

## Who pays?

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Museums began as the private collections of a wealthy elite, but were soon adopted into the public realm for the common good of society. Cultural artefacts like art works (galleries), books (libraries) and heritage objects (museums) were deemed beneficial for the common good. Egalitarian principles supported the notion of widespread access to these valuable cultural goods and, consequently, most public galleries, libraries and museums did not charge general admission or usage fees.

However, in the 1980s and 1990s in New South Wales the school of 'user-pays' emerged. In an Australian Senate Enquiry in 1998, Senator Hogg said "Why should people in Townsville have their taxes contributing to the maintenance of the museum in Brisbane?"

By and large, galleries and libraries resisted this pressure, but museums across the country began charging entry fees. The most immediate effect was a sudden and sharp drop in visitor numbers to museums, sometimes in the range of 50-80%. Entry fees changed the pattern of museum visits by eliminating most visitors who came regularly. Regular visitors became occasional visitors, and wavering potential visitors were put off altogether.

At \$25 for entry plus transport and refreshments, a family visit to the Australian Museum or the Powerhouse Museum is a planned, special outing rather than a regular or spontaneous event.

An entry fee deters or eliminates 'spur of the moment' and short visits. How many of us have paid just to 'wander in to have a look'? And how often do you pay to try something unknown?

In recent years, the tide of user pays for museums has been receding and Australian museums are gradually dropping their general entry fees. The Australian National Maritime Museum, the Museum of Contemporary Art, the National Gallery of Australia and the Newcastle Regional Museum have dropped entry fees altogether. The Melbourne Museum has halved its entry fee from \$12 to \$6. The National Museum of Australia managed to open in 2001 without an entry fee.

When museums remove their general entry fees visitor numbers soar. In 2002 Britain removed entry fees for a group of national museums and galleries and reported that visitor numbers rose by 72% in the first two years, attracting nearly 11 million extra visitors.



National Gallery of Australia – Monet Exhibition

Proponents of free entry to museums bring a range of arguments to bear on the topic, citing community health, cultural awareness and education, but the most persuasive argument has been provided by the growing body of evidence about the economic benefits brought by museums.

Large museums in the USA have been prompted to use economic impact studies to support funding applications. Some powerful data has emerged, so much so that museums are increasingly given a role in economic revival strategies, especially in smaller communities.

For example, in 2001-2 a number of regional museums in Queensland were opened, extended or refurbished with government funds connected with the Centenary of Federation. An important goal was that the investment would assist local economies by strengthening the cultural attractiveness of the location. Most of these museums have entry fees similar to the fees charged by large urban museums like the Powerhouse and Australian Museum in Sydney.

Several of them, including the Museum of Tropical Queensland, have balanced the roles of tourist attraction and community resource by negotiating sponsorship from their local council to give free entry to ratepayers. In this way, tourists pay for their visit, while locals are encouraged to benefit from the resource by making frequent visits.

A new approach to collecting income from visitors appears to be emerging in NSW museums. Museums without entry fees that incorporate multiple optional spending opportunities (guided tours, refreshments, shops, donation boxes, special exhibitions and programs) can collect more income from their larger visitor base than museums with entry fees.

This approach also relates to the trend of museums to be seen as multi-functional campuses co-located with other cultural institutions or community facilities. While this is most evident in large cities (e.g. Federation Square in Melbourne), it is also apparent in small towns such as Lismore where the New Italy complex incorporates a museum, cafe, community hall, peace park and aboriginal cultural centre and gallery.



Redcliffe Museum – 'Admission Free' prominent over door

New South Wales museums are expected to be traditional museums or galleries, but also to act as popular cultural attractions and, at the same time, as places of learning. They are expected to play the roles of cultural guardian, mass tourist attraction, university, school and civic space.

With so many complex and subtle roles to fill, simplistic entry fees will not suit the evolving and dynamic institutions that are contemporary museums, large and small.

In a decade or so, the rear view mirror may reveal that museum entry fees were a short term aberration that resulted from a limited view of the value and role of museums to the cultural and economic life of the community.