

University Museum: Its Relevance as an Enhanced Learning Ecosystem for Higher Education

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ABSTRACT

The most interesting museum exhibitions are fun exhibitions, and when visitors start to feel that there are many things to explore and benefit from their tours. Like other countries, Malaysia has a wide variety of museums, one of which is the university museum that serves as a learning and research centre. With the establishment of MyMuse (Museums and Galleries of Malaysian Public Universities), efforts are made to meet academic needs. However, the role of university museums and galleries in this contemporary era is constantly changing over time. The 21st-century university museums should now try to improve relations with the university and local communities and provide extraordinary exhibits and collections to be accepted internationally. The objectives of this study are to explicate to what extent the university museums and galleries are still relevant in benefiting the surrounding community and to identify the methods used in the process of skill development, learning experiences, and exploration of ideas at Malaysian university museums. A qualitative approach was employed through interviews involving 19 museum personnel from 13 university museums and galleries throughout Malaysia. From the study, it is observed that the university museums and galleries strive to achieve the objectives set by the management in ensuring that they remain relevant, playing their roles, providing students with information, and enabling them to conduct research. These institutions can now produce dynamic exhibitions although some may have barriers in terms of expertise and expenditure. Nonetheless, these museums are still trying to expand the methods of operation in more economical ways and benefit many.

Keywords: *University Museum, Relevance, Learning Ecosystem, Learning Skills, Higher Education*

INTRODUCTION

The main feature of the most interesting museums and museum exhibitions is being able to create excitement. Besides that, a visit to the museum will be more meaningful for visitors when they feel that there are many things to be explored and gain new benefits and knowledge through their visits. Many museum lovers are aware of the existence of various types of museums worldwide. Like other countries, Malaysia also owns museums of multiple categories. One of them is a university museum serving as a learning and research centre.

In recent years, various changes and contributions have been made by university museums to achieve the academic mission of higher learning institutions in the country. The impressive record also shows broader public engagement. With the establishment of MyMuse (Museums and Galleries of Malaysian Public Universities), discussions and efforts have been planned and implemented to fulfil the university's academic mission. Objects and artefacts of various kinds that are the country's pride have been preserved and conserved by museums and galleries under the auspices of twenty public universities in the country.

According to one of the members of MyMuse, Zolkurnian Hassan (personal communication, March 3, 2020), the number of museums and galleries established under the auspices of Malaysian public universities has reached almost 70 by 2020, and this figure is expected to increase from time to time. This increasing trend of figures shows that Malaysia, especially the Ministry of Higher Education, is committed to expanding the role of Malaysian public university museums and galleries in line with other developed countries. Wahiza Abdul Wahid (2021) stated that there are 20 public universities in the country. Of the 20, it is understood that 67 museums and galleries are listed. However, the existing museums and galleries are under the auspices of 16 public universities. This means that four others, namely Universiti Pertahanan Nasional Malaysia, Universiti Malaysia Perlis, Universiti Teknikal Malaysia, and Universiti Tun Hussein Onn Malaysia do not have their universities or galleries.

It is important to note, that it is quite unfair to compare the achievements of this country with other modern countries that established their university museums more than a century ago as a knowledge centre for scholars. Nevertheless, the country's public universities have strived hard to turn museums and galleries into interesting places to visit although, undoubtedly, many were unaware that Malaysia had a university museum before independence. The museum that is understood to have existed before the time of independence is the Asian Art Museum under the auspices of the University of Malaya. Originally, the museum was built in 1955, located in Singapore and its first curator was Michael Sullivan, a British citizen. The establishment of this museum was two years before Malaysia gained independence from the British on August 31, 1957 (Farivar, 2013). The museum was then relocated to the Malaysian campus in Kuala Lumpur and officially opened to the public in 1980 (Edzan, 2012). This is proof that the Asian Art Museum is the oldest university museum in Malaysia and Michael Sullivan was the first curator of the Malaysian university museum. Through the passage of time, a period of continuous investment and development has put university museums and galleries at the helm of the national museum community, experimenting with innovative approaches and technologies. University museums and galleries are now trying to provide 'real world' skills, not only to students but also to researchers and the surrounding community. Not only do they work efficiently, they also engage with the local and international communities.

This study highlights the relevance of Malaysian public university museums and galleries to the contemporary community and the benefits given to investments as well as academics and contemporary society. The collections in these museums and galleries inspire new research, and cross-discipline, stimulate new areas of investigation and provide research impact. Through the provision of access to in-depth learning collections and offers by developing transferable skills while providing more opportunities and work experience, university museums and galleries also support research communities around the world.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Exhibitions and Collections by University Museums and Galleries

Similar to other countries, museums and galleries of Malaysian public universities provide exceptionally prestigious resources for education, the museum sector, the public, locally and at the international level. They do not only focus on students of higher institutions, but all levels of education. This is acknowledged by the curator of INOS Research Gallery, Institute of Oceanography and Environment, Universiti Malaysia Terengganu, Azwarina Mohd Azmi Ramasamy (personal communication, February 10, 2020). She stressed that the role of university museums and galleries is important as a bridge that connects the knowledge and results of university researchers so that it can be conveyed to the public in a more convenient and remarkable visualisation. This knowledge transfer plays an important role in delivering the latest information to the community and can help improve their quality of life.

University museums and galleries are now racing to hold dynamic exhibitions. They hold countless histories and national culture (Abu Talib Ahmad, 2015). In addition, more learning spaces as well as skilled staff with public relations are provided. Museums of this century must abandon the outdated prototype, to improve relations with the university's residents and the local community. Inevitably, university museums and galleries now act as vital interfaces between the university and the wider public. University museums and galleries in Malaysia provide amazing exhibitions and collections internationally. Apart from the exhibits audiences usually view on display at show cases, interactive exhibition is an exhibition that highlights an easy way to learn something new, where the knowledge exchange process is more effective, easier to understand and straightforward. This shows that interactive exhibitions are practised in most university museums in Malaysia despite using different approaches and methods.

Currently more researchers and visitors from around the world often visit these university museums and galleries for further information on their studies. University museums and galleries are also among the landmarks that can have a huge impact on the number of visitors in Malaysia. Among the famous university museums in this country, and also well known in the Southeast Asia region are MGTG (USM), Asian Art Museum (UM) and Aquarium & Marine Museum (UMS), Museum of Academic Heritage (UMK) and International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilisation (UIA). The collections exhibited in most Malaysian university museums are spectacular and have high historical significance.



Figure 1. 'Gamelan' musical instrument collection at Asian Art Museum, Universiti Malaya
(Source: Author's personal collection)

The Asian Art Museum is the first university museum in Malaysia to offer services for students and the public regardless of race and religion where artefacts can be accessed for learning purposes (Wiessala, 2017). This prestigious university is also the only one in Malaysia that has a museum that exhibits artefacts consisting of three main civilizations of the World-Malay/Islamic society, China and India on display (Insight Guides, 2017). On the other hand, in Penang, Tuanku Fauziah Museum & Gallery (MGTF-USM) is the only museum in the region that combines both science- technology and art-culture under one roof (Tan Li-Jen, 2012). The visiting experience at MGTF- USM provides holistic and stimulating principles of teaching and learning. Various programmes involving the interaction between visitors and the museum staff, as well as the hands-on experience are very helpful to better understand the collections available at the museum.



Figure 2. 'Batik' demonstration at MGTF-USM
(Source: Author's personal collection)

Currently, both museums in the Universiti Malaya and Universiti Sains Malaysia are the most prominent, not only in the country, but also in Asia and other countries around the world. Almost every university museum and gallery in Malaysia plays a role as a centre for the collection, preservation, conservation, research, documentation, and exhibition of the country's cultural and scientific heritage. Besides that, most of the university museums and galleries in this country also offer great collections in an interesting and comfortable setting for the public to visit. For example, the Malay Heritage Museum (UPM) has several interesting collections including manuscripts, textiles, Malay weapons and many more. According to its curator, Nur Layla Witra Mat Arop (personal interview, April 5, 2020) visitors to this museum can also view and appreciate the 100- year-old traditional Malay houses representing various states in Malaysia.



Figure 3. Collection of artefacts at the Aquarium and Marine Museum, Universiti Malaysia Sabah
(Source: Author's personal collection)

UMS Aquarium & Marine Museum has long been responsible for managing Research and Development (R&D) and appropriate learning priorities for academics and professionals with the necessary knowledge and experience to support every research study (Siti Raehanah Muhamad Shaleh, personal communication, May 11, 2020). This proves that Malaysian university museums and galleries have long conducted scientific studies based on their collections that have high historical and unusual values to ensure that the data they obtain remains relevant.

Inspiring students and Improving Learning Across Disciplines

The role of university museums and galleries in this contemporary era is constantly changing. University museums and galleries in Malaysia offer students from different levels with diverse opportunities. This is to improve one's learning to a more perfect level. The museums are always busy holding interesting activities and exhibitions for visitors and are putting efforts on holding interesting activities and exhibitions for visitors. The university museum provides abundant and prestigious resources for higher education, the museum sector and the wider public, both nationally and internationally (UMG & UMIS, 2013). On top of this, it also offers a diverse learning environment compared to schools that usually rely on chalk and talk. Besides that, these museums and galleries are also concerned with the visitors' development program as well as offering an experience enriched by science knowledge and appreciation of cultural arts and heritage in interactive, interesting edutainment features.



Figure 4. Visitors witnessing and observing a partial solar eclipse at MGTF, Universiti Sains Malaysia
(Source: Author's personal collection)

Apart from visitors experiencing activities as in Figure 3 at MGTf, there are also ‘Night at the Museum’, an annual event often held by university museums, which is during the International Museum Day. This is an activity and effort by the museum to educate and instil the love for museums to the younger generations so that they can be well-informed and evoke the spirit of patriotism towards the country's heritage. With such modules or programs, university museums can foster closer ties with the community, especially schoolchildren and encourage the culture of visiting museums among the younger generation, regardless of educational background. In addition, this can also foster a strong understanding, a spirit of unity among the people and inculcate the community's mindset on the benefits of a museum university to all groups.

In this era of technological advancement, people from various levels of education use the collections of university museums with new methods and through various disciplines such as seminar halls, workshops, facilities provided and many more, for example, academic reference materials and free internet based. On top of this, these museums often deliver lessons in various styles as well as providing new experiences and knowledge for their visitors. Most of the university museums’ collections, which include artefacts, fine arts, textiles and many more, are very important as they can all help in providing information and becoming research materials for several undergraduate and postgraduate courses. Students from related fields need assistance from university museums’ staff to carry out their research tasks (Muhammad Zu Shimalain Azizul, personal communication, April 20, 2021). The university museums and galleries also complement the requirements and enhance the role of the museum in providing facilities, research, education and management and administrative centres through its collections which facilitate the acquisition of new information and knowledge by its visitors in various disciplines.

Learning Experience, skills development, and exploration of ideas

All museums have a responsibility and opportunity to foster an understanding of the relevance of the problems we face, both environmental and social (Hawken et al., 2000). Likewise other types of museums, university museums and galleries are places that can benefit students from various levels of education. Most university museums in Malaysia provide knowledge dissemination services through various types of exhibitions, workshops, and visits to exhibition spaces where the information transfer process can be done in various ways (Abd Rahim Nor Mohammad, personal communication, August 31, 2020).

Different and constructive experiences can be gained daily for the purposes of teaching and learning. Firdaus Khairuddin (personal communication, February 28, 2020) a curator of Museum & Gallery of Tuanku Fauziah, Universiti Sains Malaysia, Penang revealed that the Anatomy Museum (USM) in Kubang Kerian is used by all students of various education levels. In addition, lecturers and physicists also use the university museum to organise their learning or medical methods for their students.



Figure 5. Learning experience by visitors at the Aquarium and Marine Museum, Universiti Malaysia Sabah
(Source: Author's personal collection)

When students visit the museum or bring some artefacts to the classroom for field work, the typical educational environments are instantly changing. This allows teachers and students to have the ability to engage in different settings with art objects.



Figure 6. Activities for the development of skills by children at the Asian Art Museum, UM
(Source: Author's personal collection)

The services offered at university museums in Malaysia are usually free or sometimes charged a low fee. This is to encourage more visitors, especially among the students to visit the museum. Most of the university museums in Malaysia remain with the primary purpose of non-profit institutions and organisations where collections of historical items are collected and preserved as superlative as possible. These museums and galleries are significant because their essence can represent our heritage and culture for the public's gaze without concerning the benefits and emphasis on educating the public (Mohd Zaimuddin Mohd Zain, personal communication, February 16, 2020). By realising the full potential of museum exhibits and artefacts, students will discover more practical ways of learning experiences. These museums see students as users and friends in learning interactions and hope that they will also become regular returners.

The university museum is a substantial component of developing a deeper understanding and appreciation of history, art, and culture (Muhammad Pauzi Abd Latif, personal communication, February 15, 2020). Hackett et al. (2020) agreed that the university museum is a momentous national heart for the nation. They are actively conducting vital experimental research and experimenting with various new methods involving some emerging technologies and encouraging some insightful ideas that may be inferred in the local cultural field.

Apart from developing skills, university museums in Malaysia play a role in enhancing one's skills and developing new concepts that can be implicit in life. Students are encouraged to experiment with their ideologies and understandings by applying critical, innovative and able-to-form critical out-of-the-box thinking. Therefore, these museums have their own distinctive characteristics, which provide audiences with a variety of informal learning opportunities. Several university museums are not open to the public due to several factors. Nevertheless, these museums still receive many visitors every month and get excellent feedback from students who agree that they have learned new things after visiting these museums (Museos, 2018).



Figure 7. A brief briefing session on the exhibition at the Academic Heritage Museum, UKM by the staff to stimulate the minds of the visitors
(Source: Author's personal collection)

Thus, with a wide variety of exhibits and artefacts in the university museum, audiences can obtain new experiences and make their own meanings where varieties of insightful ideas and perspectives can be created if perfect accompaniment and innovative thinking are applied to the participants. When the university museums are involved in a social welfare program using educational materials linking to museums, each student will be able to develop innovative and creative thinking skills and relate to real-world abilities. Public projects and exhibitions are of great benefit to students in enhancing their skills, knowledge and acquiring new experiences related to specific interests such as culture, visual arts, professional sector and many more.



Figure 8. Unique services and activities provided at the Malay Heritage Museum, UPM
(Source: Author's personal collection)

These programs will open a wide range of opportunities for students to highlight their hidden talents as well as to produce dedicated leaders in engaging a large working group, especially in scientific studies. In conclusion, through several interesting large-scale activities, students will find opportunities to engage in various organised programs. In short, almost all programs coordinated by university museums provide a lot of information in learning either in or outside the classrooms.

Relationship Between the University, Museums and Community

The role of university museums in Malaysia for the development of society is undeniable. University

museums in the country always offer a variety of development programs from grassroots to international level involving museums, communities, or outside communities. Therefore, it is not surprising that this museum is the one of the best locations to gather the local community. In a way, besides being able to become a place where knowledge is transferred, the university museums and galleries are ideal places for edutainment or leisure activities. This is because university museums in Malaysia provide various facilities to accommodate visitors, not only from educational groups, but also those who come as families and groups of friends. They interact with one another, sharing experiences and likely to start making their own meanings from what they observe in the museums. Visitors can acquire more knowledge about the heritage and museum industry through the information transfer process. An interactive exhibition is a method used by several university museums. It is a display that creates easy learning to something new-fangled, where the process of exchanging knowledge is more effective and entertaining, easier to comprehend and more pleasing (Rauterberg, 2020).



Figure 9. School trips at INOS gallery (Universiti Malaysia Terengganu)
(Source: Author's personal collection)

The decent relationship between universities and society are important as various successes can turn into reality if this bond is intact and always provides respectable cooperation. In this contemporary era, more and more university museums in Malaysia are in their own class and remain relevant by making lots of contributions and impacting society and the nation, as well as providing a consistent lifelong learning process. More mega or large-scale exhibitions are now organised to attract more visitors from all age groups and levels to take advantage of every activity and event conducted by these museums. In the last two years, despite Covid-19 outbreak which has hit the world and had a huge impact on almost all sectors, there are still many activities or events that have been organised online. Thanks to the members of MyMuse who have always worked together to ensure that the museum sector in the country remains relevant.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The general aim for this study is to discuss the relevance of university museums in Malaysia with an enhanced ecosystem for higher education level. This study was conducted through the employment and collection of primary data, such as observations and interviews at several university museums and staff who have long been on service at the museums. As a support to solidify the topic, preliminary research and readings for the purpose of literature review from articles, newspapers, bulletins and several other materials had been performed. Observation method is employed to meet the first objective, which is to explicate the extent to which university museums and galleries are still relevant in benefiting the surrounding community. For the interview sessions carried out face-to-face, 19 museum personnel from different public universities had been involved. Among the interviewees, four (4) are the directors of the museum or galleries, eleven (11) curators and four (4) museum assistants. The output of these interview sessions was to fulfil the second

objective, which is to identify the methods used in the process of skill development, learning experiences and exploration of ideas at the university museums in Malaysia.

Brief communications and random conversations with visitors and participants from all ranges of ages and groups were carried out to see how well they understand the benefits that can be obtained and new knowledge they could experience and gain following the visits and program they participate in. Apart from observation, participation and conversations with museum staff and personnel and audiences, the relevant photographs were also recorded in the vicinity of the museums visited. Secondary data collections are collected to assist and strengthen the study of the literature for this study. The results from the findings are based on a blending of both primary and secondary data that focuses on issues and questions about the relevance of today's university museums.

FINDINGS

Through careful observation, random conversations with visitors and discussions with staff, most of those who visit these museums and public university galleries are women, rather than men. This is an undeniable fact because on average, most visitors in the world's most prestigious museums are among females.

Understanding different groups audiences

Malaysia is a developing Islamic country and is considered one of the successful Islamic countries from various aspects, for instance, the cultural background in its region that can still maintain harmony despite being multi-ethnic. Apart from the Malays, Chinese and Indians, there are also other ethnic groups in Sabah, Sarawak, and Labuan. Undeniably, every group of all races and ethnicities in this country must have visited museums, even once. With most of the Muslim community in Malaysia, most of the museums in Malaysia, including university museums, provide visitor-friendly facilities, including space for worship especially for the Muslims. In comparison, visitors to the university museums of this century are different from the visitors when the university museum first opened. Visitors to university museums at the time were mostly aristocratic, well- educated, but now all the community can visit museums to see the collections on display.

Looking into how relevant the university museums are, numerous studies have been conducted to identify regular visitors who are returners to these museums. Through short conversations at random, most of the visitors admitted that they came to visit on the recommendation of lecturers, teachers, friends, and social media platforms available. From close observations and brief discussions with the museum staff, it can be identified that most of the visitors to the university museums are among those who are pursuing higher education from several local public and private universities and colleges locally and abroad. Therefore, the management of the university museums always offers interesting collections and exhibitions to educate them and help to contribute and complete the study by providing various necessary facilities including space, facilities, Wi-Fi, easy access directly to the collections and more.

Digital Ecosystem for the new museum environment

In this rapidly developing technology era, communities around the world have been provided with various facilities and services that make it easier for people to live their daily lives. Cultural institutions such as museums are no exception from this temptation with the rapid advancement of technology. Many museums and galleries in Malaysia now have their own websites and develop digital ecosystems that makes it easier for their users to learn about the collections and follow the exhibits taking place in their respective museums.

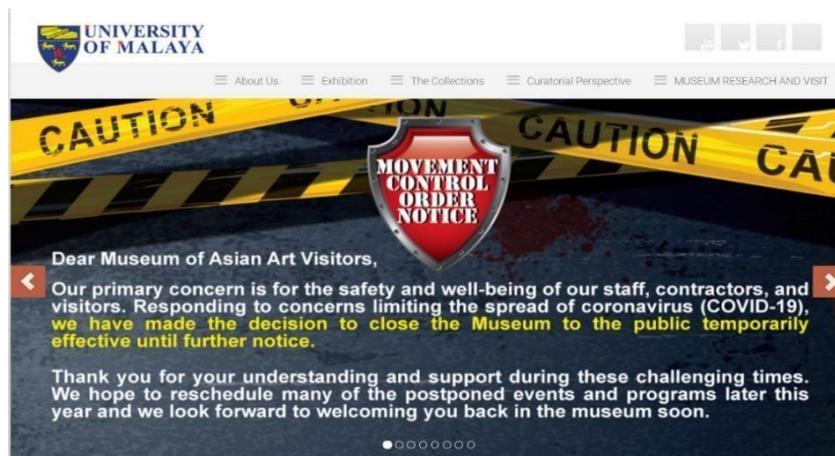


Figure 10. Official website of Asian Art Museum, Universiti Malaya
(Source: Screenshot of Universiti Malaya Webpage)

With the spread of Covid-19 over the past two years and the closure of several museums and university galleries due to safety factors to prevent the spread of the pandemic, a dramatic increase is now visible in the online community cultural visit to the museum's website. Many prominent museums around the world have adopted the digital ecosystem to introduce their respective museums. Malaysia is also no exception, although the number of museums that practice this is still in small numbers. This is due to the lack of expertise in this field, in addition to the need for considerable expenditure to implement it.

Through analysis from observations for this study, the Asian Art Museum (UM) has a strong and good digital ecosystem site compared to other university museums. This is not surprising as the museum is one of the leading university-owned museums in Malaysia and is also used as a reference centre by many scholars from all over the world. To further strengthen, the museum needs expertise in IT, documentation, and graphics to successfully create an attractive and comprehensive website. In any case, most of the existing museums certainly encourage visitors to physically visit the museum rather than surfing the internet. This is because every museum, especially the university museums, will be more focused on offering an exceptional experience through hands-on and not just providing information online. In other words, seeing is believing. Logically, observing and having the opportunity to touch an object by hands-on will be more convincing to researchers. Furthermore, when it comes to a good digital business and ecosystem, it requires a complete and accurate collection record.

There is no denying that there are still several collections owned by university museums in the country that still lack detailed records due to several factors, one of which is the lack of research expertise. Therefore, it is believed that museums in Malaysia are doing their best to resolve this issue and provide their clients with sophisticated and more accessible forums.

Based on the findings of this research, the university museums and galleries are still significant in benefiting the surrounding community especially for researchers, students and those who would have the need to expose and utilise the museums and galleries' collections and facilities.

Looking at the methods of the university museums and galleries on how they attempt to expand their operations in a less cost-effective ways in order to benefit greater number of people for the skills development, learning experiences, and exploration of ideas, it is exposed that there are a number of museums and galleries which introduced digital ecosystem for their users, but there were also limitation for others museum to practice these more accessible approach due to the challenges in terms of expertise and expenditure.

However, at this point, all museums are still encouraging the users to maintain the physical tour and visit the museums rather than looking through them online. This will be able to create more unique and remarkable experiences for the users through hands-on activities.

CONCLUSION

University museums and galleries in Malaysia will continue to play their part in enhancing performance for the arts and culture industry. As the arts and culture sector transforms for better performance; museums, structures, and processes should also reflect these changes to restructure their role in society. Beyond the economic perspective, by reforming the role of university museums to a higher level of integrity, at least in theory, it is also related to the development of knowledge (research) and the application of knowledge (innovation) in a knowledge-based, democratised society improving the country's economy. Under other conditions, the implementation of advanced digital technology and interesting interactive exhibitions by the university museums will create a new perspective for the community. In other ways, this effort will also provide an insight into how visitors can communicate and interact with university museums in a simple way and provide the necessary beneficial experiences and knowledge. With the movement control order in place after Covid-19 hit, online communication between the university museums and the community has increased the interest and persistence of visitors in connecting with the museum during the MCO.

The original role of the museums and university galleries in Malaysia is to always pay attention in ensuring that the true purpose of its establishment is achieved with some of the objectives set by the management. The university museums will continue to maintain the national cultural heritage institutions that serve all and have become historical and cultural awareness through its unique functions and position. In conclusion, the museums and galleries in Malaysia have a good bond with the millennial generation and remain relevant as an enhanced learning ecosystem for higher education. This will certainly create awareness for the younger generation to appreciate the culture and history of the country and thus will truly understand the purpose and roles of university museums.

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