. Contribution to urban tourism and city image

London-level cultural-tourism strategies consistently position the National Gallery, alongside the British Museum and Tate, as a flagship attraction that anchors the city’s image as a global cultural destination. A London cultural-tourism vision document describes museums and galleries in central locations such as Trafalgar Square as key to London’s appeal for both domestic and international visitors, citing their free entry, iconic collections, and concentration within a walkable area as distinctive competitive advantages (London & Partners et al., 2015, pp. 6–8). Travel and heritage guides similarly present the Gallery as a “London icon” and a must-see site, emphasising its unparalleled collection of European masterworks, free admission, and location forming the northern backdrop to Trafalgar Square—often described as the “heart” or “centre” of modern London (Discover Britain, 2024, paras. 3–7; StoryHunt, 2025, paras. 10–13). This combination of world-class art, civic

symbolism, and free access makes the Gallery central to London's cultural brand as both cosmopolitan and publicly accessible.

For tourists, the National Gallery is marketed and reviewed as an accessible, "must-visit" experience that does not depend on high spending. Visitor-facing materials stress that admission is free, donations are welcome, and all are invited to "bring people and paintings together," which allows budget-conscious visitors to see major works by Van Gogh, Leonardo, and Turner without a ticket charge (National Gallery, 2024, homepage). Travel guides aimed at independent travellers and families highlight the Gallery as one of Europe's most accessible major art museums, noting that free entry, central location, and flexible visit lengths make it especially attractive for tourists who may only have a few hours and want a high-quality, low-cost cultural experience (Artsy Traveler, 2025, paras. 2–5; Hotel La Place, 2025, paras. 4–7). At the same time, the Gallery's NG Citizens initiative and plans for a more welcoming entrance and digital experiences as part of its bicentenary (including Summer on the Square and National Treasures touring displays) are explicitly framed as efforts to reach people "who may never have visited before," suggesting that inclusive experience is a strategic objective as well as a marketing asset (Discover Britain, 2024, paras. 8–12; National Gallery, 2024b, paras. 3–6).

As a major free attraction in a prime urban location, the National Gallery contributes to both economic activity and wider social value. National analyses estimate that the UK's major museums and galleries together generate around £1.5–2 billion per year in economic benefits when turnover and associated visitor spending are taken into account, with London's "museum cluster" in particular driving visitor expenditure on accommodation, food, retail, and transport (National Museum Directors' Council, 2004, pp. 3–5; DCMS, 2010, pp. 9–11). Heritage-economy studies further highlight "spillover impacts" where flagship cultural sites attract visitors into surrounding areas, support local jobs in hospitality and services, and contribute to urban regeneration and place attractiveness, especially in high-profile districts like Westminster and the West End (Historic England, 2020, pp. 18–22; DCMS, 2010, pp. 15–17). Socially, the Gallery's presence in Trafalgar Square helps sustain one of London's most important civic spaces—used for protests, celebrations, and everyday gathering—with free cultural infrastructure that supports education, informal learning, and shared experiences across social groups, aligning with SDG 11's emphasis on inclusive, safe, resilient, and sustainable cities.

5. Comparative Analysis: Paid-Entry Museums

5.1. Overview of selected paid-entry museums in London

Paid-entry museums and heritage attractions remain an important part of London's cultural tourism offer because they combine heritage consumption with a direct revenue model. Among these institutions, the Tower of London is a particularly relevant case because it is one of the city's most visited paid-entry attractions and it uses a tiered admission system with concessions and special low-cost schemes (Historic Royal Palaces, 2026; Association of Leading Visitor Attractions [ALVA], 2024).

The Tower of London welcomed 2,902,385 visitors in 2024, placing it ninth in ALVA's visitor rankings and making it one of the leading paid-entry attractions in London (ALVA, 2024). According to Historic Royal Palaces, standard adult admission from March 2026 is £37.00, with reduced prices for children, seniors, students, disabled visitors, groups, and eligible benefit recipients; in addition, Tower Hamlets residents can enter for £1 (Historic Royal Palaces, 2026).

This pricing structure is important for comparative analysis because it shows that paid-entry museums do not rely on a single access model. Instead, they often combine commercial pricing with selective concessions to preserve both revenue generation and some degree of social accessibility (Historic Royal Palaces, 2026).

For a thesis section focused on comparative analysis, the Tower of London can therefore serve as a benchmark for understanding how London's paid-entry museums balance financial sustainability, visitor demand, and access policy. Its high attendance demonstrates strong market appeal, while its concessionary tickets show how paid-entry institutions can partially soften the exclusionary effects of admission charges (ALVA, 2024; Historic Royal Palaces, 2026).

5.2. Barriers for tourists and locals

Paid-entry museums in London face three connected barriers for both tourists and residents: cost, perceptions of exclusivity, and accessibility challenges. These barriers affect not only whether people visit, but also how often they return and whether they feel welcomed in cultural spaces (Local Government Association [LGA], 2021, para. 1; European Commission, 2014, pp. 4–5).

Cost remains one of the most important barriers to museum participation. The LGA notes that ticketing and other cultural costs limit access, especially for people with fewer

resources, while AAM data show that admission cost is a leading reason occasional visitors do not go more often (LGA, 2021, para. 3; Wilkening Consulting & American Alliance of Museums [AAM], 2024). In practice, the barrier is wider than the ticket price alone, because transport, food, and childcare can make even a single museum trip expensive for families and low-income residents (LGA, 2021, paras. 3–4).

For tourists, cost can still matter, but it often works differently. Visitors may be more willing to pay a higher admission fee for a landmark attraction, while locals are more sensitive to price when they consider repeat visits or short, spontaneous trips (LGA, 2021, paras. 3–4). Paid-entry museums can remain attractive to tourists while gradually becoming less accessible to local communities.

Museums can also be seen as socially exclusive spaces, particularly by people from lower-income, working-class, or minority backgrounds. The LGA highlights “barriers of perception,” where cultural activities are seen as not intended for certain groups, and it links these perceptions to wider issues of representation and social inequality (LGA, 2021, paras. 1, 8). In other words, some potential visitors do not stay away because of price alone, but because they feel that museums are not “for people like them”.

Research on accessibility and museum participation also shows that symbolic barriers matter alongside financial ones. If people expect a museum to be intimidating, elite, or socially coded for educated audiences, they may avoid it even when admission is affordable (ASERS Publishing, 2024; European Commission, 2014, p. 17). This perception can be especially relevant in London, where iconic museums attract both global tourists and local audiences, but the social meaning of the visit may differ sharply between these groups.

Accessibility challenges remain substantial in London because the city combines historic buildings, dense transport systems, and uneven public-realm design. The European Commission’s London case study states that London has improved accessibility across transport, public space, and visitor services, but also makes clear that the city has “not yet reached its goal of being fully accessible,” with continued gaps in wheelchair access, accessible toilets, and reliable accessibility information. The report also stresses that improving access requires more than physical adaptation; it depends on coordination across transport, infrastructure, information, and service design.

For museums specifically, this means that barriers can arise before a visitor even reaches the front door. Historic architecture can limit step-free access, while poor signage, inaccessible websites, and inconsistent staff training can create obstacles for disabled visitors and older tourists alike (ASERS Publishing, 2024; European Commission, 2014, pp. 12–15). The LGA likewise argues that physical barriers must be understood together with

attitudinal barriers, because access problems often persist when staff and institutions do not fully understand the social model of disability (LGA, 2021, paras. 5–7).

5.3. Lessons from comparison

The comparison suggests that paid-entry museums in London tend to generate strong visitor numbers and tourist appeal, but they also face a sharper inclusivity problem than free-entry institutions because pricing, social perceptions, and access conditions affect who participates and how often. EU cultural policy materials stress that access policies matter not only for increasing numbers, but also for changing the socio-economic composition of audiences and removing barriers that exclude disadvantaged groups (European Commission, 2012, pp. 9–15).

A key lesson is that paid-entry museums often succeed in attracting occasional and tourist audiences, yet they are less effective at supporting regular participation by local residents, especially those with lower incomes or weaker cultural capital. The European Commission's access-to-culture report states that people in more deprived circumstances participate much less in museum visits than people with higher education and income, which helps explain why admissions charges can widen existing participation gaps (European Commission, 2012, pp. 12–14). The same report also argues that access policies should be designed not just to increase attendance, but to improve the diversity of the audience and reduce social exclusion (European Commission, 2012, p. 15).

By contrast, free-entry models are more likely to support wider everyday use and stronger social inclusion because they remove an immediate financial barrier. UK policy statements on free museums explicitly frame free admission as a way to ensure that culture is available to everyone rather than a limited few (UK Government, 2011).

For cultural tourism policy, the main implication is that admission pricing should be treated as part of a wider inclusion strategy rather than as a purely revenue-based decision. OECD guidance on museums and local development argues that museums should be integrated into local tourism strategies, but also positioned as civic assets that support education, inclusion, and local development, not only visitor spending (OECD, 2019). That means tourism policy should encourage a balance between revenue generation and access, especially in cities like London where museums serve both international visitors and local communities (OECD, 2019).

A second implication is that policy should support mixed funding and targeted access measures. EU cultural policy documents and inclusion case studies show that public support, project funding, and accessibility investments can help museums widen

participation without abandoning financial sustainability (European Commission, 2012, pp. 20–25).

6. Analysis of Free Access and Sustainable Urban Tourism

6.1. Contribution to Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

Museums are increasingly recognised as active contributors to the 2030 Agenda, and the National Gallery's free-access model can be read through this lens as a policy that links cultural participation with education, equity, and urban sustainability (UNESCO, 2023; UNESCO, 2025). This matters because UNESCO describes culture as a transversal component of sustainable development, especially in relation to SDG 4, SDG 10, and SDG 11 (UNESCO, 2023). In the context of this thesis, the Gallery is not only a tourist attraction but also a public cultural institution with measurable social value.

Free entry supports SDG 4 because it allows museums to function as informal learning spaces where visitors can develop historical, artistic, and civic understanding outside formal schooling (UNESCO, 2025; Museums Next, 2024). The National Gallery's free access policy is especially relevant here because it reduces financial barriers to learning and makes cultural education available to school groups, families, students, and independent visitors alike. UNESCO also stresses that museums and UNESCO-designated sites can be used as partners for Education for Sustainable Development, helping learners connect heritage with contemporary social issues. In this sense, the Gallery contributes to lifelong learning not only by displaying art but also by creating repeated opportunities for interpretation, reflection, and public engagement.

Free access also supports SDG 10 because it lowers one of the most visible barriers to participation: admission price (UNESCO, 2023; Museums Next, 2024). However, the literature shows that free entry alone does not eliminate inequalities, since participation is also shaped by cultural capital, language, location, confidence, and perceptions of whether museums are "for people like me" (Cerquetti & Montella, 2021, pp. 114–118; UNESCO, 2023). This means the National Gallery's contribution to SDG 10 depends not only on free admission but also on how well it reaches underrepresented audiences through outreach, interpretation, accessibility, and inclusive programming. In practical terms, the thesis can use this SDG to evaluate whether free access widens participation in a meaningful way or mainly benefits those who already feel comfortable in museum spaces.

SDG 11 is particularly relevant because UNESCO links culture directly to inclusive, safe, resilient, and sustainable cities, and identifies cultural heritage as central to target 11.4 (UNESCO, 2023; UNESCO, 2026). The National Gallery contributes to this goal by acting as a public anchor institution in central London, strengthening the city's identity, attractiveness, and shared cultural infrastructure. Free access makes the Gallery part of

everyday urban life rather than a purely commercial attraction, which supports the idea of the city as a shared civic space rather than a consumption-only destination. At the same time, the thesis can critically examine whether the benefits of this model are distributed evenly across residents and tourists, or whether congestion, uneven awareness, and social exclusion limit its sustainability.

6.2. Free-access museums as a sustainable tourism strategy

Free-access to national museums can be interpreted as a sustainable tourism strategy because they advance social, economic, and—under certain conditions—environmental goals in line with international frameworks on sustainable cultural tourism and the SDGs (du Cros & McKercher, 2015/2025, pp. 15–18; European Commission, 2017, pp. 7–9; McGhie, 2019, pp. 18–21). In the social dimension, removing general admission fees reduces a major financial barrier and symbolically affirms culture as a public right rather than a luxury, helping to widen opportunities for participation in urban cultural life (Centre for Public Impact, 2024, paras. 5–8; McGhie, 2019, pp. 44–46). UK evidence shows that free-entry policies at national museums more than doubled visits after charges were removed in 1999–2001, with strong growth especially at London institutions that previously charged, and that free museums report higher repeat-visit rates and more "casual" visits than charging ones (BBC, 2011, paras. 4–7; AIM, 2024, pp. 8–10). For residents, this facilitates more frequent, everyday engagement with art and heritage rather than one-off "special" visits, supporting SDG 4 on inclusive, lifelong learning and SDG 10 on reducing inequalities in access to culture (McGhie, 2019, pp. 18–21, 44–46).

Social sustainability also depends on how free access is combined with targeted inclusion strategies. Research on barriers to museum participation emphasises that cost is only one among many obstacles, alongside location, transport, opening hours, cultural capital, and perceptions that museums are "not for us" (Dawson, 2014, pp. 5–7; European Parliamentary Research Service, 2025, pp. 2–3; Kirchberg, 1998, pp. 57–60). Studies of free-entry museums in the UK and Finland show that although attendance increases, visitor profiles often remain skewed towards higher-educated and more affluent groups unless free access is accompanied by outreach, co-created programmes, and efforts to reflect diverse histories and identities (AIM, 2024, pp. 12–14; Pyykkönen, 2025, pp. 608–612). In this sense, free national museums such as The National Gallery can support socially sustainable tourism when they combine free entry with community partnerships, inclusive interpretation, and governance mechanisms (for example, citizens' assemblies or advisory panels) that give voice to under-represented groups, thereby strengthening social cohesion

and cultural rights in the city (National Gallery, 2024c, paras. 2–6; UNESCO, 2015, paras. 33–35; UNESCO, 2023, paras. 5–8).

Economically, free-access museums contribute to sustainable tourism by generating substantial visitor expenditure, employment, and place attractiveness without relying on high upfront costs for cultural participation. Impact studies show that major museums produce multiplier effects through spending on accommodation, food, transport, and retail, supporting local jobs and supply chains in line with SDG 8 on decent work and economic growth (Mathouraparsad, 2016, pp. 25–27; McKercher & du Cros, 2002, pp. 52–54; AAM, 2018, pp. 20–22). The UK's free national museums, clustered in central London locations such as Trafalgar Square, anchor cultural districts that draw both residents and tourists, underpinning city branding and competitiveness in the global cultural tourism market (OECD & ICOM, 2019, pp. 11–13, 22–24; London & Partners et al., 2015, pp. 6–8). Because basic access is free, visitors can flexibly tailor visit length and spending, which may encourage repeat visits and ancillary spending on cafés, shops, and paid exhibitions; this pattern is reflected in evidence that free museums often see more short, frequent visits combined with lower per-visit but higher lifetime spending (AIM, 2024, pp. 9–12). For residents, free access reduces the economic threshold for using museums as everyday cultural resources, while for tourists it enhances the perceived value of the destination by offering high-quality experiences that are not contingent on ticket affordability (Discover Britain, 2024, paras. 3–7; Artsy Traveler, 2025, paras. 2–5).

At the same time, economic sustainability requires that free-access strategies are embedded in viable funding models. Studies on museum finance highlight that free museums depend heavily on stable public subsidies and diversified earned and donated income; where public funding is cut or volatile, institutions may be forced to reduce programmes, postpone maintenance, or reintroduce fees, threatening both social and economic benefits (OECD & ICOM, 2019, pp. 40–41; Prokůpek et al., 2023, pp. 6–8; Pyykkönen, 2025, pp. 608–610). The UK example shows that universal free admission at national museums was only sustainable because government grant-in-aid compensated for lost ticket revenue and allowed continued investment in conservation, education, and visitor services (DCMS, 2011, paras. 3–6; Centre for Public Impact, 2024, paras. 5–8). From a sustainable tourism perspective, this suggests that free access can support long-term economic resilience when combined with hybrid funding—public support plus ethically managed commercial and philanthropic income—that spreads risk and maintains quality without re-erecting financial barriers (ICOM, 2025, pp. 9–14; McGhie, 2019, pp. 40–46).

The environmental dimension is more ambivalent: free-access museums can either support or undermine environmental sustainability depending on how visitor flows are managed. High-profile free institutions tend to attract very large visitor numbers, which can lead to overcrowding, wear on historic buildings, and increased energy use and waste, as exemplified by overtourism at the Louvre, where daily visitor caps had to be introduced after numbers far exceeded design capacity (The Independent, 2025, paras. 5–8; Travel Daily Media, 2025, paras. 6–10). Similar concerns have been raised for London's flagship museums, whose volume-dependent revenue models rely on high throughput in shops and cafés, raising questions about crowding, infrastructure strain, and emissions associated with concentrated tourist flows (OECD & ICOM, 2019, pp. 29–31, 52–54; McGhie, 2019, pp. 50–52). However, sector guidance on sustainable museum tourism suggests that when free access is paired with timed-ticketing, visitor caps, dispersal strategies across galleries, and interpretation that encourages slower, more reflective visits, museums can mitigate environmental pressures while retaining openness, aligning with SDG 11 on sustainable cities and communities (Ásványi, 2021, pp. 27–29; OECD & ICOM, 2019, pp. 29–31; Formula D, 2023, paras. 9–12).

In the long term, free-access museums can offer significant benefits for both residents and tourists if they are governed as part of integrated urban sustainable-tourism strategies. For residents, free entry and locally oriented programmes support cultural rights, social cohesion, and community resilience, allowing people to use museums as spaces for learning, leisure, and civic dialogue throughout their lives (Kelly, 2006, as summarised in NEMO, 2020, pp. 8–10; UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2024, paras. 2–4; Lifestyle Sustainability Directory, 2025, paras. 15–18). For tourists, free national galleries provide high-value, low-barrier cultural experiences that enrich visits while signalling a civic commitment to shared heritage, strengthening the city's image as both world-class and welcoming (National Gallery, 2024, homepage; StoryHunt, 2025, paras. 10–13). When embedded in funding frameworks that protect quality and accessibility, and in visitor-management and environmental policies that avoid overtourism, free-access museums thus function as sustainable tourism assets that simultaneously advance social inclusion, economic vitality, and responsible use of urban heritage.

6.3. Challenges and limitations

Free-access national museums such as The National Gallery face significant challenges and limitations that qualify their role as sustainable tourism strategies, particularly in terms of resource allocation, visitor management, and maintaining visit quality (OECD & ICOM, 2019, pp. 40–41; Pyykkönen, 2025, pp. 608–610).

From a resource-allocation and operational-sustainability perspective, free admission removes a direct revenue stream and increases dependence on public subsidies, donations, and secondary income such as retail and paid exhibitions (OECD & ICOM, 2019, pp. 32–37; ICOM, 2025, pp. 9–12). Evidence from Europe and the US shows that when public grants stagnate or fall, free national museums often struggle to cover rising conservation, staffing, and building costs, leading to cutbacks in education programmes, outreach, and capital projects, or to growing pressure to expand commercial activities (Museums Journal, 2020, paras. 3–5; Hyperallergic, 2025, paras. 5–8; Prokůpek et al., 2023, pp. 6–8). Studies of "what free really costs" indicate that free-entry institutions typically report lower cost per visitor and strong repeat use but remain highly vulnerable to political shifts and macroeconomic shocks, making long-term planning for sustainable, inclusive tourism more difficult (Pyykkönen, 2025, pp. 608–612; OECD, 2019, pp. 52–54). For The National Gallery, this translates into a constant balancing act between upholding free access as a core principle and securing sufficient grant-in-aid, self-generated income, and philanthropy to sustain high-quality collections care and programming over time (Centre for Public Impact, 2024, paras. 5–8; National Gallery, 2024, pp. 12–14).

Free access also complicates visitor management, particularly in relation to overcrowding and overtourism. Popular free museums in central locations can attract visitor numbers that exceed building and staffing capacity, generating congestion in key galleries, longer queues, and pressure on infrastructure—patterns documented at similarly high-profile sites such as the Louvre, where overcrowding has led to staff strikes and the introduction of daily visitor caps (The Independent, 2025, paras. 5–8; Travel Daily Media, 2025, paras. 6–10; Thred, 2025, paras. 4–7). OECD–ICOM guidance warns that volume-driven models, in which financial stability relies on very high footfall, risk undermining both heritage conservation and visitor wellbeing, and recommends integrating timed ticketing, dispersal strategies, and coordination with city tourism policies to keep numbers at a sustainable level (OECD & ICOM, 2019, pp. 29–31, 52–54; Ásványi, 2021, pp. 27–29). For the National Gallery, whose free permanent collection and blockbuster exhibitions draw large tourist and resident crowds to Trafalgar Square, managing peak-time congestion without re-introducing financial barriers is a key operational limitation, especially as post-pandemic recovery and changing tourism patterns complicate demand forecasting (NAO, 2023, pp. 18–20; Museums Association, 2023, paras. 7–10).

Maintaining the quality of visitor experience under these conditions is another central challenge. Visitor-studies research suggests that free and paid museums achieve similarly high enjoyment scores, indicating that admission fees alone do not determine satisfaction; however, free museums typically see shorter visits and higher repeat-visit rates, which,

combined with crowding, can lead to “dip-in” experiences that may limit depth of engagement (AIM, 2024, pp. 9–12, 10–11). Overcrowding in iconic rooms, noise, and limited personal space can reduce opportunities for reflection, learning, and emotional connection with artworks—effects reported in analyses of overtourism at major art and heritage sites (Ásványi, 2021, pp. 27–29; Formula D, 2023, paras. 9–12). At the same time, operational pressures linked to free, high-volume access—such as staffing constraints, pressure to monetise ancillary services, or the need to prioritise blockbuster exhibitions—may draw resources away from quieter galleries, participatory projects, or communities that require more intensive support to feel welcome (Stylianou-Lambert et al., 2014, pp. 64–66; Prokůpek et al., 2023, pp. 8–11). For The National Gallery, sustaining a high-quality, inclusive experience thus depends on continuous investment in wayfinding, interpretation, staffing, and digital tools, as well as careful curation of both the physical and affective environment—investments that are harder to guarantee when financial and spatial pressures are intensified by free-entry, high-demand conditions.

6.4. Recommendations for policy and practice

Recommendations for policy and practice should focus on strengthening inclusivity, deepening collaboration with local communities, and adapting proven international best practices to The National Gallery’s free-access context (McGhie, 2019, pp. 18–21; OECD & ICOM, 2019, pp. 18–20).

First, strategies to enhance inclusivity need to go beyond free admission and systematically address financial, physical, social, and cognitive barriers. Policy reviews and evidence syntheses emphasise combining free or low-cost entry with targeted outreach in low-income areas, co-produced programmes, and inclusive interpretation that reflects diverse histories and identities (UK Government & Arts Council England, 2023, pp. 5–7; UNESCO, 2022, paras. 3–6). For the National Gallery, this implies prioritising programmes for under-represented groups (for example, people on low incomes, minority ethnic communities, and disabled visitors), expanding concessionary support for travel and group visits where possible, and embedding accessibility features—tactile and audio-described resources, easy-read materials, multilingual labelling—as standard practice rather than add-ons (Ajuntament de Barcelona, 2019, pp. 4–7; SEND in Museums, 2021, pp. 3–6). Data-driven audience development should underpin these policies, using visitor surveys and public data to monitor who is reached, who remains absent, and how different groups experience the Gallery (AIM, 2024, pp. 5–7; ArtsProfessional, 2024, paras. 8–12).

Second, sustained collaboration with local communities is essential to ensure that free access translates into genuine social inclusion. International and UK practice shows that co-curation, community advisory boards, and citizens' assemblies can redistribute cultural authority, allowing residents to shape narratives, programmes, and priorities (Tlili, 2008, pp. 161–163; ICOM, 2023, paras. 2–5, 12–14). The National Gallery's NG Citizens initiative, which uses a civic lottery to convene a demographically diverse citizens' panel to advise on its future direction, is a promising model that could be expanded and more tightly integrated into governance, exhibition planning, and evaluation (National Gallery, 2024c, paras. 2–6; NEMO, 2025, paras. 3–5). Collaboration with schools, youth groups, migrant and refugee organisations, and disability-led groups can also ensure that programmes respond to locally identified needs and strengthen the Gallery's role as a civic space in Trafalgar Square, aligning with SDGs 10 and 11 (UNESCO, 2015, paras. 33–35; ICCROM, 2022, paras. 3–6).

Finally, adopting best practices from other international museums can help align free-access policies with sustainable and inclusive urban cultural tourism. Case studies from Balkan museums, community-based museums in Peru, and accessibility initiatives across Europe highlight the effectiveness of co-designed exhibitions, locally guided tours, quiet hours, and integrated accessibility planning in broadening participation while enhancing visitor experience (Balkan Museums Network, 2024, pp. 10–13; Repetto Málaga & Brown, 2019, pp. 64–68; COME-IN! Project, 2018, pp. 22–25). Large institutions such as Tate Modern, the Rijksmuseum, and Scandinavian museums demonstrate how timed-entry systems, diversified revenue streams, and explicit equity goals in strategic planning can reconcile high demand with quality and inclusion (Stylianou-Lambert et al., 2014, pp. 62–66; Prokůpek, 2022, pp. 8–10; ICOM, 2025, pp. 12–14). For policymakers and museum leaders, this suggests three priorities: embed inclusion and community benefit in funding criteria and performance indicators; support hybrid funding models that protect free access while reducing vulnerability to shocks; and encourage international knowledge-exchange on sustainable, inclusive practice so that institutions like The National Gallery can learn from, and contribute to, a global community of museums engaged in socially just urban cultural tourism (McGhie, 2019, pp. 40–46; Culture 2030 Goal Campaign, 2021, pp. 34–36).

7. Results and Discussion

7.1. Questionnaire findings

The questionnaire findings provide qualitative evidence from 11 museum and cultural heritage professionals working in learning, curatorial, collections, archives, visitor experience, exhibitions, digital collections, mediation, and community heritage settings. Since the questionnaire focused on professional perspectives rather than respondents' personal demographic profiles, the strongest patterns concern how staff perceive visitor demographics, access barriers, visitor satisfaction, and inclusivity initiatives across different institutional contexts.

Several respondents linked free entry to broader and more diverse visitor profiles. According to ID 1, free-entry museums attract families, school groups, and younger local audiences, while ticketed museums tend to attract more adults and tourists. ID 4 similarly observed that free museums bring in "young old diverse" publics and encourage casual local use, whereas paid settings are more selective and calmer. In the Barcelona context, ID 9 stated that free museums attract families, immigrants, and students more easily, while paid museums are used more by tourists and exclude working-class locals from regular participation. ID 10 also argued that free museums encourage more local and repeat visits because people feel less pressure to make the visit "special," whereas ticketed visits become more planned and selective.

At the same time, several respondents stressed that visitor diversity cannot be explained by ticket price alone. ID 10 argued that language, education level, cultural distance, and the feeling that "this place is not for me" remain decisive barriers even when admission is free. ID 11 made a similar point, stating that the difference between free and paid museums is not only economic but also social and symbolic, because some visitors simply do not recognise themselves in the museum. ID 2 added that intellectual barriers, including dense scholarship and jargon-heavy interpretation, can deter non-specialist audiences, while ID 6 pointed to archival barriers such as incomplete catalogues, appointment systems, and restricted photography policies.

Financial barriers were nevertheless described as highly important by most respondents. ID 1 said that even small charges deter locals, families, and students once travel and food costs are added. ID 4 described ticket price as "huge" for students and families and linked free access directly to repeat local visitation. ID 9 stated that even a 10 euro entrance fee can stop local residents from returning, while ID 11 said that for families and low-income visitors, even a small admission price can be enough to prevent a visit, especially repeated

visits. However, respondents such as ID 2, ID 3, and ID 8 also noted that ticket income can support conservation, collection care, or site protection, which means that staff often perceive a real trade-off between affordability and institutional maintenance.

Non-financial barriers were described in especially rich detail. ID 1 mentioned family-unfriendly schedules, lack of interactive elements, transport costs, weak communication, and staff shortages. ID 4 highlighted poor wayfinding, language gaps, and the intimidating feeling of entering a large cultural space without enough support. ID 9 pointed to eurocentric narratives, lack of childcare, limited evening hours, and unstable staffing, while ID 10 referred to language, exclusion, lack of representation, transport, and unclear communication. In heritage settings, ID 3 and ID 8 emphasised physical and environmental barriers such as stairs, uneven paths, weather, rural access, and limited parking or buses. In digital and archive settings, ID 5 and ID 6 pointed to metadata gaps, digital divides, server downtime, and uncatalogued holdings as forms of exclusion that are less visible but still very important.

The responses also provide a clear pattern regarding visitor satisfaction. ID 1 linked satisfaction to friendly and knowledgeable staff, interactive tools, and clear family trails. ID 4 stressed the role of front-of-house support, interactive spaces, and smooth visitor flow, while ID 10 argued that visitors feel satisfied when they are treated respectfully, when the content is well explained, and when they feel included rather than only informed. ID 11 expressed a similar view, stating that visitors feel welcome when the museum speaks “with them, not at them,” which highlights recognition and respect as central dimensions of satisfaction. Other respondents offered more context-specific explanations: ID 2 valued rich interpretation and quiet reflection; ID 3 emphasised uncrowded conditions and good storytelling; ID 7 focused on functioning installations and clear exhibition flow; and ID 8 pointed to personal interaction, clear paths, and opportunities to pause. Taken together, these answers suggest that satisfaction is shaped not only by content quality but by how accessible, readable, and socially welcoming the whole museum experience feels.

When asked about successful inclusivity initiatives, respondents consistently referred to active and targeted forms of engagement. ID 1 highlighted school holiday workshops, multilingual family storytelling, and sensory backpacks for neurodiverse visitors. ID 4 mentioned pop-up talks, artist interactions, family zones, and multilingual guides, while ID 7 described height-adjustable touchscreens, multilingual QR panels, and calm spaces within exhibitions. These examples show that staff often understand inclusion as something built through concrete design and programming choices rather than through mission statements alone.

A second strong theme was the importance of community-based and participatory work. According to ID 9, free neighbourhood workshops with local artists, multilingual family days, and staff training in cultural sensitivity are especially effective in making museums more welcoming. ID 10 stated that workshops with schools, family activities, community projects, and mediation with different entry points work well because they allow people to speak and participate rather than passively receive information. ID 11 similarly argued that community projects, school programmes, neighbourhood activities, and participatory formats are more inclusive because they connect heritage to everyday life and stop assuming a single type of public. These answers suggest that inclusivity is seen not only as access to a building but as access to dialogue, representation, and shared cultural authority.

Several respondents also focused on the role of representation and interpretation. ID 2 argued that revised labelling with both scholarly and accessible entry points, as well as loans from diverse collections, can broaden engagement without sacrificing rigour. ID 9 warned that eurocentric narratives alienate diverse locals, and ID 10 said that museums become less inclusive when they repeat the same language and speak to the same audiences over and over again. ID 11 reinforced this by arguing that inclusion requires changing discourse, social codes, and institutional relationships, not only reducing ticket prices. Across these responses, the message is that inclusive practice depends heavily on whether people feel represented in the stories museums tell and in the ways they are invited to engage.

Digital inclusion was another important theme, especially in the responses of ID 5 and ID 6. ID 5 emphasised open-access collections, multilingual metadata, auto-translation, downloadable high-resolution images, and public APIs as tools that expand access across borders and income levels. ID 6 pointed to online finding aids, priority digitisation for underrepresented histories, and workshops on archive navigation as ways of opening access to researchers and community historians. However, both also warned that digital inclusion depends on infrastructure and usability: poor search systems, incomplete metadata, paywalls, and uncatalogued materials can reproduce exclusion in new forms. This suggests that digital initiatives can widen access, but only when they are designed with the same care for equity and clarity as physical programmes.

Finally, many respondents connected inclusivity initiatives to staffing and institutional capacity. ID 1 said that staff time for innovation is a hidden but essential condition for inclusive programming. ID 9 argued that precarious contracts reduce the quality of mediation and make it harder to sustain inclusive work, while ID 10 stated that staff conditions shape the quality of everything else in the museum. ID 11 similarly noted that

when workers are not properly supported, inclusion risks becoming only a slogan. These responses indicate that staff do not see inclusion as a low-cost add-on; rather, they view it as something that depends on time, training, stability, and organisational commitment.

Overall, the questionnaire findings show that respondents broadly agree on three points. First, according to IDs 1, 4, 9, 10, and 11, free access tends to broaden visitor reach and encourage more local and repeat use, even if it does not solve all participation inequalities. Second, according to IDs 2, 5, 6, 10, and 11, the main barriers to inclusion are multidimensional and include symbolic, linguistic, digital, logistical, and representational obstacles as well as financial ones. Third, according to IDs 1, 7, 9, 10, and 11, inclusivity initiatives work best when they combine welcoming staff, participatory programming, community links, accessible interpretation, and sustained institutional support.

7.2. Interpretation of results

The questionnaire findings broadly support the central argument of this thesis that free access can improve cultural participation and support more inclusive forms of urban cultural tourism, but they also show that free admission alone is not enough to produce full inclusion. Overall, the professional responses confirm that admission price matters, especially for local residents, families, students, and lower-income groups, yet they also make clear that participation is shaped by a much wider set of symbolic, social, logistical, and institutional factors. In this sense, the results do not contradict the theoretical framework of the thesis; rather, they refine it by showing that the social impact of free museums depends strongly on what happens beyond the ticket desk.

The results provide substantial support for Hypothesis 1, which proposed that free access democratises culture and fosters inclusion by lowering financial barriers, increasing attendance, and encouraging more diverse participation. Several respondents explicitly linked free access to broader and more frequent museum use. According to ID 1, free entry encourages visits by families, school groups, and younger local audiences, while ticketed settings attract more adults and tourists. ID 4 similarly argued that free museums bring in a wider social mix and make the institution feel more open and publicly owned, while ID 9 stated that free museums are more likely to attract families, immigrants, students, and local residents than paid ones. ID 10 also emphasised that free museums generate more repeat visits because people feel less economic pressure and can enter casually rather than only on special occasions. These responses support the hypothesis that free entry broadens access and helps position the museum as an everyday civic resource rather than a selective cultural product.

At the same time, the findings also qualify Hypothesis 1. The questionnaire does not suggest that free access automatically creates a fully diverse audience. IDs 10 and 11 both stressed that many people still feel socially or culturally distant from museums even when admission is free, and ID 2 argued that intellectual barriers such as dense interpretation and specialist language can continue to limit inclusion. This means that the first hypothesis is only partially confirmed in its strongest form: free access clearly reduces one major barrier, but democratisation remains incomplete without complementary action in programming, communication, representation, and staff practice.

The results strongly confirm Hypothesis 2, which proposed that barriers remain despite free access, including transport costs, opening hours, lack of awareness, cultural capital, and feelings of not belonging. This was one of the clearest patterns across the whole questionnaire. ID 1 referred to time, transport, family scheduling, and staff shortages; ID 4 emphasised poor wayfinding, language gaps, and intimidating environments; ID 9 highlighted language, childcare, evening access, and unstable staffing; and ID 10 described exclusion, lack of representation, and the feeling that the museum is “not for me” as major obstacles. ID 11 reinforced this interpretation by arguing that symbolic barriers are sometimes stronger than financial ones, especially when visitors do not recognise themselves in the institution’s language, atmosphere, or narratives. The evidence therefore aligns very closely with the second hypothesis and strengthens the thesis argument that accessibility must be understood as multidimensional rather than purely economic.

The findings also support Hypothesis 3, which proposed that the free model of a major national museum can align with SDGs 4, 10, and 11 by contributing to education, reduced inequalities, and inclusive urban life. In relation to SDG 4, respondents such as ID 1, ID 9, ID 10, and ID 11 described museums as spaces for lifelong learning, reflection, dialogue, and critical engagement rather than only exhibition spaces. In relation to SDG 10, the responses showed that free entry helps reduce inequalities in access, but only when supported by inclusive mediation, outreach, and representational change; this point was especially clear in the answers of IDs 9, 10, and 11. In relation to SDG 11, several respondents linked access policy directly to the image of the city and to the role of museums in creating inclusive, socially meaningful urban environments. ID 1 described free museums as helping cities feel vibrant and accessible, ID 4 connected free access to an open and welcoming city image, and IDs 10 and 11 argued that accessible museums make the city appear more democratic and socially connected. Although the questionnaire did not directly measure SDG outcomes, the responses support the interpretation that free museums can contribute to these goals when access is embedded in a wider public-service orientation.

The findings also help answer the three main research objectives and associated questions set out in the thesis. The first objective was to analyse the social and cultural impacts of free access at a major national museum. The questionnaire suggests that free access has clear positive effects on repeat visitation, local use, public value, and symbolic openness, as shown in the responses of IDs 1, 4, 9, and 10. However, the same findings also show that inclusion depends on whether visitors feel represented, welcomed, and able to understand the institution, which means that free access works best when it is combined with targeted forms of mediation and inclusive design.

The second objective was to identify persistent barriers associated with paid-entry models and, by implication, to understand what free access can and cannot solve. Here the questionnaire provides strong support for the claim that paid entry narrows participation, especially among locals and low-income groups. IDs 1, 4, 9, 10, and 11 all linked ticket prices to more selective visitor profiles and lower repeat visitation. Yet the responses also complicate a simple free-versus-paid opposition, because IDs 2, 3, 7, and 8 pointed out that paid models can sometimes support conservation, better visitor flow, calmer conditions, and higher-quality maintenance. The interpretation, therefore, is not that charging is always socially harmful and free access is always fully inclusive, but that pricing policies shape who visits, how they visit, and what institutional trade-offs become possible.

The third objective was to examine the contribution of museums to city image and sustainable tourism strategies. The questionnaire findings support the idea that accessible museums function as more than cultural institutions: they also act as symbolic markers of what kind of city is being presented to residents and visitors. ID 1 associated free access with an inclusive and creative urban image, ID 4 linked it to a lively and welcoming cultural atmosphere, ID 5 argued that open digital collections strengthen a city's global cultural visibility, and IDs 10 and 11 both suggested that a city loses part of its identity when museums become too tourist-focused or socially exclusive. These responses support the thesis claim that free museums contribute to sustainable urban cultural tourism not only by attracting visitors, but by shaping the moral and civic meaning of the city itself.

One of the most important unexpected findings is that many respondents treated symbolic and social barriers as equal to, or even more important than, financial barriers. While the thesis expected non-financial barriers to matter, the strength and consistency of this theme were especially notable. IDs 10 and 11 repeatedly argued that free access changes little if people still feel culturally excluded, and ID 9 similarly stressed that tourists may benefit from access policies while local communities still feel alienated by language, narratives, and institutional culture. This suggests that the biggest challenge for inclusion may not be simply

removing the ticket price, but transforming the museum's discourse, atmosphere, and relationships with communities.

A second unexpected finding is the extent to which respondents linked staff working conditions to inclusion outcomes. IDs 1, 9, 10, and 11 all argued, in different ways, that understaffing, precarious contracts, and limited preparation time reduce the museum's ability to welcome visitors, run community programmes, and sustain inclusive mediation. This is an important interpretive insight because it shifts part of the discussion away from visitor policy alone and towards labour conditions inside the institution. In other words, the questionnaire suggests that social inclusion is not only a matter of audience development but also of employment structure, institutional priorities, and the time available for relationship-building work.

A third unexpected finding concerns the role of digital access. The thesis already considered digital access as relevant, but the responses of ID 5 and ID 6 gave it greater weight than might normally be expected in a study focused on physical museum attendance. These respondents described digitisation, open-access collections, online catalogues, and metadata systems as central mechanisms for widening access, supporting research, and extending the museum's educational and urban role beyond the building. At the same time, they also showed that digital access can reproduce inequalities through poor design, incomplete metadata, paywalls, or digital exclusion. The explanation may be that in large institutions, especially those with research and global audiences, the social impact of museum access now increasingly operates through both physical and digital infrastructures.

Another unexpected element is that some respondents presented ticketed models more positively than the general argument of the thesis might initially imply. IDs 2, 3, 7, and 8 highlighted the advantages of charging for conservation, calmer visits, predictable visitor flow, equipment maintenance, or protection of fragile sites. Rather than contradicting the thesis, this finding suggests that professionals often think in terms of practical trade-offs rather than ideological oppositions. The explanation here is likely institutional context: respondents from historic houses, archives, and exhibition logistics face material constraints that make unlimited free access more difficult to sustain than in large state-supported urban museums. This nuance is useful because it prevents the thesis from framing free access as universally simple or costless.

Finally, the questionnaire produced an unexpectedly strong emphasis on the idea that museums should serve local communities first, even within tourism-heavy urban contexts. IDs 9, 10, and 11 especially argued that museums risk becoming tourism products unless they remain rooted in neighbourhoods, schools, local associations, and everyday urban life.

This strengthens the sustainable tourism angle of the thesis by suggesting that an inclusive museum is not one that merely attracts many visitors, but one that balances tourist appeal with long-term local relevance.

Overall, the interpretation of results shows that the questionnaire findings broadly confirm the thesis hypotheses, especially the argument that free access supports inclusion while not eliminating deeper barriers. The results also expand the thesis by showing that symbolic inclusion, staff capacity, digital infrastructures, and local embeddedness are central to how free access actually works in practice. As a result, the evidence suggests that the social value of a free national museum such as the National Gallery depends not only on admission policy, but on whether the institution can translate free access into belonging, relevance, and sustained public engagement.

7.3. Discussion in a wider context

The questionnaire findings gain broader significance when placed within the wider debate on museums as actors in urban cultural tourism, social inclusion, and sustainable development. Taken together, the responses suggest that free-access museums are not only cultural institutions but also urban infrastructures that shape how cities are experienced, who feels entitled to participate in them, and how cultural tourism is balanced with local public value. This wider discussion is especially relevant to the case of the National Gallery, because the thesis positions it not simply as a museum with a free-entry policy, but as a flagship institution within London's tourism economy and civic identity.

The findings reinforce the thesis argument that museums play a central role in urban cultural tourism by contributing to the city's image, attractiveness, and everyday urban life. Several respondents explicitly described museums as anchors of cultural identity and urban vibrancy. ID 1 stated that museums make cities feel alive and accessible by drawing both local families and tourists, while ID 4 argued that museums create urban "buzz" and make cultural districts feel active and welcoming. In Barcelona, ID 10 similarly described museums as helping people understand the city beyond its postcard image, and ID 11 argued that museums should strengthen local identity rather than function only as tourism products. These responses strongly support the conceptual framework in the thesis, which describes museums as anchor institutions that shape place identity, destination image, and urban competitiveness.

At the same time, the questionnaire also adds an important corrective to standard tourism-centred narratives. The respondents did not define success primarily in terms of visitor numbers, but in terms of whether museums remain socially meaningful for local residents.

IDs 9, 10, and 11 were especially clear that museums in tourist-heavy cities risk losing legitimacy if they become oriented mainly toward visitors rather than local communities. This point is highly relevant to sustainable urban cultural tourism, because it suggests that the value of a free museum lies not only in drawing tourists but in functioning as a repeated, ordinary, and publicly shared cultural resource for people who live in the city.

The questionnaire also shows that access policy affects how a city is symbolically presented through tourism. According to ID 1, free access positions a city as inclusive and innovative; ID 4 linked free museums to openness and social energy; ID 9 argued that free local access helps make Barcelona a “people’s city”; and ID 10 said that accessible culture sends a strong message about what kind of city it is. These observations align with the thesis literature on museums as instruments of city branding and soft power, but they also deepen it by showing that access policy itself becomes part of urban image-making. In other words, the museum’s pricing model is not only a financial or operational question; it also communicates whether the city imagines culture as a public right or as a selective commodity.

The questionnaire findings are broadly consistent with the international research discussed earlier in the thesis, especially on the relationship between free access, cultural democratisation, and persistent participation inequalities. The literature reviewed in the thesis argues that free admission lowers a major financial barrier and tends to increase attendance, but does not automatically remove deeper obstacles linked to cultural capital, representation, language, transport, or feelings of exclusion. The professional responses strongly confirm this pattern. IDs 1, 4, 9, 10, and 11 all associated free access with broader participation and repeat visits, while IDs 10 and 11 in particular stressed that symbolic and social barriers remain powerful even when tickets are free. This closely mirrors the thesis discussion of accessibility as financial, social, cognitive, and cultural rather than only economic.

The results also align with international scholarship on audience development and inclusive museum practice. The literature cited in the thesis emphasises that diverse participation is more likely when museums combine lower barriers with outreach, co-creation, community partnerships, multilingual communication, and inclusive interpretation. The questionnaire offers direct practice-based confirmation of this. ID 1 highlighted sensory backpacks, multilingual storytelling, and school workshops; ID 9 pointed to neighbourhood workshops, migrant voices, and cultural-sensitivity training; ID 10 stressed mediation, participation, and local partnerships; and ID 11 argued that museums become more inclusive when they work with communities rather than simply talk about them. These findings therefore do not merely

repeat the literature, but concretely illustrate how international principles of participation and inclusion are being understood by professionals in different institutions.

Another strong point of alignment concerns the literature on barriers to participation and Bourdieu-inspired understandings of cultural capital. The thesis draws on research showing that museums may still feel elitist, intimidating, or “not for people like us” even when practical barriers are reduced. This exact dynamic appeared repeatedly in the questionnaire. ID 2 referred to dense scholarship and elitist interpretation, ID 4 described how visitors can feel lost or intimidated in large galleries, ID 10 emphasised cultural distance and the feeling that the museum is not designed for different realities, and ID 11 argued that many people stay away because they do not recognise themselves in the museum’s discourse or atmosphere. These parallels strengthen the validity of your interpretation, because the primary data fits well with the wider research consensus that inclusion depends on social recognition as much as on physical admission.

At the same time, the questionnaire usefully complicates some parts of the literature by showing how strongly professionals emphasise staffing and operational conditions. While the thesis literature does discuss funding, governance, and audience development, the responses of IDs 1, 9, 10, and 11 suggest even more clearly that precarious staffing, lack of preparation time, and overwork directly weaken inclusion efforts. This indicates that future research and policy may need to treat labour conditions not as a secondary management issue, but as one of the core conditions of equitable access. In this way, the questionnaire both aligns with international research and extends it by highlighting the institutional labour dimension of cultural inclusion.

The findings have clear implications for the SDG framework used in the thesis, especially SDG 4, SDG 10, and SDG 11. In relation to SDG 4 (Quality Education), the questionnaire strongly supports the idea that museums function as spaces of informal and lifelong learning. IDs 1, 10, and 11 all described museums as places of curiosity, reflection, dialogue, and sustained learning rather than only display, while ID 5 showed that digital collections can extend these educational functions beyond the physical visit. This suggests that free access contributes to SDG 4 most effectively when it is linked to high-quality mediation, interpretation, and educational programming rather than being treated only as a numerical admissions strategy.

In relation to SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities), the findings point to both opportunity and limitation. Admission price clearly matters: IDs 1, 4, 9, 10, and 11 all stressed that fees reduce repeat access for locals, families, students, and lower-income groups. However, the same respondents also showed that inequalities persist through language, social codes,

lack of representation, working hours, transport, digital barriers, and feelings of exclusion. The policy implication is that free entry should be understood as a necessary but insufficient condition for cultural equality. To align more fully with SDG 10, museums need integrated inclusion strategies that address pricing, narrative diversity, community partnership, multilingual communication, disability access, and staff capacity at the same time.

The implications for SDG 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities) are especially strong. The thesis argues that free museums in central urban spaces can act as cultural infrastructures that support more inclusive and sustainable cities. The questionnaire supports this, particularly through the responses of IDs 1, 9, 10, and 11, who described museums as spaces of community life, belonging, local identity, and social cohesion. ID 9 linked free culture hubs to social cohesion and the prevention of tourist-only urbanism, while ID 10 argued that museums can support sustainable urban culture when they work with local networks rather than only tourist logic. These perspectives suggest that museum access policy should be treated as part of broader urban policy, not only cultural policy, because it affects how cities balance tourism, citizenship, and public space.

The questionnaire also has practical implications for sustainable tourism policy. First, it suggests that museums should not be assessed only by total attendance, but by who visits, who feels represented, and whether locals continue to use the institution repeatedly over time. Second, it indicates that sustainable access models are likely to be hybrid: respondents such as IDs 1, 5, 9, 10, and 11 supported free or low-barrier core access combined with supplementary funding, provided that social purpose remains central. Third, the findings imply that outreach, mediation, digital access, and staff stability should be treated as long-term investments in sustainable tourism rather than as optional extras. This is particularly relevant for the National Gallery case, because it suggests that the success of its free-entry model depends not only on maintaining open doors, but on sustaining the institutional capacity to make those doors socially meaningful.

In wider context, then, the questionnaire supports a model of urban cultural tourism in which museums contribute to destination attractiveness precisely by being publicly valuable, educationally meaningful, and socially inclusive. The strongest message emerging from both the literature and the professional responses is that free access has genuine democratic potential, but only when supported by inclusive narratives, community connections, stable staffing, and sustainable funding. This makes the National Gallery relevant not only as a successful free museum, but as a test case for whether major urban museums can align cultural tourism with social justice and long-term urban sustainability.

8. Conclusions

8.1. Summary of key findings

This thesis set out to examine the social impact of free museum access through the case of the National Gallery in London, with particular attention to inclusion, audience diversity, city image, and sustainable urban cultural tourism. Taken together, the findings show that free access has a clear positive social value, especially because it lowers an immediate economic barrier, encourages repeat visitation, and helps position the museum as a public cultural space rather than an exclusively commercial or elite institution. At the same time, the research also shows that free admission alone is not enough to guarantee inclusive participation, since financial access does not automatically remove the symbolic, social, cultural, and logistical barriers that continue to shape who feels able and entitled to enter museum spaces.

One of the clearest findings of the study is that free access does have a meaningful social impact, particularly in relation to frequency of use, local access, and the idea of the museum as an everyday public resource. The questionnaire responses consistently showed that professionals associate free-entry museums with broader visitor mixes, more local visitors, more families and students, and a greater likelihood of spontaneous or repeat visits. According to ID 1, free entry encourages participation by families, school groups, and lower-income visitors because it removes a major practical barrier, while ID 4 similarly observed that free museums attract a wider social mix and create a stronger sense that the institution belongs to everyone. In Barcelona, ID 9 argued that free access enables repeated engagement by local residents, immigrants, and students, and ID 10 noted that when admission is free, people feel less pressure and can visit casually rather than treating the museum as a one-off special purchase. These findings support the core argument of the thesis that free access expands the public role of museums by making them more available for ordinary cultural participation and informal learning.

The research also indicates that the social impact of free entry is not only practical but symbolic. Several respondents suggested that free admission sends a message that culture is a public good and that the museum is intended for broad social use rather than only for those with economic means or cultural confidence. ID 9 described free entry as essential for ensuring that diverse local communities feel entitled to culture, while ID 11 emphasised that public value depends not only on the absence of a ticket fee but on whether people genuinely feel that the museum belongs to them. This is an important conclusion because

it shows that free access matters both as a material policy and as a civic statement about who museums are for.

The findings further show that free museum access can make an important contribution to inclusivity, but only when supported by inclusive programming, mediation, representation, and adequate institutional capacity. Across the questionnaire, respondents repeatedly argued that lower ticket prices or free admission make inclusion more possible, but do not produce it automatically. IDs 10 and 11 were especially clear that many barriers remain even in free museums, including language, classed expectations, lack of representation, and the feeling that the museum is “not for me”. Likewise, ID 2 pointed to dense interpretation and scholarly language as forms of exclusion, while ID 4 highlighted wayfinding, atmosphere, and first-time visitor confidence as decisive factors in whether people feel welcome. The overall conclusion is therefore that free access is a necessary foundation for inclusion, but not a sufficient one.

The most effective inclusivity measures identified in the study were relational and participatory rather than simply financial. Respondents highlighted multilingual family activities, school workshops, community projects, sensory and accessibility resources, outreach beyond the museum building, and interpretation designed for different levels of knowledge and experience. ID 1 referred to sensory backpacks and multilingual storytelling; ID 9 stressed free neighbourhood workshops, immigrant voices, and cultural-sensitivity training; ID 10 emphasised mediation, participation, and local partnerships; and ID 11 argued that museums become inclusive when they work with communities instead of only speaking about them. These findings suggest that inclusivity is best understood as a long-term institutional relationship with diverse publics rather than a simple consequence of opening the doors for free.

A further key finding is that free-access museums also contribute to city image and to the broader attractiveness of urban cultural destinations. The questionnaire showed that respondents view museums not only as internal cultural institutions but also as visible symbols of what kind of city is being presented to residents and visitors. ID 1 linked free access to an inclusive and innovative city image, ID 4 associated it with openness and urban energy, ID 5 argued that open digital access makes a city’s heritage globally visible, and IDs 10 and 11 both suggested that accessible museums help present the city as more democratic, thoughtful, and socially connected. In this sense, the findings support the thesis argument that the National Gallery’s free model contributes not only to cultural access but also to London’s image as a culturally vibrant and publicly accessible destination.

Despite these positive effects, the research also demonstrates that significant barriers remain. Financial access matters greatly, especially for repeated visits by families, students, and lower-income groups, but respondents repeatedly stressed that non-financial barriers are often equally important or even more important in practice. IDs 10 and 11 highlighted language, cultural distance, and symbolic exclusion; ID 1 pointed to timing, transport, and staff shortages; ID 4 referred to confusion, intimidation, and poor wayfinding; and ID 9 emphasised childcare, opening hours, and precarious working conditions. This confirms that inclusive museum access must be understood across economic, social, spatial, psychological, and institutional dimensions rather than as a question of admission price alone.

Another important finding is that respondents often described a tension between access and sustainability. Although free access broadens participation, it can also generate overcrowding, operational strain, wear on infrastructure, and pressure on staff, especially if funding is unstable. ID 1 referred to overcrowding and stretched workshop capacity, ID 7 described how free surges can overwhelm exhibition infrastructure, and ID 9 linked high-volume free access to staff exhaustion when contracts and resources are weak. Meanwhile, respondents such as IDs 2, 3, 7, and 8 pointed out that ticketed or hybrid models can support conservation, calmer visitor flow, better maintenance, and improved planning. The conclusion here is not that free access is ineffective, but that its success depends on adequate support structures, especially public funding, staffing, and operational planning.

The study also has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the questionnaire captures the perspectives of museum and heritage professionals rather than visitors themselves, so the findings reflect expert interpretation of audience behaviour rather than direct visitor testimony. Second, the sample is relatively small and qualitative, which means the results are valuable for thematic insight and comparative interpretation but cannot be treated as statistically representative of the whole museum sector. Third, although the thesis centres on the National Gallery, the questionnaire includes professionals from a range of museums, archives, and heritage settings, so some findings are broader than the case study itself and need to be applied to the National Gallery with analytical caution. Even so, this wider range is also a strength, because it allows the thesis to situate the National Gallery within broader professional debates on access, inclusion, and sustainability.

Overall, the key findings of the study can be summarised in three main conclusions. First, free museum access has a real and positive social impact because it lowers financial barriers, encourages repeat use, and strengthens the museum’s public role. Second, free access contributes to inclusivity and to a city’s image as open and culturally vibrant, but

only when it is accompanied by inclusive mediation, representation, community engagement, and stable institutional support. Third, significant barriers remain, especially symbolic, logistical, and structural ones, which means that the social value of free access depends less on the absence of a ticket price alone than on the institution's wider ability to turn access into belonging, participation, and sustained cultural relevance.

8.2. Response to research objectives

The research objectives of this thesis are broadly met, and the questionnaire responses provide strong qualitative support for the main argument that free museum access has substantial social value but does not, by itself, guarantee inclusion. When the findings are read through the experiences of the respondents, a clear pattern emerges: free access helps broaden participation, strengthen public value, and improve the city's cultural image, but its effects depend on mediation, representation, staffing, and institutional commitment beyond pricing policy alone.

The first objective was to analyse the social and cultural impacts of free access at the National Gallery, especially in relation to visitor diversity, belonging, and everyday cultural participation. The questionnaire findings strongly support this objective. Several respondents associated free-access museums with broader visitor mixes, more repeat visits, and stronger use by local residents, families, students, and school groups. For example, ID 1 stated that free entry allows "everyone in, from school kids to families," encourages repeat visits, and creates public value through broad education, while ID 4 described free access as something that brings in "all sorts" of visitors and makes people feel that the museum is "theirs". Similarly, ID 9 argued that free access is essential because it enables repeated engagement by diverse local communities rather than only one-off visits by tourists, and ID 10 noted that free museums receive more local and repeat visitors because people feel less pressure and can visit casually.

These responses show that the first objective is met in relation to the positive social reach of free access, but they also qualify it by showing that access does not automatically create inclusion. ID 10 stressed that free access is important but insufficient if the museum still feels culturally or socially distant, and ID 11 similarly argued that public value depends on whether people from different backgrounds actually feel the museum belongs to them. In this sense, the findings suggest that free access expands opportunity and frequency of participation, but the deeper social impact of that access depends on whether the institution can transform entry into recognition, relevance, and belonging.

The second objective was to identify persistent barriers associated with paid-entry models and to assess what kinds of exclusion remain even where general admission is free. The questionnaire answers provide clear support for this objective and show that the barriers are both financial and non-financial. On the financial side, many respondents emphasised that ticket prices strongly shape who visits museums, especially for local residents, families, students, and lower-income groups. ID 1 stated that even small fees can deter these groups because costs accumulate with transport and food, ID 4 said that students and families visibly skip pricier museums, and ID 9 argued that even 10 euros can be enough to stop regular local participation. ID 10 also noted that in cities like Barcelona, if museums want locals to return more than once, price becomes a real issue because cultural visits compete with other leisure spending.

At the same time, the questionnaire makes equally clear that non-financial barriers often remain decisive even when entry is free. ID 10 highlighted language, cultural distance, education level, and the feeling that “this place is not for me” as major obstacles, while ID 11 argued that social distance, class, migration background, and institutional communication can matter even more than price. ID 2 referred to dense scholarly interpretation and elitist perceptions as barriers, ID 4 pointed to confusing wayfinding, language gaps, and intimidating gallery atmospheres, and ID 1 mentioned timing, transport, and staff shortages that reduce the availability of programmes. These responses confirm that the second objective is fully met: the study shows not only that paid entry excludes some groups more strongly, but also that free entry alone does not remove symbolic, linguistic, spatial, psychological, and organisational obstacles to participation.

The third objective was to examine the National Gallery’s contribution to London’s image and to sustainable urban cultural tourism strategies. The answers of the respondents strongly support the idea that museum access policy influences city image and tourism competitiveness, and they also show that this impact is closely connected to questions of local belonging and public legitimacy. ID 1 argued that free museums help make a city feel alive, accessible, and innovative, while ID 4 described free access as sending a “come as you are” message that supports a cool, open urban image. ID 5 added a digital perspective by arguing that open digital access strengthens the city’s global image and makes heritage searchable and visible worldwide, while ID 10 stated that a city that makes culture accessible sends a strong message about what kind of place it is. ID 11 likewise argued that accessible culture makes a city appear more open and democratic, but warned that if access is designed only for tourists, the city loses part of its social reality.

These responses suggest that the third objective is met, but in a critical rather than celebratory sense. The findings show that free-access museums contribute positively to city branding and to the attractiveness of urban cultural tourism, but they also indicate that this contribution is most sustainable when local communities remain central. ID 9 argued that museums should not become only tourism products, and ID 10 stressed that museums should stay connected to the city and its people rather than serving visitors alone. Therefore, the National Gallery's contribution to London's image is best understood not simply as tourism promotion, but as the presentation of London as a city where culture is publicly available, socially meaningful, and embedded in civic life.

The first hypothesis proposed that free access democratises culture and fosters inclusion. The respondents' answers support this hypothesis, but only partially. IDs 1, 4, 9, and 10 all described free access as a crucial factor in broadening participation, encouraging repeat visits, and reducing economic exclusion. ID 1 linked free entry to broad education and family access, ID 4 described it as generating diverse audiences and a sense of ownership, ID 9 saw it as essential for local and class inclusion, and ID 10 argued that free admission helps museums feel more like public spaces. However, the same respondents also insisted that free access alone is not enough. ID 10 explicitly said that free access is insufficient if the museum remains culturally distant, and ID 11 argued that access price is only one small part of inclusion and that institutions must change how they relate to society. For this reason, Hypothesis 1 is confirmed only in a qualified sense: free access fosters inclusion, but does not automatically achieve full democratisation.

The second hypothesis proposed that barriers remain despite free access, particularly in relation to location, awareness, accessibility, and belonging. This hypothesis is strongly confirmed by the questionnaire responses. IDs 10 and 11 repeatedly emphasised symbolic exclusion, language, lack of representation, and social distance; ID 4 highlighted disorientation, non-English access issues, and intimidating atmospheres; ID 1 referred to scheduling problems, transport, digital glitches, and lack of family-friendly timing; and ID 9 linked persistent exclusion to childcare, opening hours, staff shortages, and culturally disconnected narratives. Taken together, these responses show that even when ticket price is removed, many people may still not attend, return, or feel comfortable in museum spaces. Hypothesis 2 is therefore clearly supported.

The third hypothesis proposed that the National Gallery's free model aligns with SDGs 4, 10, and 11 within the context of urban cultural tourism. The respondents' answers strongly support this hypothesis, but again with important qualifications about implementation and institutional support. IDs 1, 9, 10, and 11 all described museums as educational, socially

useful, and city-shaping institutions, and they connected free access to learning, reduced exclusion, community life, and public urban identity. At the same time, IDs 2, 3, 7, and 8 reminded us that access must be balanced with conservation, infrastructure, and funding, while IDs 9, 10, and 11 warned that inclusion weakens when museums become overly tourist-oriented or when staff are under-resourced. Hypothesis 3 is therefore supported, but its success depends on the quality of implementation, not on free entry alone.

In relation to SDG 4 (Quality Education), the respondents consistently described museums as spaces of lifelong, informal, and participatory learning. ID 1 emphasised workshops, family programming, and digital tools that turn passive viewing into active learning, while ID 10 argued that museums support curiosity, dialogue, and learning across different ages. ID 11 also stressed that museums can contribute to adult and intergenerational learning, not only to children's education, and ID 5 extended this point by highlighting digital collections and open access as global educational tools. These responses show that free and open access supports SDG 4 by widening the conditions for cultural learning, although respondents also made clear that educational value depends on mediation, interpretation, and adequate staffing.

In relation to SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities), the findings show strong alignment, but only in a foundational sense. IDs 1, 4, 9, and 10 all argued that free access lowers economic barriers for families, students, and lower-income groups, while ID 9 explicitly framed free local access as a way of reducing class exclusion in cultural participation. Yet IDs 10 and 11 insisted that reducing inequalities requires more than cheaper tickets: it also requires representation, inclusive communication, community partnership, and attention to social distance. ID 6 added another dimension by showing how archival backlogs and inaccessible catalogues can silently reproduce inequality, and ID 5 showed that digital access can reduce some inequalities while also creating new ones through digital exclusion or poor usability. The National Gallery's free model therefore aligns with SDG 10, but only as part of a wider institutional commitment to equality.

In relation to SDG 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities), the alignment is particularly strong. ID 1 described museums as making cities feel alive and accessible, ID 4 linked them to urban energy and public buzz, ID 9 saw free-access museums as helping build social cohesion and a "people's city," and ID 10 described museums as part of community life rather than mere cultural consumption. ID 11 added that museums can help people understand the city as a shared project rather than just a tourist market, which is especially important in cities under strong tourism pressure. These perspectives closely match the thesis argument that the National Gallery contributes to London not only as a tourist

attraction but as a civic anchor institution within sustainable urban cultural tourism. At the same time, respondents such as IDs 1, 7, and 9 also highlighted the risks of overcrowding, staff exhaustion, and tourist dominance, showing that SDG 11 alignment depends on balancing accessibility with operational sustainability and local relevance.

Overall, the response to the research objectives confirms the central argument of the thesis through both the conceptual framework and the direct testimony of museum and heritage professionals. The questionnaire demonstrates that free museum access matters because it reduces direct exclusion, encourages repeated use, strengthens education, and improves the city's democratic cultural image. However, the same respondents also make clear that inclusion is not produced by price alone: it depends on whether museums invest in mediation, community relationships, staff capacity, clear communication, and social relevance. For that reason, the National Gallery's free-access model should be understood as a strong basis for inclusive and sustainable urban cultural tourism, but not as a complete solution in itself.

8.3. Recommendations for future research

The findings of this thesis suggest that future research should move beyond the single-case and cross-sectional design used here and should investigate museum accessibility through broader comparative, temporal, and digital perspectives. The questionnaire responses were especially useful in showing that inclusion is experienced differently depending on institutional type, professional role, city context, and audience profile, which means that the topic would benefit from research designs capable of capturing greater variation over time and across settings. In particular, the respondents' answers point to three especially important directions for future research: multi-city or international studies, longitudinal research on social inclusion impacts, and research on digital and hybrid access strategies.

A first recommendation is to carry out multi-city or international comparative studies on free museum access, inclusion, and urban cultural tourism. This thesis focuses on the National Gallery in London, but the questionnaire shows that professionals working in London, Barcelona, Amsterdam, and rural heritage settings often describe similar issues in different ways, especially around local access, tourism pressure, staffing, and the tension between openness and sustainability. For example, ID 1 and ID 4, both working in large London museums, described free access as central to visitor diversity, educational participation, and an open city image, while ID 9, ID 10, and ID 11, speaking from Barcelona-based experiences, placed stronger emphasis on local communities, anti-tourist pressures, mediation, and the need to prevent museums from becoming spaces primarily for visitors

rather than residents. ID 7, working in Amsterdam, highlighted logistical and infrastructural issues such as crowd flow, interactives, and breakdowns, while IDs 3 and 8, from heritage-site contexts, stressed conservation, terrain, and physical fragility as limits on access models.

These differences suggest that future research should compare how free-access policies operate in different urban and institutional ecosystems rather than assuming a single model of museum inclusion. Comparative research between cities such as London, Barcelona, Amsterdam, Paris, Berlin, or Madrid could examine how museum funding structures, tourist intensity, local cultural policy, transport systems, and housing or gentrification pressures affect the inclusivity of museums. Such studies could also compare national museums, municipal museums, contemporary art institutions, heritage sites, and digital collections platforms, since the questionnaire clearly shows that professionals define “access” very differently depending on whether they work with school groups, collections, archives, front-of-house services, exhibitions, or community heritage. In this sense, future international research would not only test whether current findings are transferable, but also identify which contextual factors most strongly shape whether free museum access becomes socially meaningful in practice.

A second recommendation is to develop longitudinal research on the social inclusion impacts of museum access policies. The current study captures experiences and perceptions at one moment in time, but many of the questionnaire responses imply that inclusion is cumulative, relational, and dependent on repeated engagement rather than one-off attendance. ID 1 argued that free access encourages repeat visits and ongoing learning for families and young people, ID 9 described repeated local engagement as more valuable than one-off tourist visits, and ID 10 noted that free museums allow people to come back casually and gradually develop a relationship with the institution. ID 11 also emphasised that public value depends on whether people from different backgrounds come to feel that the museum belongs to them, which implies a longer-term process of trust-building and recognition rather than an immediate outcome of lower ticket prices.

For that reason, future research should follow visitors, non-visitors, local communities, and museum workers over longer periods to examine whether free access produces lasting changes in participation, belonging, and social inclusion. This could involve panel studies on repeat visitation, longitudinal interviews with first-time and returning visitors, or mixed-methods research tracking how specific groups such as schoolchildren, migrant communities, lower-income households, or infrequent museum users change their perceptions over time. It would also be useful to examine whether positive effects are

sustained when institutional conditions deteriorate. Several respondents, including ID 1, ID 9, ID 10, and ID 11, linked inclusion directly to staffing levels, working conditions, and the quality of mediation, while ID 2 and ID 6 pointed to the importance of research time, cataloguing, and institutional depth. A longitudinal design could therefore investigate whether free-entry policies continue to support inclusion when museums experience overcrowding, staff burnout, funding instability, or shifts toward tourist-oriented programming. This would be especially valuable because the questionnaire repeatedly suggests that inclusion is not only about initial access, but about whether institutions can sustain welcoming, relevant, and socially responsive relationships over time.

A third recommendation concerns digital and hybrid access strategies, which emerged very clearly in the questionnaire as both a major opportunity and a major area of uncertainty. Several respondents viewed digital access as essential to the future of museum inclusion, but they also warned that it cannot simply be treated as a substitute for physical or social presence. ID 5 offered the strongest digital argument, describing open digital collections, multilingual metadata, APIs, and online access as tools that can remove geographical and financial barriers, reach users in more than 150 countries, and extend museum participation far beyond the building. ID 1 similarly emphasised apps, outreach workshops, and hybrid learning as ways to reach schools and remote audiences, while ID 4 described apps and digital maps as important for first-time visitors and crowd navigation. ID 6 saw digital access as an “essential relief valve” for archives, especially where cataloguing backlogs and physical limits restrict use, and ID 7 pointed to VR previews and on-site apps as tools that can improve flow and reduce friction in exhibition settings.

At the same time, the responses also show why future research on digital access must remain critical. ID 5 identified the digital divide, weak search design, incomplete metadata, and platform usability as key barriers, while ID 1 referred to app glitches and uneven digital confidence among users. ID 10 and ID 11 both stressed that digital tools are valuable only when they support, rather than replace, mediation, community work, and the relational side of the museum. Even more critically, ID 8 argued that place-based heritage cannot be overlaid digitally in any complete way, and ID 3 rejected the idea that historic interiors can be meaningfully replaced by screens or virtual interfaces. These answers suggest that future research should examine not only whether digital access expands reach, but for whom, under what conditions, and with what trade-offs in relation to physical experience, local identity, and social interaction.

Future studies could therefore compare different digital and hybrid models such as open collections databases, virtual tours, apps for multilingual interpretation, hybrid school

programmes, digitised archives, remote workshops, and online-offline community engagement formats. They should also assess whether digital participation leads to later physical participation, whether it reaches new audiences or mainly serves existing culturally confident users, and whether it reduces or reproduces inequality. The questionnaire strongly suggests that digital inclusion should not be measured only by clicks, page views, or downloads, but also by educational quality, usability, representation, and the extent to which digital tools support deeper and more continuous relationships with different publics.

Overall, the respondents' answers indicate that future research should treat museum inclusion as a dynamic, context-dependent, and multi-layered process rather than a simple question of ticket price. Comparative international designs would help identify contextual differences, longitudinal studies would clarify whether inclusion is sustained over time, and digital-access research would show how museums can expand participation without losing social depth or local relevance. These directions would strengthen the academic study of museum access and would also provide more useful evidence for cultural policy, institutional planning, and sustainable urban tourism strategies.

8.4. Final reflections

This thesis has shown that free museum access is not only a pricing policy but also a cultural, social, and urban policy instrument with important implications for how cities define public culture, tourism, and inclusion. The findings suggest that free access can strengthen the democratic and educational role of museums, broaden participation, and improve the cultural image of a city, but only when it is supported by stable funding, inclusive management, and sustained attention to the barriers that remain beyond admission price. In that sense, the significance of this study lies not only in its conclusions about the National Gallery, but also in what it reveals about the wider relationship between museum access, city identity, and the governance of urban cultural tourism.

For urban cultural tourism policy, the study suggests that museums should not be treated simply as attractions that increase visitor numbers, but as civic institutions that shape how cultural life is distributed within the city. The questionnaire responses repeatedly showed that professionals understand museums as places that can either reinforce unequal access to culture or help create a more inclusive urban environment, depending on how access, programming, and public value are organised. ID 1 and ID 4 described free museums as spaces that make the city feel alive, accessible, and welcoming, while ID 9, ID 10, and ID 11 insisted that museums should remain rooted in local communities and should not become only instruments of tourism consumption. This is especially important in cities such

as London or Barcelona, where cultural institutions contribute to destination branding but are also under pressure to justify their relevance to residents as well as visitors.

The findings therefore support a policy approach in which free-access museums are understood as part of sustainable urban infrastructure rather than as isolated cultural amenities. If policymakers want museums to contribute meaningfully to inclusive tourism, social cohesion, and city identity, then access policy must be linked to transport, education, outreach, linguistic inclusion, disability access, and neighbourhood-level participation. The responses from ID 10 and ID 11 are particularly important here because they show that the value of accessibility depends on whether people feel socially recognised and represented, not only whether they can physically enter the building. From a tourism-policy perspective, this means that a culturally successful city is not only one that attracts visitors to museums, but one in which museums help residents experience the city as a shared cultural space.

Another policy implication concerns the balance between local publics and tourists. Several respondents warned that museums risk weakening their social role when they orient themselves too strongly toward visitor economies, premium branding, or tourist demand at the expense of local continuity and community connection. ID 9 argued that local communities should remain the “soul” of the museum’s cultural function, ID 10 stressed that museums should serve the people who live in the city first, and ID 11 warned that if access is designed mainly for tourists, the city loses part of its social reality. These responses suggest that sustainable urban cultural tourism policy should move beyond simple growth models and adopt a more balanced framework in which resident access, repeat local use, and community relevance are treated as key indicators of success alongside international visibility and visitor volume.

For museum management, the significance of the study lies in its strong evidence that inclusion depends as much on institutional practice as on admission policy. Across the questionnaire, respondents repeatedly linked successful inclusion to staff capacity, mediation, communication, interpretation, and the ability to create a welcoming environment for different publics. ID 1 emphasised that staff time for innovation is the hidden factor behind inclusive programming, ID 4 pointed to the importance of front-of-house guidance and everyday visitor interaction, and ID 10 and ID 11 both argued that the quality of museum relationships with audiences depends on whether institutions invest seriously in mediation, local partnerships, and social relevance. These responses show that museum managers cannot assume that free access alone will produce inclusion; they must actively design for it.

The findings also underline that management decisions about funding are inseparable from public mission. Respondents were generally open to hybrid funding models, but only when commercial or ticketed elements did not undermine the accessibility of the institution as a whole. ID 1 supported a hybrid structure that protects free general entry while funding additional programmes, ID 10 argued that hybrid models work only if they defend access rather than prioritise paying audiences, and ID 11 warned that the danger of hybridisation is that the paying public gradually becomes the main reference point for the institution. At the same time, ID 2, ID 3, and ID 8 reminded us that conservation, collections care, and physical sustainability also require reliable resources, which means that good museum management must balance openness with quality, preservation, and operational realism.

A further reflection concerns staffing and organisational culture. One of the clearest messages from the questionnaire is that precarious or overstretched staff conditions weaken inclusion, even in museums that are formally open and publicly accessible. ID 9 directly linked precarious contracts to poorer mediation and weaker diversity outcomes, ID 10 said that unstable funding affects the quality of programmes because staff have too little time to work meaningfully with audiences, and ID 11 argued that if workers are not cared for, inclusion becomes only a slogan. This is a major management implication because it means that staff wellbeing, training, and institutional stability are not secondary internal issues; they are part of the museum's social-access strategy itself.

The study also shows that management must think more broadly about what "access" means in practice. Respondents described access not only in terms of free admission, but also through language, opening hours, wayfinding, atmosphere, digital usability, representation, and the adaptability of programming for families, migrants, disabled users, students, and different kinds of local communities. ID 5 highlighted the importance of open digital infrastructure and metadata, ID 6 showed how archive backlogs can silently exclude users, ID 7 focused on design reliability and exhibition usability, and ID 8 reminded us that some heritage settings require measured access because the place itself is fragile. For museum managers, this means that accessibility must be treated as a whole-institution strategy rather than a single department's task or a matter of ticket cost alone.

Taken together, these final reflections suggest that the National Gallery case has significance beyond one museum or one national policy framework. The case illustrates a wider tension faced by many museums in contemporary cities: they are expected to be inclusive public institutions, educational resources, tourist attractions, and financially resilient organisations all at once. The questionnaire answers confirm that professionals do not reject this complexity, but they do insist that public purpose must remain central if

museums are to contribute meaningfully to sustainable urban cultural tourism. Free access emerges from the study as an important foundation for that purpose, but not as a substitute for institutional transformation, community connection, or ethical management.

The broader significance of the thesis is therefore twofold. First, it contributes to the understanding of how access policy shapes not only who visits museums, but also how cities imagine themselves as public, cultural, and democratic spaces. Second, it demonstrates that museum management and cultural tourism policy must be considered together, because decisions about funding, staffing, visitor strategy, and community engagement all shape whether museums function primarily as market-facing attractions or as socially meaningful urban institutions. The evidence presented here suggests that the most sustainable path is not simply free access in itself, but free access embedded within a broader institutional commitment to inclusion, mediation, public value, and long-term civic responsibility.

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APPENDIX

Questionnaire for Museum and Cultural Heritage Professionals

Question 1

Question text: Before we begin, please choose how you would like to be referred to in the bachelor's thesis.

ID 1

I allow only my workplace to be mentioned.

ID 2

I allow only my workplace to be mentioned.

ID 3

I allow my name and workplace to be mentioned.

ID 4

I allow my name and workplace to be mentioned.

ID 5

I allow my name and workplace to be mentioned.

ID 6

I allow only my workplace to be mentioned.

ID 7

I prefer to be referred to using only a general description or pseudonym.

ID 8

I prefer to be referred to using only a general description or pseudonym.

ID 9

I allow only my workplace to be mentioned.

ID 10

I allow only my workplace to be mentioned.

ID 11

I allow my name and workplace to be mentioned.

Question 2

Question text: Professional Background: Could you briefly describe your professional background in museums or the cultural heritage sector, including the kind of work you have done and the types of institutions ...

ID 1

Learning Assistant at Victoria and Albert Museum for 1.5 years now. Before that, 6 months as Learning Intern in the same place. Got my BA in History of Art. Mainly run school workshops, gallery interpretation sessions, and family programming and lots of hands-on activities to make art fun for kids and parents.

ID 2

Curatorial Assistant in Decorative Arts at the Victoria and Albert Museum, 2 years now. Prior to that, 8 months as Curatorial Intern here. Hold an MA in Museum Studies. Work focuses on detailed object research, cataloguing collections, and preparing exhibitions,ensuring scholarly accuracy throughout

ID 3

collections assistant at national trust property in english countryside, 1 year now. before that seasonal visitor assistant same org 1 year. ba history. focus on object care room setups visitor chats in historic houses

ID 4

visitor experience assistant at tate modern now 2 years straight. was front-of-house casual there before that. ba fine art. all about chatting with visitors helping in galleries finding their way round big crowds every day

ID 5

Digital Collections Assistant at the British Museum, 1 year in role. Previously 6 months Digitisation Intern at another major museum. MSc Digital Humanities. Day-to-day: metadata entry, high-res imaging, database management - making millions of artefacts openly accessible online. Practical tech makes heritage global.

ID 6

Archive Assistant at British Museum in 2022. 6-month Archive Intern prior at same institution. MA Archives. Core work: documentation of holdings, detailed cataloguing to standards, researcher support via query handling and access facilitation. Backlogs remain a daily reality.

ID 7

Exhibitions Assistant at museum in Amsterdam, 1.5 years. 6 months Exhibition Intern before. BA Art History. Handle installation support, interpretation panels design, logistics coordination, get shows up on time every time.

ID 8

Heritage Assistant at National Trust site in Gloucestershire, England (2 years in role). Volunteer guide there before starting paid work. BA Heritage Studies. Focus on visitor engagement through outdoor interpretation, site walks, and storytelling about the landscape and buildings. Physical place is core.

ID 9

Educator and moderator at MNAC Barcelona, 3 years now. Started with 1 year coordinating school programs here. Before that, freelance cultural mediator in smaller Barcelona heritage sites. MA in Art Education. Run guided tours, diversity workshops, and community sessions, always pushing for local access and fair work conditions in cultural sector.

ID 10

i have worked as an educator at macba in barcelona, mostly in mediation, school visits and public programmes. before that i was involved in cultural education and guided activities in other museum and heritage spaces in the city. my background is in art and education, and i've spent most of my time trying to make contemporary art feel less distant for different kinds of visitors.

ID 11

i am an anthropologist and i have been involved in several cultural heritage organisations in barcelona, specially around human towers, local traditions and community based heritage projects. over the years i have worked with associations, festivals and heritage initiatives that connect culture with social life in the city. my background is more on participation, identity and collective memory than on classic museum work, but i know the sector quite well.

Question 3

Question text: Museum role and perspective: From your point of view, what is the most important role of a museum or cultural heritage institution in today's society?

ID 1

To inspire lifelong learning through interactive experiences. Especially for young people and families. We bridge the gap between historical art and modern life with digital tools and workshops. But staff time constraints often limit how innovative we can be.

ID 2

Preservation and deep interpretation of cultural objects for public understanding. Museums should prioritise. scholarly depth over trends. In a fast world, they offer thoughtful context that tech can't replicate. superficial innovations risk diluting core value

ID 3

preserve history for future generations. protect fragile objects houses from damage. too much focus on modern gimmicks risks the real heritage

ID 4

make art feel alive and welcoming for everyone. people expect interactives now not just staring. from the floor i see it shifts how folks connect

ID 5

Democratise knowledge through open digital access. Physical limits who sees what; digitisation removes barriers for researchers worldwide. Practical innovation sustains relevance - not just walls but global platforms.

ID 6

Safeguard primary sources for authentic historical research. Enable verified access despite processing delays. Digitisation aids but can't bypass need for complete cataloguing first.

ID 7

Deliver compelling exhibitions that connect past to present practically. Interactives engage but solid logistics make or break visitor flow. Focus delivery over hype.

ID 8

Connect people directly to tangible history and place. Open sites let visitors feel the heritage through walking paths, touching stone walls, breathing the air. Digital can't replicate that grounded experience. Balance with care for the site.

ID 9

Serve local communities first, especially diverse groups who get priced out. Culture belongs to everyone and museums must mediate actively for inclusion. Working conditions for staff are key too; precarious contracts kill quality mediation.

ID 10

for me, the most important role is to create a space for reflection, not just display. a museum should help people think about the present through culture, not only preserve objects. it also has a responsibility to be socially useful and to stay connected to the people around it.

ID 11

the museum should help people understand society, not just objects. it must work as a place for dialogue, memory and also conflict, because heritage is never neutral. it should reflect social diversity and not pretend that everybody experiences culture in the same way.

Question 4

Question text: Museums and urban cultural tourism: In your experience, how do museums contribute to the cultural life, identity, and attractiveness of a city?

ID 1

They make cities vibrant cultural hubs. V&A draws families and tourists with fun events and workshops, boosting London's creative identity. Interactive programs keep locals coming back, not just one-off visitors. Makes the city feel alive and accessible.

ID 2

They anchor a city's historical identity through rigorous exhibitions. V&A exhibitions on design history draw discerning visitors, enhancing London's intellectual appeal. Tourism benefits, but only if quality interpretation sustains repeat interest. Balance needed to avoid over-commercialisation

ID 3

less urban here but historic sites draw respectful tourists. give sense of place roots. cities need that authenticity not flash

ID 4

tate makes london buzz, tourists snap pics families wander. interactive bits keep city feeling fresh locals pop in casual. draws crowds makes streets lively

ID 5

Online collections amplify city identity exponentially - BM's database draws virtual tourists boosting physical visits. Metadata/tags make London heritage searchable globally. Hybrid reach: locals dig deep, tourists preview. Sustainable tourism via digital hooks.

ID 6

Archives underpin credible city narratives - BM docs validate London's imperial past for scholars. Tourism glances at surface; real identity from deep source access. Backlogs limit full contribution.

ID 7

Amsterdam museums pack galleries during shows, tourists flock, locals proud. Good installs boost city buzz but overcrowd kills experience. Balance capacity key.

ID 8

Rural sites like ours root regional identity, drawing tourists who seek authentic England. Urban museums could learn: real landscapes enhance city heritage stories. Contributes quietly through word-of-mouth stays.

ID 9

MNAC anchors Barcelona's identity for locals through free community days, tourists benefit but shouldn't dominate. Diversity programs make city feel inclusive, not just tourist trap. Precarious staff hurts long-term cultural depth.

ID 10

museums are part of the identity of a city, especially when they are connected to the local context and not only to tourism. they can make a city feel more alive and more thoughtful. in barcelona, they also help people understand the city beyond the postcard image.

ID 11

in barcelona, museums are one part of a much bigger cultural ecosystem. they can help shape the image of the city, but they should not replace local living traditions or neighbourhood culture. when they are connected to the social reality of the city, they can strengthen identity instead of just serving tourism.

Question 5

Question text: Free access and public value: What is your opinion on free museum access, and what do you think it contributes to the public value of museums?

ID 1

Totally positive. Free entry lets everyone in, from school kids to families, creating real public value through broad education. It encourages repeat visits and sparks curiosity without barriers. Downside is it can get crowded, straining our workshop schedules. Still worth it for inclusivity.

ID 2

Free access has merit for democratizing culture, adding to public value via broader exposure. However, it strains resources for collection care and research. Ideal in principle; practically, risks shallow engagement without funding safeguards.

ID 3

ok for locals who respect site. but public value comes from preservation first—free crowds can harm objects. need funds to protect

ID 4

free is ace and brings all sorts in young old diverse. public value skyrockets cos everyone feels its theirs. see happier mixes leave smiling

ID 5

Free physical + open digital = maximum public value. Digitised collections let anyone query from home - equity in action. Crowds ok if servers scale; real value in usage analytics showing broad impact.

ID 6

Free access to reading rooms supports genuine inquiry, enhancing value for serious users. Increases query volume straining understaffed desks. Sustainable only with targeted funding for processing.

ID 7

Free fills rooms fast, good public value if infrastructure copes. Strains installs tho, more wear on panels interactives. Needs backup power generators.

ID 8

Free access builds local ownership and families return seasonally. Adds value as community anchor. But sites wear faster; measured access sustains long-term public good. Fair balance needed.

ID 9

Essential. Locals from diverse backgrounds deserve culture without paying. Builds real public value through repeated engagement, not one-off tourist snaps. Staff burnout from crowds is issue, needs better contracts to sustain.

ID 10

i think free access is important, especially for local people. it helps remove one of the most obvious barriers and makes the museum feel more like a public space. but free access alone is not enough if the museum still feels culturally or socially distant.

ID 11

free access is important, of course, but it is only one small step. if the museum remains socially distant, free entry alone does not make it inclusive. public value depends on whether people from different backgrounds really feel the museum belongs to them.

Question 6

Question text: Paid entry and audience behaviour: Based on your experience, how do ticketed museums differ from free-entry museums in terms of visitor behaviour, audience composition, or visit frequency?

ID 1

Ticketed ones see more committed visitors who stay longer, engage deeply with exhibits, fewer quick browses. Free entry brings diverse families and schools, higher frequency but shorter, busier visits. Composition-wise, free skews local and young; paid more tourists and adults.

ID 2

Ticketed museums attract more dedicated visitors (longer dwells, deeper interactions with labels/objects) Free entry yields higher volume but fleeting visits, mixed demographics including casuals. Frequency: paid encourages returns for value; free more one-offs

ID 3

ticketed=more careful visitors stay longer mind objects. free=busy quick crowds families kids touch stuff. less repeat from tourists who paid

ID 4

ticketed folks more chill linger chat art deep. free=quick ins outs families rushing kids everywhere busier vibe. tourists dominate paid locals free more

ID 5

Ticketed: niche deep divers (scholars); free: broad casuals + repeat locals. Digital free entry shifts all - high frequency online, diverse global comp via IP tracking. Physical ticketed skew tourists; free locals frequent. Data proves it.

ID 6

Ticketed galleries: casual browsers. Archive access (free to researchers): purposeful, note-taking sessions, repeat based on project timelines. Demographics skew academic/professional vs tourist.

ID 7

Ticketed: calmer crowds, linger at interactives, families less chaotic. Free: surges at opening, quick throughput, diverse but distracted. Tickets predict flow better for logistics.

ID 8

Ticketed visitors value time here more - slower walks, deeper questions. Families dominate free days with kids running. Composition: paid skews couples/older, free locals frequent but brief.

ID 9

Ticketed: mostly tourists lingering superficially, less local diversity. Free: families, immigrants, students return often, richer interactions in workshops. Paid excludes working-class Barcelonans who can't afford regular visits.

ID 10

when museums are free, you usually get more local visitors and more repeat visits. people feel less pressure and sometimes come just to spend time or discover something new. when there is a ticket price, the visit tends to feel more planned and more “special,” but also more selective.

ID 11

when there is a ticket, you usually see a more selective public. people with fewer resources or less cultural confidence visit less often. but the difference is not only economic, it is also social and symbolic, because some people simply do not feel that museums are for them.

Question 7

Question text: Access and inclusion: When you think about access to museums, what kinds of barriers do you believe are most important for different audiences?

ID 1

For families and schools, time and transport are huge and workshops fill up fast. Digital barriers like app glitches hit non-tech groups. Physical access ok at V&A but scheduling conflicts exclude many.

ID 2

intellectual barriers like dense scholarship deter non-specialists. Physical access improving, but fragile objects limit handling. Time for families conflicts with research schedules

ID 3

old buildings stairs no ramps. rural location hard to reach. families with kids need space but sites fragile

ID 4

crowds confuse newbies esp non english speakers. wayfinding sucks without good signs. families need kid zones or they bail

ID 5

Digital divide tops: no broadband/devices/skills. Physical secondary now - metadata gaps exclude non-experts. Rural/global users need robust APIs not just pretty sites.

ID 6

Incomplete catalogues - researchers waste hours on false leads. Appointment-only slots fill fast. Fragile docs limit handling time per user.

ID 7

Narrow install spaces block wheelchairs sometimes. Interactive buttons too high/low. Peak hour crushes and time slots solve.

ID 8

Uneven paths and hills exclude mobility-impaired. Weather shuts outdoor interpretation. Rural buses infrequent for locals without cars.

ID 9

Prices first for locals/families. Then language/cultural disconnects for immigrants. Working parents can't attend daytime, need evenings. Staff shortages from bad conditions mean fewer sessions.

ID 10

the first barriers are not always economic. language, cultural distance, education level and the feeling of “this place is not for me” are very important. also, if the programmes are not designed for different realities, access remains limited even if the entrance is free.

ID 11

the price matters, yes, but social distance matters even more. language, education, class, migration background and the way institutions communicate are very important. many people do not enter because they do not recognise themselves in the place.

Question 8

Question text: Financial barriers: How important do you think admission prices are in shaping who visits museums, especially for local residents, families, students, or lower-income groups?

ID 1

Very important bcs prices deter locals, families, students big time. Even small fees add up with travel and food. Free access changes everything for lower-income groups, letting them prioritise learning over cost.

ID 2

moderately important, fees filter out impulse visits from locals/families, skewing toward tourists. Students/low-income hit hardest; targeted waivers help but complicate ops. Not the sole factor, but significant

ID 3

important yeah families locals skip if pricey. but revenue keeps lights on objects safe

ID 4

huge. students families skip pricey ones i see it. locals want repeat easy free changes that daily

ID 5

Big for physical-only; digital open access nullifies it entirely. Prices gatekeep bodies not minds - students worldwide use our DB free daily. Hybrid wins.

ID 6

Minimal for archives (researcher passes free); gallery fees indirectly affect via family priorities. Students benefit most from waivers but still face travel costs.

ID 7

Prices filter families big time, see empty kid hours. Locals want free days but then logistics nightmare.

ID 8

Fairly important. Locals grumble at fees but understand upkeep costs. Families hit hardest; concessions help but not enough for regulars.

ID 9

Critical, even 10€ kills repeat visits from locals. Families choose free culture over paid. Students/lower-income completely sidelined without free policies.

ID 10

they matter a lot, especially for families and younger people. in cities like barcelona, if you want locals to come more than once, price becomes a real issue. for many people, museum visits are part of their leisure time, and they have to choose carefully where they spend money.

ID 11

they are important, especially for repeated visits. for a family or someone with a low income, even a small ticket can be enough to decide not to go. but again, it is not the only barrier, and sometimes the symbolic barrier is stronger than the financial one.

Question 9

Question text: Non-financial barriers: In your view, what other barriers can still prevent people from visiting museums even when admission is free?

ID 1

Lack of family-friendly timing, like evening slots. Intimidating if no interactive elements... static labels bore kids. Transport costs and awareness via social media gaps. Staff shortages mean fewer workshops too.

ID 2

Elitist perceptions from jargon-heavy interpretation. Inflexible hours clash with work/school. Lack of contextual depth alienates diverse groups without guided depth.

ID 3

weather remote roads. no parking. fragile rooms cant handle big groups

ID 4

lost in big spaces no maps. language gaps. feeling out of place if too posh vibe

ID 5

Poor UX/search on digital platforms. Incomplete metadata hides gems. Physical: travel emissions - virtual eliminates. Server downtime kills access.

ID 6

Backlog-induced gaps: 40% holdings uncatalogued, invisible to searches. Rigid ID checks. Restricted photography policies frustrate note-taking.

ID 7

Tech fails mid-show dead screens kill interest. Poor lighting hides panels. No space for strollers.

ID 8

Muddy trails after rain. Lack of indoor fallback. Intimidating if no personal welcome on arrival.

ID 9

Eurocentric narratives alienate diverse locals. No childcare or evening hours. Precarious staff = inconsistent welcoming atmosphere. Transport costs still bite.

ID 10

the main ones are language, feeling excluded, and not seeing yourself reflected in the content. also opening hours, transport, and lack of time are very real. if the communication is not clear or the space feels too academic, people stay away.

ID 11

the museum language, the building atmosphere, the lack of representation and the feeling of not belonging. also opening hours, location and lack of time are relevant. if the museum does not speak to people in a meaningful way, free access changes very little.

Question 10

Question text: Audience diversity: From your experience, what makes it easier or harder for museums to attract a diverse audience?

ID 1

Easier with targeted family workshops, digital interactives, multilingual audio. Harder when programs are too academic or understaffed, can't run enough sessions. Innovation draws diversity; old-school repels it.

ID 2

Easier: exhibitions with layered narratives appealing broadly. Harder: over-reliance on visuals without substance; institutional inertia resists change. True diversity needs curatorial evolution cautiously.

ID 3

local events talks help. hard with stairs old setup and excludes wheelchairs elderly. preservation limits changes

ID 4

easy with events interactives chill staff. hard if galleries feel cold no engagement -->people ghost

ID 5

Open APIs/multilingual metadata = instant diversity (analytics show 150+ countries). Hard: siloed proprietary DBs, bad imaging. Digitise smart, attract all.

ID 6

Easier: online finding aids with diverse source tags. Harder: Eurocentric default catalogues exclude global researchers. Processing prioritisation key.

ID 7

Multisensory installs draw everyone. Hard when one interactive breaks and whole group bails. Test everything pre-open.

ID 8

Themed history walks draw locals wide. Harder: terrain limits diverse abilities; traditional narratives feel distant to some. Adapt stories carefully.

ID 9

Easier: free diversity workshops in community languages. Harder: tourist priority + underpaid staff rushing groups. Stable contracts = better trained mediators = diversity.

ID 10

it becomes easier when the museum listens to its surroundings and works with people outside the institution. local partnerships, educational projects and mediation really help. it becomes harder when museums repeat the same language and the same audiences over and over again.

ID 11

it is easier when institutions work with communities instead of only talking about them. in barcelona, the link with local associations, schools and neighbourhood life is very important. it is harder when museums stay closed in a professional or middle class bubble.

Question 11

Question text: Local versus tourist audiences: How do you think museums can balance the needs of local visitors and tourists at the same time?

ID 1

Free family days and school tie-ins for locals; guided digital tours and evening events for tourists. Time-slot bookings help manage crowds. Flexible programming serves both without overlap stress.

ID 2

Locals via members' previews/evening lectures; tourists daytime self-guide. Segmented programming preserves depth for both. Avoids dilution.

ID 3

locals free days small groups. tourists guided tours bigger fees. time slots protect rooms

ID 4

locals late nights free hangs. tourists day maps audio. mix works if flow smooth

ID 5

Digital serves both 24/7 - geo-tags local events, VR tours tourists. Physical: free locals anytime, timed tourist slots. Data-driven balance.

ID 6

Locals: extended researcher memberships. Tourists: digitised highlights online. Physical archives prioritise verified projects over sightseeing.

ID 7

Locals: preview nights quiet. Tourists: audio guides peak days. Staggered entry protects installs.

ID 8

Locals: community gatherings off-peak. Tourists: guided trails peak season. Natural site rhythms handle it.

ID 9

Free local hours + paid tourist slots. Community-led programming evenings. Prioritize locals always, they're the soul of Barcelona culture.

ID 10

they need to think of both, but not in the same way. tourists often need orientation and context, while locals need continuity and reasons to return. a good balance is to offer programmes that are open to everyone but still rooted in the city and its people.

ID 11

they have to prioritise local communities without excluding visitors. tourists will always come, especially in a city like barcelona, but the museum should not become only a tourism product. the key is to make the local public feel that the museum is also theirs.

Question 12

Question text: Visitor satisfaction: In your opinion, what factors most strongly influence whether people leave a museum feeling satisfied or welcome?

ID 1

Friendly, knowledgeable staff in workshops. Hands-on digital tools and clear family trails. Quick feedback loops like app comments help us improve on the spot.

ID 2

Rich object interpretation and contextual stories. Quiet reflection spaces. Staff expertise over volume.

ID 3

tidy rooms good stories from staff. no crowds damaging things

ID 4

us front staff smiles directions. interactive spots easy nav. bad flow kills it

ID 5

Frictionless search + downloadable high-res = delight. Physical: fast wifi + app integration. Analytics confirm.

ID 6

Rapid relevant document retrieval. Clear handling protocols. Realistic backlog wait time notifications upfront.

ID 7

Everything works, lights panels interactives flow. One glitch and complaints roll.

ID 8

Personal chats with staff on site history. Clear paths and benches for pauses. Weather-proof backup stories.

ID 9

Personal connection from well-supported staff. Relevant diverse narratives. Free entry signals "this is yours too".

ID 10

i'd say it is a mix of how they are treated, how the content is explained, and whether they feel the museum respects their background. people leave satisfied when they feel included, not just informed. attention from staff also makes a huge difference.

ID 11

they feel welcome when the language is clear, the staff is respectful and the visit connects with their own experience. satisfaction comes from recognition, not only from information. people want to feel that the museum is speaking with them, not at them.

Question 13

Question text: Inclusivity initiatives: What kinds of activities, programmes, or strategies have you seen that successfully make museums more inclusive or more welcoming to different groups?

ID 1

School holiday workshops with touch objects and VR art exploration (kids mainly). Family storytelling sessions in multiple languages. Sensory backpacks for neurodiverse visitors work brilliantly.

ID 2

Revised labelling with multiple entry points (scholarly/lay). Loans from diverse collections. Carefully handled handling sessions proven without compromising objects

ID 3

volunteer locals sharing history. quiet hours small tours. nothing flashy

ID 4

pop up chats artist talks family zones. multilingual guides. visitors light up

ID 5

Open Access CC0 releases - educators worldwide remix. Multilingual auto-translate metadata. API grants for community projects. Usage spikes prove impact.

ID 6

Priority digitisation for underrepresented histories (e.g. colonial records). Researcher workshops on archive navigation. Extended access for community historians - measurable uptick in diverse queries.

ID 7

Height-adjustable touchscreens. Multilingual QR panels. Pop-up chill zones during installs to visitors stay longer.

ID 8

Gentle access trails with audio posts. Local storytelling evenings. Volunteer diversity reflects community (works well).

ID 9

Free neighborhood workshops with local artists/immigrant voices. Multilingual family days. Paid staff training on cultural sensitivity.

ID 10

workshops with schools, family activities, community projects and mediation with different entry points usually work well. also activities that allow people to speak, respond or participate instead of only receive information. museums become much more open when they stop thinking only in terms of exhibition and start thinking in terms of relationship.

ID 11

community projects, school programmes, activities in neighbourhoods and participatory formats usually work best. also anything that brings heritage closer to everyday life, not only to expert knowledge. museums become more inclusive when they stop assuming a single public.

Question 14

Question text: Education and learning: How do museums contribute to education and lifelong learning, in your view?

ID 1

Hands-on workshops turn passive viewing into active learning for all ages. Digital tools extend reach beyond walls. Sparks curiosity that lasts, especially if we innovate despite time limits.

ID 2

Via specialist research access and exhibition narratives building knowledge layers. Sustains lifelong inquiry better than digital superficiality.

ID 3

hands on history talks site visits. real objects teach best no screens needed

ID 4

casual drops ins spark chats turn into real interest. interactives make it stick no lectures

ID 5

Endless queryable datasets fuel self-directed learning. APIs integrate into curricula globally. Physical workshops optional bonus - digital scales infinitely.

ID 6

Primary source immersion teaches evidentiary thinking. Online catalogues extend self-service learning despite physical limits.

ID 7

Well-built interactives teach hands-on - kids remember pressing buttons. Panels reinforce if durable.

ID 8

On-site immersion through landscape stories beats apps. Repeat visits deepen family knowledge over years. Traditional but effective.

ID 9

Mediated sessions spark critical thinking for diverse adults/kids. Free access makes lifelong learning possible without class barriers.

ID 10

they are important because they offer another way of learning, one that is not only formal or academic. museums can support curiosity, critical thinking and dialogue. they are especially useful when they connect with everyday life and with different ages.

ID 11

they can contribute a lot, especially when they help people think critically about identity, history and society. museums are not only for children or for formal learning, they can also support adult education and intergenerational learning. that part is often underestimated.

Question 15

Question text: Social inequalities: How do you think museums can help reduce inequalities in cultural participation, or, if they do not act carefully, how might they reproduce those inequalities?

ID 1

Free interactive programs level the field for underserved kids. But without them, we reproduce gaps, only the privileged get deep experiences. Prioritise outreach to break the cycle.

ID 2

Targeted loans/programs bridge gaps thoughtfully. Poorly: reinforce via eurocentric narratives. Needs vigilant curatorial balance.

ID 3

free local access helps. but damage from crowds excludes everyone long term

ID 4

free interactives pull in underserved. stuffy labels push em out tho

ID 5

Open digitisation erases geo/wealth barriers. Careful: paywall premium content recreates divides. Always default open.

ID 6

Strategic backlog clearance for marginalised histories reduces gaps. Default: privileged topics processed first perpetuates bias.

ID 7

Universal design installs help all. Cheap tech breaks exclude low-income who can't afford alternatives.

ID 8

Local free events bridge gaps. Rural focus risks excluding urban poor unless outreach.

ID 9

Free local programs reduce gaps directly. But tourist-focused + precarious contracts reproduce elitism. Diverse locals feel like intruders.

ID 10

they can reduce inequalities if they create access, representation and real opportunities to participate. but if they keep the same canons, the same language and the same audiences, they just reproduce the same exclusions. sometimes museums think they are being open when in reality they are only opening to a small part of society.

ID 11

they can reduce inequalities if they actively work to include people who have been historically excluded. but if they keep the same discourse, the same audiences and the same social codes, they reproduce inequality very easily. access is not just about opening the door, it is about changing the institution.

Question 16

Question text: Sustainable cities: In what ways do you think museums can support sustainable and inclusive cities?

ID 1

Community workshops on green design in art history. Partner with local schools for eco-themed family days. Digital access reduces travel emissions while building inclusive urban pride.

ID 2

Stable collections stewardship underpins urban heritage identity. Long-term loans foster regional equity.

ID 3

protect green sites teach heritage care. rural focus but same for urban green spaces

ID 4

busy streets safe vibes from crowds. local events build community

ID 5

Virtual collections slash travel CO2. Shared digital platforms foster urban research hubs. Data for inclusive planning.

ID 6

Shared digital archive consortia cut duplication costs. Local history projects via open catalogues build community ownership.

ID 7

Modular exhibit systems reuse materials. Pop-up shows decentralise crowds from centre.

ID 8

Model land stewardship teaches green heritage. Rural sites offset urban density with nature links.

ID 9

Free culture hubs build social cohesion. Stable jobs in culture sector support local economy. Diversity mediation prevents gentrification tensions.

ID 10

they can do it by becoming spaces of community life, not just cultural consumption. museums can help people connect with the city, with its history, and with each other. they can also support more sustainable urban culture if they work with local networks instead of only tourist logic.

ID 11

by working with local communities, supporting social cohesion and giving space to different voices. museums can help people understand the city as a shared project, not just as a market or a tourist destination. that is especially important in cities under pressure like barcelona.

Question 17

Question text: Funding and sustainability: From your perspective, how do funding models influence the ability of museums to remain both financially stable and publicly accessible?

ID 1

Free models need strong gov/donor support to fund innovations without cutting staff. Paid adds stability but risks accessibility. Hybrid lets us run more workshops sustainably. Time for staff is the real crunch.

ID 2

Ticket revenue stabilises research/cataloguing essential for access. Pure free demands subsidies risking cuts. Hybrid prudent with caution.

ID 3

tickets fund repairs care. free starves maintenance. sites close

ID 4

free keeps doors open energy high. paid funds fancy but gates people

ID 5

Grants fund digitisation scale; tickets supplement. Open access drives donations/partnerships long-term. Proprietary kills sustainability.

ID 6

Project grants tackle backlogs best; general free entry doesn't fund cataloguers. Hybrid: researcher fees for premium services atop free base access.

ID 7

Tickets buy reliable tech. Free needs sponsors for spares, downtime kills rep.

ID 8

Memberships blend access and stability best. Pure free erodes paths: tickets fund repairs.

ID 9

Public funding for free local access + stable contracts essential. Tourist tickets supplement but can't rely solely, locals get displaced.

ID 10

funding shapes everything: staff, programming, outreach, even the type of public a museum ends up serving. if the model depends too much on income generation, accessibility becomes weaker. public support is essential if the institution wants to keep a social role.

ID 11

funding models shape the whole institution, from staffing to programming. if the museum depends too much on income from visitors, it tends to become less open socially. public funding is important if we really want museums to work as public institutions.

Question 18

Question text: Free-entry museums: What do you think are the main advantages and disadvantages of free-entry museums?

ID 1

Advantages: Broad access, diverse learning, public good vibe. Disadvantages: Overcrowding, stretched staff, harder to fund top interactives.

ID 2

Advantages: wide exposure. Disadvantages: underfunds conservation, superficial use

ID 3

adv: locals come often. dis: wear tear damage risk high

ID 4

adv diverse buzz. dis chaos rushes

ID 5

Adv: massive data reach/usage. Dis: physical overcrowd strains imaging schedules.

ID 6

Adv: Low barrier for emerging scholars. Dis: Diverts funds from processing to crowd control.

ID 7

Adv: volume tests installs real-time. Dis: overloads wiring panels fast.

ID 8

Advantage: fosters belonging. Disadvantage: accelerates site erosion.

ID 9

Advantage: true diversity, local ownership. Disadvantage: needs strong public funding or staff suffers.

ID 10

the main advantage is access, clearly. the disadvantage is that if the funding is not stable, the museum may have fewer resources for staff and programmes. free access only works well when it is supported seriously.

ID 11

the main advantage is obvious: more people can come in. the disadvantage is that if the institution is not supported properly, free entry can be more symbolic than real. it does not solve deeper social inequalities by itself.

Question 19

Question text: Ticketed museums: What do you think are the main advantages and disadvantages of museums that depend more heavily on ticket income?

ID 1

Advantages: Steady revenue for quality programs/staff. Disadvantages: Excludes locals/families, less diversity in education reach.

ID 2

Advantages: funds depth in collections/interpretation. Disadvantages: narrows local access.

ID 3

adv: money for conservation. dis: fewer poor families

ID 4

adv calm quality. dis misses locals

ID 5

Adv: project revenue. Dis: throttles broad digital adoption.

ID 6

Adv: Capital projects (digitisation scanners). Dis: Gallery focus starves archive ops.

ID 7

Adv: funds quality rigging. Dis: locals ghost quieter shows.

ID 8

Advantage: preserves fabric. Disadvantage: deters spontaneous locals.

ID 9

Advantage: short-term cash. Disadvantage: excludes locals, feels tourist-only.

ID 10

the advantage is that they may have more direct income for certain activities. the problem is that they can become less accessible and more selective in practice. that can create a museum that is rich in appearance but poor in public reach.

ID 11

they can generate resources, but they also risk reinforcing social differences. a paid museum often attracts the people who already have cultural and economic access. that is a serious limitation if the goal is inclusion.

Question 20

Question text: Hybrid models: In your view, what makes a hybrid funding model successful, and what risks or challenges can it create?

ID 1

Success: Free general + paid workshops/specials balances access and income. Risks: Confusing pricing, admin overload on busy staff. Needs clear comms.

ID 2

Tiered access (free core, paid depth)success via clarity. Risks: visitor confusion, admin burden.

ID 3

seasonal tickets locals free. risk confusion lines

ID 4

free days paid specials. risk lines confusion

ID 5

Freemium digital (basic free, API premium) scales perfectly. Risk: walled gardens confuse users.

ID 6

Free core access + paid expedited services succeeds via usage tiering. Risk: alienates casual researchers if base too restrictive.

ID 7

Free base + paid interactives zone. Risk: signage confusion clogs flow.

ID 8

Seasonal/local passes succeed. Risk: overcomplicates entry.

ID 9

Free for locals/residents + tourist fees works if policed well. Challenge: locals still deterred by hassle.

ID 10

a hybrid model can work if it protects access while also keeping the institution viable. the risk is that it becomes too complicated or ends up prioritising the paying public. the balance has to be carefully managed.

ID 11

it can work if there is a clear commitment to accessibility and public service. the danger is that the free part becomes secondary and the paying audience becomes the main reference. the model needs to be guided by social purpose, not only financial logic.

Question 21

Question text: Staff and operations: Based on your experience, how do funding models affect staff work, programme planning, and day-to-day operations in museums?

ID 1

Free ramps up workshop demand, exciting but exhausting, more casuals needed. Paid allows planned deep programs but fewer slots. Funding ties directly to our time for innovation.

ID 2

Paid affords research time; free pressures volume over quality. Planning skews to crowd control.

ID 3

free=constant cleanup crowds. paid=manageable steady work

ID 4

free=nonstop help mode fun hectic. paid=space to chat proper

ID 5

Grants = steady digitisation pipelines. Tickets fund kit but distract core mission. Digital metrics guide ops efficiently.

ID 6

Free access = query overload, backlog growth. Paid projects = focused sprints but gaps elsewhere. Consistent cataloguer funding essential.

ID 7

Free: constant fixes crowds. Paid: scheduled maintenance smooth. Logistics win.

ID 8

Free days: crowd management outdoors. Paid: focused interpretation groups.

ID 9

Free access = high volume, joy but exhaustion on precarious contracts. Paid = calmer but locals vanish, less rewarding mediation. Need permanent staff.

ID 10

they affect everything, honestly. with better funding, there is more time to prepare programmes properly and to work with audiences in a meaningful way. with unstable funding, staff often have to do too much with too little, and that affects quality.

ID 11

they affect it a lot, because they determine how much time and energy can be dedicated to mediation, research and community work. precarious funding usually means precarious staff, and that affects the quality of the institution. if workers are not cared for, inclusion becomes just a slogan.

Question 22

Question text: City image and tourism competitiveness: How do you think a museum's access policy can influence the image of a city and its attractiveness as a cultural tourism destination?

ID 1

Free positions city as inclusive innovator, V&A style draws global families. Paid signals premium but risks 'elitist' tag, hurting local tourism ties.

ID 2

Paid policies signal premium quality, elevating tourism prestige. Free risks mass-market dilution.

ID 3

paid shows value authenticity. free looks cheap risky

ID 4

free says come as you are. cool trendy pull

ID 5

Open digital = cutting-edge innovative city brand. Paywalls scream outdated. BM datasets make London tech-heritage leader.

ID 6

Deep archive access brands city scholarly, attracting conferences. Surface free entry boosts casual tourism but dilutes gravitas.

ID 7

Free blockbuster = must-see hype. Paid premium = sophisticated draw. Amsterdam mixes both.

ID 8

Balanced access signals authentic welcome. Draws discerning tourists.

ID 9

Free local access makes Barcelona "people's city", attractive to conscious tourists. Paid-only feels elitist, loses authenticity.

ID 10

it can change a lot. a city that makes culture accessible sends a strong message about what kind of place it is. if museums are only for tourists or only for people with money, the city loses part of its cultural identity.

ID 11

it can influence the image very strongly. a city that offers accessible culture appears more open and democratic. but if access is only designed for tourists, then the city loses part of its social reality.

Question 23

Question text: Digital and alternative access: How important do you think digital, hybrid, or outreach-based forms of access are for museums today?

ID 1

Super important! Outreach workshops and apps extend learning to schools/remote. Hybrid future: saves staff time while scaling impact hugely.

ID 2

Useful supplements for outreach (no substitute for object study) Cautiously integrate.

ID 3

not much historic interiors need real visit. digital cant replace touch feel

ID 4

apps maps huge for first timers. hybrid wins

ID 5

Mission critical - 80% usage non-physical now. Hybrid future or die.

ID 6

Essential relief valve for backlogs - 70% queries now digital-first. Hybrid prevents physical collapse.

ID 7

VR previews reduce no-shows. On-site apps guide traffic past fragile installs. Pretty critical.

ID 8

Supplementary for previews. Place-based core can't be overlaid digitally.

ID 9

Good supplement for remote locals but can't replace physical community feel. Outreach to neighborhoods key.

ID 10

they are very important, especially to reach people who cannot always come physically. digital tools can expand access, but they should not replace the human and social side of the museum. outreach and mediation are still essential.

ID 11

they are useful, especially for reaching people who cannot come physically. but digital access should not replace real social work or local engagement. it is a support, not the solution.

Question 24

Question text: Unexpected factors: In your experience, what factors other than funding most strongly shape who visits museums and how they are used?

ID 1

Social media trends explode family visits overnight. Teacher recommendations drive school groups. Post-pandemic, hybrid digital pulls non-traditional crowds.

ID 2

Exhibition theme relevance and scholarly buzz. Media depth coverage.

ID 3

weather site condition. school trips

ID 4

insta trends staff vibes that day

ID 5

Search engine rankings + social shares of digitised gems. Viral metadata moments explode traffic.

ID 6

Catalogue granularity and researcher networks. One good finding aid sparks chains of visits.

ID 7

Social media pics of working interactives. Bad review one glitch = empty days.

ID 8

Weather and wildflowers timing. Local gossip networks.

ID 9

Word-of-mouth in local communities. Staff morale, happy mediators draw repeats.

ID 10

the institution’s discourse, the way it communicates, and whether people feel invited. also the city context matters a lot. if the museum is connected to everyday life, people use it differently.

ID 11

education, social background, trust in institutions and whether the museum is connected to community life. also the way the city itself is organised matters a lot. culture is never separated from social structure.

Question 25

Question text: Best practices: If you could recommend one or two best practices for museums that want to be both inclusive and financially sustainable, what would they be?

ID 1

Partner with schools for funded interactives. Offer tiered digital/physical access. free entry + premium workshops.

ID 2

Balanced ticketing with scholarly free tiers. Rigorous narrative diversification.

ID 3

limit numbers protect objects. local volunteers

ID 4

train us floor staff inclusive. free interactives

ID 5

CC0 open release + public APIs. Grant-funded bulk digitisation.

ID 6

Backlog triage by equity impact & Researcher co-designed metadata standards.

ID 7

Prototype all tech 2 weeks pre-open. Modular panels for quick fixes.

ID 8

Community volunteer guides. Tiered access by season.

ID 9

Permanent staff contracts for quality mediation. Free access for locals.

ID 10

work with local communities and invest in mediation. that is probably one of the most effective ways to stay socially relevant and build a stable audience. also, protect staff conditions, because that shapes the quality of everything else.

ID 11

work with local communities in a real way, and invest in staff who understand mediation and social diversity. also stop thinking that inclusion is only about cheaper tickets. it has to do with discourse, representation and relationships.

Question 26

Question text: Final reflection: Is there anything else you think is important for understanding the relationship between museums, inclusion, funding, and sustainable urban cultural tourism?

ID 1

Staff time for innovation is the hidden key, fund that, and everything flows: inclusive programs, happy visitors, thriving cities. Digital tools amplify it all despite constraints.

ID 2

Prioritise curatorial depth. funds and inclusion follow authentic interpretation, sustaining cities long-term. Avoid tech distractions.

ID 3

preservation first or nothing left for anyone. crowds kill heritage

ID 4

listen to visitors daily, they tell you what works. interactives funding key for city vibe

ID 5

Digitisation is the great equaliser - funds follow usage data, inclusion scales exponentially, cities win global mindshare. Physical is bonus now.

ID 6

Backlogs silently gatekeep more than any fee - clear them strategically or inclusion remains theoretical. Digitisation buys time but cataloguing closes deals.

ID 7

Exhibits that actually function day 30+ = inclusion magic. Tech limits real and overpromise kills trust, cities lose tourism edge.

ID 8

Physical place endures. Fund its care first. Tradition with welcome sustains tourism roots.

ID 9

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ID 10

yes, i think people often separate these things when they are actually linked. if a museum wants to be inclusive, it needs enough funding and decent working conditions. and if it wants to be relevant in a city, it has to serve the people who live there first, not only the people who visit it.

ID 11

yes, i think the biggest mistake is to reduce inclusion to access price. ticket cost is only one piece, and a small one. if a museum wants to be truly inclusive, it has to transform how it relates to society, especially to groups that have been historically outside the cultural centre.

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