The state of research among Icelandic museums

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Abstract: Museums are faced with complex challenges when seeking to fulfil their role as research institutions, whether at the organisational or the conceptual level. These challenges are particularly prominent in the Icelandic museum sector, where research remains obscure, undefined and unregulated. Based on findings from a survey conducted among accredited museums in Iceland, this article illustrates the state of research among Icelandic museums. Inquiring about institutional approach, management and capacity for research, the survey shows how Icelandic museums struggle with scarcity of time, funding and human resources, a picture well known throughout the international museum domain. Furthermore, the article reveals how discrepancies between formal research requirements on the one hand and the lack of criteria on the other create further ramifications for the development of research in Icelandic museums. This, in turn, leaves museums with mixed messages on how to embed research in their agendas and how to account for it.

Keywords: Museum-based research, research management, research culture, public administration, Icelandic museums.

While research is defined as one of the five core activities in museums, alongside collecting, documenting, preserving and exhibiting (ICOM 2017), many museums struggle with how to manage their research. The problem with research seems to prevail at all levels, whether practical, conceptual or theoretical. First, practical issues, such as the lack of time, funding, human resources and institutional support, present major obstacles when it comes to embedding research into the museum agenda. In this way, research is commonly reported as the least prioritised among daily tasks, having to “elbow its way” into the list of institutional agendas to justify its role in the life of museums (Graham 2005:288). Secondly, ambiguous notions of what “research” means in the museum context create further confusion about this key activity (Pringle 2020). And thirdly, the notion of museum-based research remains underarticulated in contemporary museological discourse, leaving this fundamental element of museum activity rather unattended from a theoretical perspective (Sigfúsdóttir 2020). Overall, this challenging state of research in museums is
reflected through the literature, and is generally attributed to the shift in focus from the collection to visitors and public programming (Anderson 2005; Appleton 2007; Boylan 2011; Fuller 2005; Reid & Naylor 2005; Weil 2002).

However, recent discourse indicates a growing interest in the topic, particularly the relationship between research, curating and exhibitionary practice (Bjerregaard 2020; Cavalli-Björkman & Lindqvist 2008; Hansen et al. 2019; Herle 2013; Lehmann-Brauns et al. 2010; O’Neill & Wilson 2015; Pringle 2020; Sigfúsdóttir 2021a). This rising attention to museum-based research calls for critical discourse on how to frame it in relation to other museum activities and how to account for it in the museum context. The Nordic museum domain has shed some light on this, where administrative and managerial challenges in relation to research activity are articulated, particularly issues like funding, staff qualification and forms of dissemination (Fjell et al. 2020; Grinell & Högberg 2020; Johansen 2000; Petterson 2009; Sørensen 2008; Treimo 2020; Vilje til forskning 2021; Ydse 2007). This discourse is less pronounced in Iceland, where the notion of museum-based research remains elusive, not only internally from the perspective of museums themselves, but also externally from the perspective of the public administration regulating museum activity in the country.

This article seeks to address this ambiguity by providing an overview of museum-based research in Iceland built on findings from an extensive survey sent to all accredited Icelandic museums. The survey was conducted twice over a long period of time and thus provides opportunities for comparison between years. Main survey findings reflect how practical issues, such as time allocation, funding, human resources and institutional support, emerge as common challenges to the advancement of research in Icelandic museums – issues that extend far beyond the Icelandic museum context. Furthermore, the study reveals general confusion with research on the conceptual level, that is, how to define it in the museum context and how to account for it. Again, these results do not come as a surprise to the international museum domain as they are shared by many museums, notwithstanding their regional or national contexts. However, what is of particular interest in the current study is the lack of guidelines and criteria on behalf of the public administration – the authoritative body that defines research as an obligatory activity for museums to obtain formal accreditation. This discrepancy between formal requirements on the one hand and the lack of criteria on the other puts museums in a challenging position and only fuels the existing confusion around this key museum activity.

The article is divided into four sections: the first describes the public administrative framework surrounding the Icelandic museum domain, with a particular view on how the notion of research emerges through legal acts, accreditation procedures and public policies; the second describes the survey on research activity among accredited museums and summarises its findings; the third discusses the findings in relation to public policy and regulatory framework as exercised by the Museum Council of Iceland; and the fourth contextualises the findings with current museological discourse on museum-based research.

**The Icelandic Museum Landscape**

Of all the 46 accredited museums in the country, cultural heritage museums comprise the largest group, or one half; art museums
make up the second largest group, followed by museums with multiple fields of specialisation, and natural history museums comprise the smallest group. Almost 60 per cent of all accredited museums are the property of municipalities and town districts, one third are self-governing institutions, and the rest are state owned. When it comes to museum size, a vast majority (nearly 70 per cent) are small institutions with only two to five full-time, year-round staff positions, and almost one-fifth operate with only one full-time, year-round staff position. Considering the extremely limited capacity when it comes to human resources and the generally low annual subsidisation, many museums struggle to fulfil their legal responsibilities and official roles, let alone their roles as research-active institutions.

**Legal framework**

When considering the legislation surrounding the Icelandic museum domain, a complex landscape emerges. Different legal acts apply to different types of museums, and numerous public policies come into play for daily operations and tasks. The current Museum Act divides the sector into three types: a) accredited museums, b) central museums, and c) numerous other bodies referred to as “other museum-related activities, museums in the making, centres and exhibitions” (Museum Act no. 141/2011). Enterprises in the last category are not formally defined as “museums” and are therefore not subject to any regulatory control or competitive funding.

In this article, museums in the first category are of main interest, as they are the only ones regulated by the Museum Council of Iceland, undergoing a formal accreditation process and subsequent annual monitoring of that status. Museums in the second category, on the other hand, are state owned and operate under separate legislation; these institutions are the National Museum of Iceland, the National Gallery and the Museum of Natural History. From an organisational perspective, their role is to act in an advisory capacity towards other accredited museums in the same field. Each adhering to its own separate legal act(s), central museums are exempt from the formal accreditation process and do not formally operate under the auspices of the Museum Council of Iceland. Finally, public libraries and archives are not included in the category of museums and are therefore not subject to the Museum Act.

**Accreditation**

The Icelandic museum sector has adopted international standards for professional practice as reflected in the Code of Ethics for Museums (2017). The code is inscribed into Icelandic law on museums and is one of the requirements for formal accreditation (Museum Act no. 141/2011, article 10). Furthermore, the Museum Act stipulates that the role of museums is to safeguard the Icelandic cultural and natural heritage through the five core elements of museum activity, namely, “of collecting, cataloguing, preserving, studying, exhibiting and communicating in other ways” (Museum Act, article 3). Museums apply for accreditation based on criteria and requirements laid out in the Museum Act, including standards pertaining to finances and organisational structure, facilities, storage and safety, as well as standards for documentation, cataloguing and access (Museum Act, articles 10 and 14). Applications are evaluated by the Museum Council of Iceland, which makes recommendations for accreditation to the Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, or mandates withdrawal from accreditation. The Museum Council serves as an advisory
The current Museum Policy, issued by the Ministry of Education, Science and Culture in June 2021, presents for the first time a coordinated policy for all museums nationwide (accredited and central museums). The policy was developed by the Museum Council of Iceland in consultation with the three central museums, along with the participation of accredited museums and other stakeholders in the Icelandic museum sector. The policy addresses aims and actions in relation to all basic elements of museum practice, including research, where the aim is to “enhance research in all areas of museum operations” (Stefnumörkun um safnastarf 2021:13). It clearly recognises research as part of core museum practice, stating that “extensive research labour takes place through daily activities in the museum, where knowledge is collected and mediated” (ibid.). As a means to reach this goal, museums are encouraged to develop their own research policies as part of their annual planning, and emphasis is put on research diversity, disparate forms of dissemination of research output, access to the collection as primary research data, and collaboration with universities. Furthermore, the policy stresses the need for support in relation to museum-based research, both in...
terms of human resources and funding. By dedicating a separate chapter to research, the policy clearly articulates an understanding of the importance of research in museums, although it reflects a rather passive notion of research where “knowledge is collected and mediated” rather than generated, critiqued or produced.

In addition to the new Museum Policy at the national level, distinct subject-specific policies have been developed by the central museums, serving as guidelines on key museum practices for accredited museums in each subfield. The National Museum of Iceland has issued a subject-specific policy for museums in the field of cultural heritage (Safnastefna á sviði menningarminja 2017), and the National Gallery has recently issued the first subject-specific policy for museums in the field of fine art (Samræmd safnastefna á sviði myndlistar 2021). The Icelandic Museum of Natural History is currently developing its subject-specific policy for museums in the field of natural history, forthcoming in 2021. When looking at the category of research within the two existing subject-specific policies, it is generally understood as one of the fundamental museum practices, embedded within the other professional activities of collecting, documentation, preservation, education and display. Both policies stress the importance of collaboration when it comes to research, either between museums or between museums and universities, and emphasise the need to reinforce museums as vibrant research institutions. Furthermore, the two policies recognise the need to enhance practitioner research across the national museum sector through capacity building and staff development as well as by organising public platforms for discussion and sharing of knowledge and experience.

The Survey

The survey was a two-point longitudinal study using an online questionnaire sent to all accredited museums in Iceland. The questionnaire was first sent to a total of 38 museums in 2014 and again to a total of 46 museums in 2020. The response rate was 70 per cent in both cases.

![Fig. 1. Types of museums participating in the 2020 survey.](image)

Aims

As a means to enhance the discourse on museum-based research at the local level, the aim of the survey was to generate a general picture of the state of research among accredited museums in Iceland. Rather than putting the focus on particular cases or specific institutions, the intention was to get as wide a picture as possible. Hence, the survey was designed to address topics like institutional research policies, time devoted to research, research funding, human resources, research support, research collaboration, research subjects, relations between research...
and other core museum activities, and forms of dissemination. In the absence of previous examples in the national context at the time, the list of questions was developed with a view to similar studies in the international context, using the Nordic museum sector as a benchmark (Forskningsstrategi for Kulturministeriets område 2009; Heen & Salomon 2013). Answers were submitted anonymously, and participants were informed that results would not be traced to individual institutions.

Methodology
The survey was developed with the Question Pro software and sent by email to museum directors according to a list of accreditations published by the Museum Council of Iceland. The survey consisted of a total of 27 questions. The same set of questions was delivered in 2014 and 2020, with the former inquiring specifically about research activity during the period 2010–2013 and the second addressing the period 2017–2020. The majority of questions were presented in a closed format with multiple choices, some of which offered the respondents the possibility to explain their answers further in open text fields. At the end of the questionnaire, two open-ended questions invited participants to reflect more generally on their approach to research in their own words. The mixed methodology of open and closed questions created an important combination of quantitative and qualitative data. The closed-format questions generated quantitative and statistical data comparable over time, while the open-ended questions generated important qualitative information on attitudes and approaches towards research.

Limitations
While the high response rate enabled a fairly comprehensive picture of the state of research among accredited museums, the survey also had some limitations. These apply mainly to terms and definitions, as the concept of “research” was not pre-defined in the survey itself. As the local museum sector had not yet developed a consensus as to what counts as research in the museum setting, and the Museum Council of Iceland had no formal criteria on how to account for research, the survey would certainly not have been the appropriate platform to propose a definition. Consequently, the respondents replied to the questionnaire according to their own understanding of the term. The lack of a common understanding of the term “research” will have most likely affected the survey results, particularly with regard to questions addressing the embeddedness of research in daily activity, output, time and funding devoted to research or division of labour. However, as the problem with definition and meaning is a common one when it comes to research throughout the global museum domain, the survey still has valuable information on attitudes and understandings of research among the local scene. Further steps towards a more shared understanding of museum-based research would be in the hands of the public administration and the central museums, with active bottom-up participation of accredited museums and scholars, possibly using the results of this survey.

Findings
Research activity, funding and collaboration
Almost half of the participants claimed that research takes up a large part of daily activity in their museums, with a general range of one to five ongoing research projects during both survey periods. Two of the 46 museums participating in the 2020 survey stated they
currently had no ongoing research activity, compared to none in 2014. When asked about funding, half of the participants said they invested up to ten per cent of their annual budget on research each year, while a vast majority claimed they needed more support for their research activity, whether financial or infrastructural. Nearly 70 per cent of the participants applied for competitive research funding during both survey periods, most commonly to the Museum Fund, managed by the Museum Council of Iceland. Museums are also eligible to apply to the Icelandic Research Fund (IRF), although projects hosted by museums with funding from the IRF are extremely rare, with only three cases since 2005, all of them hosted by a central museum.

Examples of ongoing research projects provided by respondents illustrate a diverse picture of knowledge production among Icelandic museums, most of which were said to be tied to the museums’ field of specialisation and the collection. Documentation was mentioned by a vast majority of the participants in relation to research. One participant claimed that behind the gathering of information “lies a small research” and that “the documentation is the communication of research”. Other and “bigger” research projects would then be based on these “small” research steps taken through the process of documentation. The same respondent speculated further that the reason why museum staff were generally not aware of the direct link between documentation and research was because of a lack of staff identifying as researchers. This is yet another indication that research culture is relatively underdeveloped within the Icelandic museum sector, and will be addressed in the discussion below.

The survey addressed the question of research labour with the aim to determine who the researchers are in museums (in-house staff members, external academics or other collaborative partners). This was done to create a picture of the research capacity of the participating museums, as well as to gain insight into the collaborative aspects of research activity. When asked about the division of labour when it comes to research activity, the majority of the participants reported that a combination of permanent museum staff and external researchers typically conduct the research. This is a clear indicator that museums commonly seek external contractors to execute their research. Collaboration turned out to be the most common form of research among the participants, with 70 per cent participating in formal collaborative research projects, most often with independent researchers, universities or other museums. The data did not offer a deeper analysis at this point, but the notion of collaboration surely needs to be explored further in this context.

Collaboration could well be seen as one of the most important tools museums have to enhance their research capacity, whether it is between accredited museums, between accredited museums and the central museums, or between accredited museums and universities. Collaboration is likely to facilitate research amongst museums with low research capacity, scarce research funding and low staff numbers; judging from the survey results, Icelandic museums seem to depend on it to a large extent. In this context, Pringle’s (2020) view on the benefits of collaboration is relevant. Whether with regard to co-researching with academics, communities or visitors, her study shows how collaboration enriches a museum’s knowledge base and makes it more pluralistic, as it allows stakeholders to share and exchange experience and knowledge around a particular topic. She identifies different
Research policy

When asked about whether their museum had a documented policy on research, only 40 per cent of the participants said they had one. When asked to refer to the policy in an accessible format, most referred to their websites, general institutional policies and annual action plans. However, upon closer examination of these sources, it turns out that traces of research policies were hard to find, revealing a general lack of information on research programmes, research topics or examples of research projects. Limited information seems to exist on these projects in the public realm, and further inquiry indicates a scarce articulation on aims, participants, collaborators or plans for output and deliverables in relation to research projects. Moreover, less than half of the participating institutions mention research at all on their websites, and only a few present ongoing or completed research projects on their public platforms.

Research culture

The survey suggests that Icelandic museums recognise their roles as research institutions, with research activity being one of the official requirements each accredited museum is bound to by law. Attitudes towards research emerging from the data are generally positive and value-driven, where participants claim that research is “the sign of a thriving museum”, or that “without research the museum would stagnate and would not be able to keep up with professional development”. This understanding of research as fundamental to the very existence of museums is further reflected in claims that “research lies at the heart of everything else in the museum” and that “without research the collection would lose its value”. These attitudes are in line with international museum discourse, where
research is understood as “the unseen engine of museums. Without a research programme a museum cannot generate the new knowledge that the institution needs to be able to offer its public” (Lord et al. 2013:300).

At the same time, research was commonly reported as a non-priority due to lack of time, funding and infrastructural support. As an example, more than half of the participants claimed they lack sufficient human resources to conduct research. The lack of resources (of all sorts) has serious implications for the development of research in museums, pushing it into an issue of non-priority: “I must admit that research is not among the museum’s priorities over the next five years and perhaps longer. There are too many basic activities the museum is not even able to keep up with and, in my opinion, the few employees there are need to focus on those first.”

Another theme resulting from the open questions relates to the tension between academic research and museum-based research, where the former is seen as the legitimate form of research. Pringle (2020) has written extensively on this theme, where she articulates the need to deconstruct the idea of the scholar-curator as a withdrawn expert working on the museum’s backstage needs. Similar themes emerged in the Icelandic context: “Research in museums entails a viewpoint that is not always in line with academia, whereas museums deal with material reality and not only that part of reality which can be written down.” Another respondent reflected on the meaning of research in the museum setting:

When I look at that phrase ‘research in a museum’ it appears very ‘academic’, you picture someone as a doodler in dusty storage spaces […] this, however, is not my own experience of ‘research’ in the museum.

My experience is that most of the knowledge generated in the museum comes through in conversation with a diverse group of people […] I feel that we need to recognise the characteristics of knowledge generation taking place in the museum through the work of museum staff, and we particularly need to be careful not to create an incommensurable gap between academic practice, work on the collection, and exhibitions.

**Discussion**

Findings from both questionnaires in 2014 and 2020 reveal that Icelandic museums are well aware of their role as research institutions, although they struggle with how to fulfil it. No major differences were seen between the results in 2014 and 2020, indicating that the overall state of museum-based research has remained relatively unchanged since the questionnaire was first sent out in 2014 (no data exists before that time). Icelandic museums seem to experience themselves as research-active institutions, with half of the participants claiming that research takes up a large part of their daily tasks. Similarly, half of them claim to invest up to ten per cent of their annual budget on research. Yet, all respondents describe how the lack of time, funding and infrastructural support present major obstacles to their formal research requirements. This contradiction may, in part, lie in the confusion with the concept of research in the museum context. As shown in the findings above, some museums see research as integrated into general museum practice, such as documentation or preservation, while others understand it in terms of textual publications and communication through display. In part, this confusion may also stem from the lack of guidelines on behalf of the public administration, where ambiguous criteria in
relation to formal research requirements only create further ramifications on how to describe and account for this activity.

However, these challenges are in no way specific to the Icelandic museum domain as they are shared by colleagues in the Nordic sector, which also seems to suffer from obscure notions of what it means to conduct research in the museum setting and how to account for it (Fjell et al. 2020; Graham 2005; Grinell & Högberg 2020; Petterson 2009; Sørensen 2008; Vilje til forskning 2021). Similarly, Graham (2005) notes that museum practitioners generally share a common enthusiasm for research, but at the same time their institutions are lacking in support, resources and general acknowledgement of research practice. In his mind, museums generally need to make more effort and include more support for their staff in allowing their research activities to be more visible to their colleagues, their superiors and the general public (Graham 2005:288). Similarly, 81 per cent of museums in Norway report having unsatisfactory access to resources related to research, and they identify research as the area in most need of enhancement in the near future (Arts Council Norway, 2019).

**The confusion with research**

The Museum Council of Iceland, as the body that oversees formal requirements for accreditation and supervises regular monitoring of museums, has of yet not developed any instruments to validate research within museums, nor does it define any requirements for deliverables by museums, either in terms of quantity or quality. This, in turn, confuses the very notion of research in the museum setting, where staff and directors are uncertain when to frame their activity as research or what the consequences would be if they were not to pursue any research at all. Consequently, museums are left with self-assigned criteria on what constitutes research in their daily practice, with no administrative framework to guide them. Gray & McCall (2018:133) explain how the identification of museums as bureaucratic organisational forms enables an understanding of the underlying reasons why particular features of museums function as they do. Mapped onto the Icelandic museum domain, their approach becomes particularly relevant, where the absence of regulatory frameworks, guidelines and support for research generates uncertainty, confusion and, perhaps, an identity crisis when it comes to the research role of museums. So what, then, constitutes research in museums?

The international museum sector uses abstract and open terms to describe research: “In the museum, research consists of the intellectual activities and work aimed at discovery, invention, and the advancement of new knowledge connected with the museum collections, or the activities it carries out” (Desvallées & Mairesse 2010:73). Drawing on this definition, it becomes understandable how research tends to blend in with other museum activities, such as documentation, preservation or exhibition-making, something that could be said to characterise the idea of research amongst Icelandic museums, judging from study findings above. This notion of research as everything and anything has been addressed as blurring lines between scholarship on the one hand and research on the other (Arrhenius et al. 2008; Pringle 2020; Svensson 2008). Here, scholarship is approached as the activity that updates or maintains already existing knowledge, for instance, through searching for data or verifying existing theories. Research, on the other hand, is approached as the activity of creating new knowledge, new interpretations.
of existing knowledge or new contexts for known facts. In the Icelandic case, research and scholarship are understood as one and the same thing, as survey findings have clearly revealed.

Pringle's study illustrates how the legacy of the twentieth-century conception of the “scholar curator” shapes the dominant notion of research in museums, where “research becomes identified as something undertaken by selected individuals who are the ‘experts’, or by academics who might avail themselves of the museum’s resources” (Pringle 2020:17). This, in turn, creates ambiguous research identities and insecurities amongst staff, who might see what they do as research but are less certain whether the museum also recognises their work as such. Survey findings from the Icelandic sector become particularly interesting in light of Pringle’s study, as they show how Icelandic museums hesitate to profile themselves as research institutions, almost to the point of concealing their research activity rather than promoting it. Whether this is rooted in an underdeveloped museum culture or a lack of prioritisation at the level of individual institutions, the fact remains that Icelandic museums are faced with obscure and contradictory notions of research. The contradiction lies in the public administration clearly naming research as one of the formal requirements for accreditation – yet there are no provisions of what that means.

At the same time, scholarship and research are known as common forms of knowledge-making activities in the museum context. Arrhenius et al. (2008:7) describe scholarship as exploration or inquiry without the production of verified knowledge, while they see research as the production of “knowledge in the sense of verified facts, proven hypotheses and defensible generalizations disseminated by someone whose authority and professionalism can be verified – and, if necessary, challenged”. Here, information is not the same as knowledge, neither is reflection the same as analysis. In a similar vein, Svensson (2008:181) distinguishes research from other knowledge-generating activities in museums, where research means “searching for new knowledge by formulating problems on the basis of theory and scientific methods”. On the other hand, general knowledge-generating museum activities, such as documentation, collecting and other knowledge-building practices around collections, take place on a daily basis. These activities, in Svensson’s mind, can lead to research projects but are not equal to research in the academic sense.

If the Icelandic museum sector would take up Svensson’s rather rigid distinction between scholarship and research, there would probably not be much research left. I would rather suggest Pringle’s approach, stressing that there are no clear lines of division between the two, as they both feed on each other and generate one another in a perpetual continuum (Pringle 2020:33). She stresses the importance of avoiding a culture of distinction and intimidation in relation to research in museums, where a sense is created of research as a specialised activity only to be conducted by selected individuals (Pringle 2020:17). Instead, she proposes a working definition for museum-based research based on the recognition that museums are different from universities as sites of practice, whether in terms of methodology, forms of output or systems of evaluation. As such, she sees museum-based research as “a creative and reflexive process” involving the formulation of questions (often emerging from practice rather than theory), a structured process of
enquiry, and the generation of new knowledge or new insights that are made public (often in non-discursive forms) (Pringle 2020:34–35). Although emerging from a study on art museums, I believe Pringle’s understanding of research is applicable to all museums, notwithstanding their field of specialisation or their national context. It is broad enough to encompass the diverse means there are to do research in museums, while also being descriptive enough to function as a working tool for policymakers, museums directors and individual staff members.

Notes
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Association of Natural History established in 1889, operates under the Act on the Museum of Natural History no. 35/2007.

2. Currently there are three national policies pertaining to the museum domain in Iceland: Menningarstefna 2013 [Cultural Policy], Menningararfurinn: Stefna um varðveislu og aðgengi 2021 [Cultural Heritage: Policy on Preservation and Access], and Stefnumórkuð um safnaðarf 2021 [Museum Policy].

3. The first survey was commissioned by the Museum Council of Iceland in 2014. The second survey was conducted independently by the author in 2020. Both surveys are part of the author’s ongoing PhD research in Museum Studies at the University of Iceland.

4. The three central museums were not included in the survey as they do not undergo the formal accreditation process.

5. Detailed results of survey findings, where each question is analysed and compared between years, have been published in Icelandic; see Sigfúsdóttir 2014 and 2021b.

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