

Leeds University Business School – Research and Innovation Podcast

Episode: Co-creating civic exchange through academic and museum partnership

Speakers: Dr Maria Hussain and Adam Jaffer

[00:00:05] **Maria:** Hello, and welcome to the Research and Innovation podcast. My name's Dr Maria Hussain, and I'm an associate professor at Leeds University Business School. I'm delighted today to be joined by Adam Jaffer from Leeds City Museum. Hi, Adam.

[00:00:20] **Adam:** Hi, Maria. Hello, everyone. My name's Adam Jaffer, and I work as the curator for world cultures at Leeds Museums and Galleries. So I worked with Maria on this project at Leeds City Museum.

[00:00:34] **Maria:** Excellent. It's great to have you on the podcast, Adam. So many of you might know, or you might not know, that we worked together, on a project called Muslims in the North. It's a research dissemination exhibition in collaboration with Leeds City Museum, and it was funded by the Cultural Institute at Leeds.

[00:00:55] **Maria:** Muslims in the North disseminates research on understanding the value of diversity in civic society through exploring the contributions of Muslims, a marginalized group in the North, through four kind of broad areas of: research innovation, business and commerce, healthcare, and law.

[00:01:16] **Maria:** So that was launched back in 2024, and we've had over 300,000 people actually visit the exhibition at Leeds City Museum. So that's quite a number, and I'm still... As I say that, it's kind of, it's still something that kind of gives me goosebumps. But today we're going to be kind of reflecting, on that project, as we worked very closely together on that.

[00:01:41] **Maria:** And I can't quite believe it's been two years either. I mean, what comes to your mind, Adam, as we're kind of reflecting on that?

[00:01:49] **Adam:** Yeah, I mean, the time really does go quickly, and like you said, because we've had it up at City Museum as part of our Voices of Asia gallery, we have had, you know, a really good footfall of people coming to see it.

[00:02:02] **Adam:** So this is the first collaboration I've done with the University of Leeds. I've done several university partnerships at other museum jobs, but this is the first one I've done at Leeds. And as I said, I think, the footfall has been very good for us and the sort of feedback we've had - it's important for us because we're displaying people's personal stories. It's important that they are happy with how we've presented them and the objects we've chosen, and I think they are. I think the participants who loaned their items were pleased as well. So, from my point of view, that's a good result.

[00:02:34] **Maria:** Excellent. Yeah, so I guess it'd be good to hear some of the highlights from your perspective, from working on the Muslims in the North project. What were some of your key highlights? It was definitely a journey, wasn't it, Adam?

[00:02:51] **Adam:** Yeah, I think... I mean from my point of view, we... So we have quite a large collection of artifacts from Asia, but they're mostly historic. And quite a lot of them don't have any sort of provenance information, so we don't know who owned them. We don't know what they were used for. So I think the highlight is definitely having personal stories and objects and being able to speak to sort of living people about their experiences and maybe use some objects to sort of furnish the story of who they are. So yeah, I was very pleased to sort of include that.

[00:03:25] **Adam:** We had a launch for the display back when it opened and it, you know, it's very moving to see people looking at something that we worked on, like late hours, early mornings, just, you know, like me and Maria worked on. So it's nice when it sort of comes and sees the light of day as it were. And as I say, having a visitor- such a high visitor footfall at City Museum was a highlight as well.

[00:03:51] **Maria:** Definitely. So I think for me, some of the highlights were really understanding and appreciating, you know, kind of what goes into an exhibition. I'll never look at the labels in the same way again! So really having to make the most of each and every word that you see in an exhibition, to really help tell the story. And I think, you know, the storytelling aspect of bringing that research to life in a visual way, an accessible way, was definitely a highlight to really, you know, think about innovative ways of sharing that research.

[00:04:31] **Maria:** We'll come on to that shortly, thinking about what might be the key benefits of having a research underpinned exhibition up at Leeds City Museum. But again, just thinking about other kind of highlights for me I think also thinking about, I mean, you mentioned the launch event. So that was I think a really kind of key highlight for myself, seeing the exhibition come to life, come together, being able to invite, you know, some of the trailblazers that were profiled within the exhibition. So we had Nazir Afzal OBE. We also had Dr Mumtaz Patel, who was able to join us, who's a current president of the Royal College for Physicians. We also had Professor Ghazala Mir, who is one of our very own professors at the University of Leeds. And yeah, it was an amazing experience. And to also have the Lord Mayor open the exhibition and over 220 people actually attend from across the region, you know, from different walks of life, was really quite special.

[00:05:45] **Maria:** And I think that was something that, I think it was quite a proud moment for the whole team because we had, as you mentioned, worked quite tirelessly, you know, to bring it together and to really kind of, make it the best it could be. And the reception that we had also from, the media coverage - it was covered across all platforms of media.

[00:06:07] **Maria:** So we had, the Yorkshire Post print the story. The BBC also covered it in their digital coverage. We were on the radio as well, BBC Radio Leeds. And we were

also on another podcast, I think the Northern Agenda. So yeah. I mean, it-- when I look back, it was great to get that coverage, and even now I do get, you know, and I'm sure you also get, messages on LinkedIn, et cetera, to really, to recognize that it was quite a unique exhibition, which we'll come onto.

[00:06:42] **Maria:** But also to know what's next, as well, which we'll also be discussing. So yeah, it brings back a lot of memories, the launch. But also whenever I go back and visit that exhibition or when colleagues, or new connections have also been to visit it, they always share their insights and, you know, it's usually very positive.

[00:07:09] **Maria:** So coming on to, I think, I guess thinking about what might be some of the key benefits of co-creation, of kind of civic spaces, organizations, working with researchers like myself, with universities for public engagement, what are the key, I guess, benefits from your perspective, Adam, as a curator? Thinking about kind of the value that it might add for civic society. Is it important, do you think?

[00:07:42] **Adam:** Yeah. I mean, definitely. I think-- so the sort of first fundamental benefit of partnering with an academic or academics is that there's a sort of intellectual and academic rigor behind the information we present. So that's, that's really, really valuable. It was lucky with this project that also you had contacts with people who maybe I wouldn't have been able to have contact with or I would've just had to sort of cold call or cold email if we wanted to profile them in the gallery. So having access to your contacts, but also, having, you know, inform- being able to present information that is rigorous and is underpinned by research. That's really important because when we publish information in our galleries, we want to be certain that that information is correct and that there's not going to be lots of comeback or we're going to have to change things further down the line. It does happen in museums, but you know, we prefer to just print the material and know that it's sound.

[00:08:45] **Adam:** So I'd say definitely the academic sort of, rigor, that comes with it, but also the contacts that you are able to bring. And also it's good for our minds, to think- that we're not just sort of living in a bit of a museum bubble. That there are other approaches that we can apply, and it's always good to have people come in and sort of, give us their opinions on how things should be done.

[00:09:13] **Adam:** We don't always agree, and there's always a middle ground. But I think that's good professionally to keep you engaged. And, you know, I've generally found in my career that academics are very generous with their time. There's obviously challenges involved in or presenting things which we can move on to. But, yeah. I think your contacts and the sort of academic rigor is very important for us.

[00:09:35] **Maria:** Yeah, definitely. I think I would just add, from my perspective, it was really, you know, it was a great opportunity to be able to share the research insights with the public, that public engagement piece, you know. And to be able to share that in a very accessible way visually, I thought was an amazing opportunity. I think, secondly, also kind of building on your point around the research underpinning of the exhibition,

and I think that was, something that really, has really landed well with the public and wit, the various streams of feedback that we've received.

[00:10:21] **Maria:** Because the exhibition, I think provides quite a novel way of framing, what seems to be or what is perceived to be, kind of a deficit model of marginalized groups, really thinking about what their contributions are in a material sense across very clearly defined areas and sectors to debunk some of the assumptions or stereotypes that might be, you know, quite prominent in mainstream media, et cetera.

[00:10:56] **Maria:** So to really push back on that negative stereotyping and to provide a positive framing and an alternative framing of what's actually happening out in society. So to really, you know, to bring that kind of research, to the public, to actually showcase that within public discourse and civic society, I think was a really, amazing opportunity that this collaboration, this partnership, allowed for.

[00:11:25] **Maria:** And again, thinking about the exhibition, it is very novel. I'm not aware that an exhibition similar to this exists within Europe, so it's quite, you know, is a contemporary framing of what's often kind of framed, as perhaps a story around migration for many Muslim communities. There is that story around migration. But actually this exhibition really frames and it, you know, really frames it within the present, and really I think engages with public in a different way through that framing and the contemporary frame, I think is also something that speaks to young people today, as well, and hopefully to future generations thinking about... And again, there are kind of big questions around, you know, civic bodies, civic spaces, how representative they are, you know, how current they are as well, for Gen Z for example, and how appealing they might be for those parts of, of society to engage in the spaces and to feel, you know, that their story's there too.

[00:12:44] **Maria:** So I think there's lots that it is for kind of the public good if we are able to make the most of partnerships that we have here at the University of Leeds, with Leeds City Museum. So I think, you know, long may it continue.

[00:13:04] **Adam:** Yeah, definitely.

[00:13:05] **Maria:** So thinking now, you know, we've just been talking, it's been two years and it seems to have flown by. What would you say are some of the top tips that you would share perhaps with colleagues that might be in my position that are thinking about innovative ways of sharing their research, in that civic space, perhaps are looking into collaborating with Leeds City Museum or a similar organization? What would be your two or three top tips, Adam, for them to really make the most of that opportunity?

[00:13:40] **Adam:** Yeah, I think, I mean, the sort of key one, and this is again something we've talked to academics about for years and years, ever since museums started to work with academics a lot more, is that, you know, most academics work on text and huge amounts of text and writing. And museums tend to work on objects and a small amount of text. And certainly, if you're presenting material to the public, "less is

more” in terms of text. There's lots of audience research that's been done, and even if you spend half an hour watching your audiences and how they behave, they don't stand there reading huge amount of text, on the wall.

[00:14:26] **Adam:** So you really have to be sort of economical with how you write, and there's a real skill to that. You know, some of the large national museums in this country which have world-class collections don't have a huge amount of text in their galleries. But what they do have really covers what they're doing.

[00:14:44] **Adam:** So I think that skill of being able to summarize your points into something small, is really, really important. Museums still do it. Some museums still do it. They still over-rely on having too much text on a wall. But I guarantee if you read audience research or even if you watch visitors for a short amount of time, it's very rare that people stand and read everything that you've written. So you have to be economical with what you're doing, and it doesn't mean, you know, quote, “dumbing it down”. But it does mean being succinct about what you're doing. So I think that's important. And then the other thing, well, the other two things is that, visitors tend to favour themes of things.

[00:15:28] **Adam:** So if you can put things within themes rather than, say, display things chronologically, you know, it's important to wrap things up in sort of universal themes that people might relate to. That could be work, it could be family, it could be religion, things like that, food. So that works really well.

[00:15:47] **Adam:** And then I think with this project, with Maria, when I first met you - it must sound like I was just like an alarm bell, but, you know, I was continuously saying “we've got to think about the objects. What's it going to look like?”

[00:16:02] **Adam:** Because that's always in the back of our minds, sort of first of all. Even when we write, you know, we write a proposal for a project, what is it going to look like to the public? So I was going to say, the last thing, this is quite... We do quite a lot of, sort of teaching on label writing and museum interpretation, and I always think it's quite useful to have your audience in mind or maybe someone in... like a member of your family when you're writing interpretation. So, for example, I use my dad. My dad doesn't regularly go to museums. He... You know, English is his second language. So I kind of think, if I can't write text that my dad would read, what am I doing? And, we have interpretation guidelines and, you know, the average visitor reading age is, I think it's 12. In some places it's 14. I think in Leeds it's 12. So again, you have to think about, how you're presenting your information with that, you know. And there's software that you can run things through to check the reading age and stuff like that. And there is a real art form to it, you know?

[00:17:13] **Adam:** It doesn't mean dumbing it down. And as I say, if the big national museums who've got world-class collections can use succinct, well-written small amounts of text, then I think it's good for us.

[00:17:25] **Maria:** Great. I mean, as I've mentioned earlier, labels just mean a whole different thing to me now, having had to really, be quite, yeah, we had to be quite brutal, didn't we, in terms of what made the final cut, to ensure that everything got to the printers in time. Yeah, and I think I would just add, thinking outside the box, I think you really do need to think about, as you mentioned, you know, what story are the objects, the pictures telling. And being really creative and innovative in terms of how you might want to tell that story with very few words.

[00:18:04] **Maria:** And it is, it can feel quite jarring as an academic because we primarily use words to express- you know, the written word... to express our research and innovation. So it, I mean, it's a really, you know, amazing opportunity, but it does really force you to think in different ways. So you do get something very tangible, I think, as well as a researcher from the experience to really appreciate different ways of thinking and doing, you know, in that space.

[00:18:37] **Maria:** I'd also add, planning is really key, because there are lots of moving parts, in the project. So lots of people that you'll be working with, for example, yourself as a curator. Also thinking about, you know, leaving time, enough time for things to go to the printer, working with the designer, you know, working with Rick to put things up in the gallery. And also planning for any kind of, you know- last-minute things that perhaps need tweaking or didn't quite work because, the material just wouldn't stick to the wall, et cetera.

[00:19:13] **Maria:** Yeah. We did have some last-minute things that we had to really think through before we launched. So yeah, so I guess thinking about that, and then really leveraging your network. So you mentioned being able to lean into some of the contacts that I had. But I also made lots of new contacts through the project and I guess really leaning into that and seeing that as a way of pushing the project to the next level, and to really, you know, harness the power of those kind of collective networks to really enable a project to take off.

[00:19:50] **Maria:** yeah, so there's lots of tips there hopefully that are useful for the audience. But before we come to a close, I'd just like to invite your thoughts, Adam, in future directions for "Muslims in the North". Where do you see it going next?

[00:20:08] **Adam:** Yeah. So, the display's going to stay on at City Museum until July next year. So we've got a good, you know, good another year for it. And we had been in, we had been discussing, about sending it on somewhere else because like you said- Yeah ... it's quite unique, for where it is. So we'll have to see what happens with those conversations. If the lenders are generous enough to, you know, allow their objects to go elsewhere, then I really see it sort of, it can have a life beyond the project that we did. So we'll have to, have to see what happens with that.

[00:20:46] **Adam:** I was, I was going to add as well that we do quite a lot of work with community groups and next year we're doing some work with another Muslim community group in Leeds, and we'd certainly like to take them to see the

display, because it hopefully, you know, we'll be offering them space in the museum to do their own display.

[00:21:05] **Adam:** And it's nice to have groups that we bring in, to show them something to react to. And it may be that we say to them, "Okay, pick five things you like and five things you don't like about "Muslims in the North", and what would you do differently?" So it's quite a good springboard for other projects that may come down, down the line and other engagement with Muslim communities in the city, further down the line.

[00:21:31] **Maria:** Yeah, no, that's a great point. I think for myself, you know, really finding a new home, for the "Muslims in the North", as you say. And we both agree that it is a novel exhibition, so it'd be a shame, that we can't continue to offer that opportunity, for the public to come and view it and to take the insights in and to really make the most of it. So we are looking to see where that new home might be. So if you do have any ideas or thoughts, please do drop us a message. The contact details will be in the show notes. But do feel free to reach out.

[00:22:10] **Maria:** And secondly, I guess building on your point around kind of other community groups that you'll be working with, I'm also quite keen to share my insights, and experience as well with other groups that might also be thinking about putting together an exhibition in that space.

[00:22:33] **Maria:** I know that we've had conversations around kind of connecting, with that particular group, to see what the learnings might be to take forward. And also, perhaps to provide a bit of guidance as well if needed. So yeah. So there's lots of kind of learning that we can take forward and also thinking about how the exhibition can also move into another space perhaps.

[00:23:00] **Maria:** But again, it's something that I'm also thinking about in terms of what else might be possible. So we did have the "Muslims in Bradford" project that was a related project, an audio visual landscape that was put together really showcasing some of the Bradfordian stories - that was funded by Bradford City of Culture 2025.

[00:23:27] **Maria:** So that's a kind of mobile, let's say, exhibition, that showcases some of their stories, but it does relate to the main "Muslims in the North" exhibition. So again, I'm thinking about what other creative ways might be possible to continue the story and continue sharing, this particular kind of exhibition and story beyond Leeds.

[00:23:53] **Maria:** So watch this space. I'm sure we'll be in touch to share updates as well on socials. So we are coming to the end now of the podcast, and I hope you've enjoyed listening to our reflections on "Muslims in the North", a research dissemination exhibition with University of Leeds and Leeds City Museum.

[00:24:17] **Maria:** Adam, did you want to share any final thoughts with the audience?

[00:24:22] **Adam:** Just to say the display's on until July 2027. So if anyone wants to go and see the work that Maria and I have put in. We're also very grateful to all the lenders who loaned their material. You know, some very personal objects in there. So we're very grateful for that, because without them, we wouldn't, of course, have had a display to put together. So that's it really. And yeah, it was interesting chatting to you about it, Maria.

[00:24:48] **Maria:** Yeah. And it was a great time and space for us to reflect, actually, on the last couple of years. It's been a real privilege, to have that time with you, Adam, so thanks a lot for sharing your thoughts and reflections. So that's all from us today. Thank you very much for listening. Hopefully, it's been useful. Bye bye.

Ends