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Making youth well-being research outcomes accessible – A public engagement experience at Auckland Museum

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Introduction

In the summer of 2024–2025, Tāmaki Paenga Hira, Auckland Museum, in partnership with Waipapa Taumata Rau, the University of Auckland, launched an interactive digital experience to present research findings from the 'Our Voices' study to the public.

The 'Our Voices' research programme collected detailed qualitative data about young people's lived experiences and aimed to explore the diverse and complex journeys they experience growing up in Aotearoa.

The interactive experience was designed to engage museum visitors with the voices of rangatahi in the study, centring on their perspectives and highlighting the issues that were important to them.

Public engagement was integrated into the 'Our Voices' study design from the start by including Auckland Museum as a study partner, to provide a platform for translating this research into an accessible, meaningful experience. The intention was to connect the study findings with the public through an interactive exhibit – providing an opportunity for rangatahi participating in the study to have agency within their community, and with a long-term goal of contributing to societal change.

Showcasing research results about young people's lived experiences is a bold and innovative shift away from the traditional museum history and culture collections-based exhibitions, yet feedback from an evaluation of the 'Our Voices' experience revealed a high level of visitor satisfaction and a desire for more experiences with a similar focus at Auckland Museum.

In this paper, we discuss the experience of sharing youth well-being research outcomes in a museum setting, the processes involved in developing a public engagement experience and what an evaluation revealed. We also share the background to the Auckland Museum and University of Auckland partnership and present an overview of the 'Our Voices' study.

Museums as a space for sharing research

As a trusted civic space, museums have an opportunity to present research findings in a fun and creative way while aligning with a strategic intention to engage communities (Knowles 2022). Sharing in-depth research findings in a museum-based public engagement experience creates opportunities for public discourse, and together with the presentation of evidence-based data, provides potential to reach policy makers and influence policy change. The importance of public engagement for communicating research results is recognised within academic (Canfield and Menezes 2020) and policy-making settings (MBIE 2017), as highlighted by the inclusion of this as a critical step in the Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment (MBIE) funding proposal for the 'Our Voices' study.

However, a horizon scan presented in a report prepared by Auckland Museum (2022) cited only a few examples of museum exhibitions showcasing contemporary well-being research findings internationally, and despite museums having a long history of educating and engaging the public (Clifton-Ross et al. 2019), disseminating research results and engaging the public (particularly children and young people) with the findings remains a novel feature of a museum exhibition or experience.

One example of health and development research in a museum exhibition in Aotearoa New Zealand is the 2020–21 'Slice of Life – The World-Famous Dunedin Study'; presenting a longitudinal study that followed babies born in Dunedin between 1972 and 1973. This

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travelling exhibition was presented at Canterbury Museum, MOTAT Auckland and Nelson Provincial Museum giving visitors a nostalgic look at the decades experienced by the study participants and an opportunity to review some of the study findings, but without interactive or participatory features (Auckland Museum 2022).

Traditional methods of academic research dissemination such as peer reviewed journals and conference presentation are not generally accessible to young people such as those who participated in 'Our Voices', nor are they accessible to the broader public. Therefore, a museum setting can provide a unique means of communicating research findings, particularly to those in the community that have been surveyed.

Research data presented in an academic format for a scholarly audience often lacks broad general appeal suitable for an exhibition, however research curation provides a means of presenting or re-formatting research findings to appeal to the interest of the target audience and to reach diverse or specific populations (Clifton-Ross et al. 2019). By curating research findings into an appropriate format for an exhibition or interactive experience the content can be tailored to be meaningful to a specific audience such as a target age group.

Additionally, a public engagement experience in a museum setting can help to increase research impact, reaching broad audiences at a faster pace than traditional research avenues, but within a more trusted medium than the fast and furious turnover of social media content. Increased engagement in this way may improve impact by influencing public opinion and policy makers to drive improvements to public health and well-being.

Auckland Museum and University of Auckland partnership

Established in 1852, Auckland Museum is often cited as the oldest research institution in Aotearoa (Auckland Museum 2018), and through this history and shared interests, Auckland Museum and University of Auckland have developed partnerships across multiple projects and departments within the museum.

The collaboration between Auckland Museum and the University of Auckland aligns research and educational objectives between the two organisations by leveraging access to museum collections to advance academic inquiry and deepen understanding of cultural and historical contexts with a shared knowledge exchange between the organisations. Additionally, the integration of curriculum initiatives, such as the museum-hosted postgraduate Museum Studies course, offers students foundational training in museum practice, delivered by both museum professionals and university academics, and prepares graduates for careers in the museum sector.

A wide variety of collaborative research projects have been carried out across several departments at Auckland Museum, including Human History, Documentary Heritage, and Natural Sciences. These efforts enhance knowledge of the collections and contribute to the ongoing refresh and renewal of gallery spaces. The findings are typically published in conference proceedings or specialised academic journals.

Aside from collections-based scholarship, this mutually beneficial relationship also enables the museum to serve as a platform for accessible knowledge sharing and public engagement, using an exhibition or 'experience' as a mode of communication and a contemporary way of learning (Watson et al. 2022).

Such partnerships also enhance resource access through joint research funding and increased public visibility via coordinated marketing and social media outreach, as demonstrated in the promotion of 'Our Voices' by both institutions through their own networks and social media channels.

Our Voices

The Our Generation, Our Voices, All Our Futures project ('Our Voices' for short) is a five-year research programme funded by MBIE that was designed to build on the extensive information collected from the cohort of children and families participating in the Growing Up in New Zealand (GUiNZ) longitudinal study. GUiNZ is New Zealand's largest longitudinal study following over 6000 young New Zealanders born between 2009–2010 from across Tāmaki Makaurau and Waikato. The GUiNZ study aims to understand more about the lives and well-being of young people growing up in Aotearoa today by regularly connecting with the study participants to gather quantitative information via surveys and interviews through into adulthood – at least until 21 years old (Growing Up in New Zealand 2025).

A key aim of the 'Our Voices' research was to address well-being knowledge gaps and enhance the wider GUiNZ dataset by designing innovative child-centric research methods that provided direct evidence and 'voice' on issues that mattered most to young people in Aotearoa (Our Voices 2025). The study team co-designed an interactive app with members of the GUiNZ cohort to enable engagement and reflection from participants on issues that were important to them. The resulting platform 'Tō Mātou Rerenga – Our Journey', provided a friendly digital interface that enabled participants to share rich qualitative information such as images, text, video and audio (Figure 1). Using an animated avatar, participants navigated ten topical representative themed islands covering School Experiences, Belonging and Connections, Cultural Identity, Family and Whānau, Hobbies and Interests, Peers and Relationships, Home and Neighbourhood, Independence, Civic Engagement and Reflections and Aspirations.

The aim of the 'Our Voices' project and the interactive app was also to learn from the lived experiences of rangatahi to develop a deeper understanding of the complex issues facing young people growing up in Aotearoa, with an

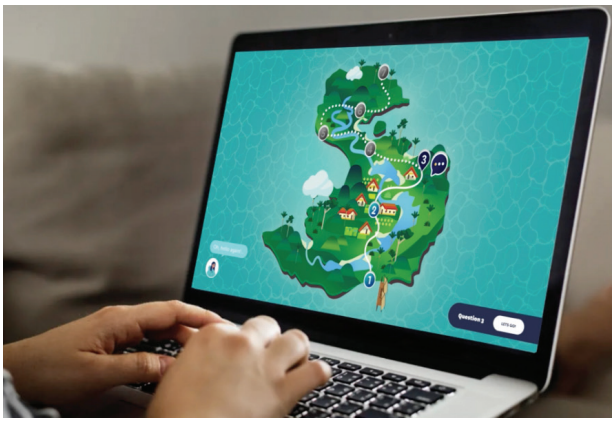

Figure 1. Development of 'Tō Mātou Rerenga – Our Journey' Interactive interface. Image credit: Our Voices, University of Auckland. All rights reserved.

overarching theme of 'Making A Difference' – ultimately driving New Zealand policy change to improve the lives of young people in Aotearoa now and in the future.

While public engagement is often highlighted in research aims, it frequently falls short due to limited resources or opportunities (Watson et al. 2023). However, the 'Our Voices' study team identified public engagement with the results of this study as a critical step in the study plan at the outset, with Auckland Museum providing an avenue for curating and presenting the research, and therefore the views of the rangatahi involved, to the public, the study participants and to the policy makers of Aotearoa.

Timeline and development of the public engagement experience at Auckland Museum

The 'Our Voices' public engagement planning process began in 2019 in tandem with the research programme (Figure 2). Over the course of five years, the project navigated several challenges including the wide-spread COVID-19 pandemic disruptions, significant staff changes and shifts in available gallery spaces, demanding some problem-solving and a flexible approach to planning and delivery.

The partnership process involved collaboration to better understand what the research results would look like and what the museum could deliver, taking into consideration available gallery space and resources to define and deliver the engagement plan. Teams across the museum worked together to secure the right space and design an experience that was both interactive and meaningful for visitors.

The brief for developing the experience design centred on creating an intuitive, interactive space where the public could hear directly from the young people involved in the 'Our Voices' study, supporting the idea that young people's opinions matter. Key design considerations included incorporating audio to echo the project's title and purpose, ensuring a participatory and engaging format, representing data in meaningful ways, and building flexibility into the design to allow the space to support other Museum programming.

Tasked with developing an innovative digital display, using assets from the 'Our Voices' team, an external creative partner was brought on board to bring the experience to life, transforming the data into a fun and engaging experience. The secured location—the 'Orientation Space' in Te Ao Mārama, the Museum's southern entrance, captured a steady flow of incidental foot traffic providing high visibility and a prominent media wall to attract visitors into the space.

The Visitor Learning Outcomes developed and described by the Exhibitions Interpretative Planning team focused on 'Knowledge', 'Inspiration' and 'Enjoyment':

1. 'Knowledge' – Visitors will gain an understanding about what young people have to say on big issues relevant to them.
2. 'Inspiration' – Visitors will be inspired by examples of young people's voices making a difference in New Zealand.
3. 'Enjoyment' – Young visitors in the target audience will engage with and enjoy the experience.

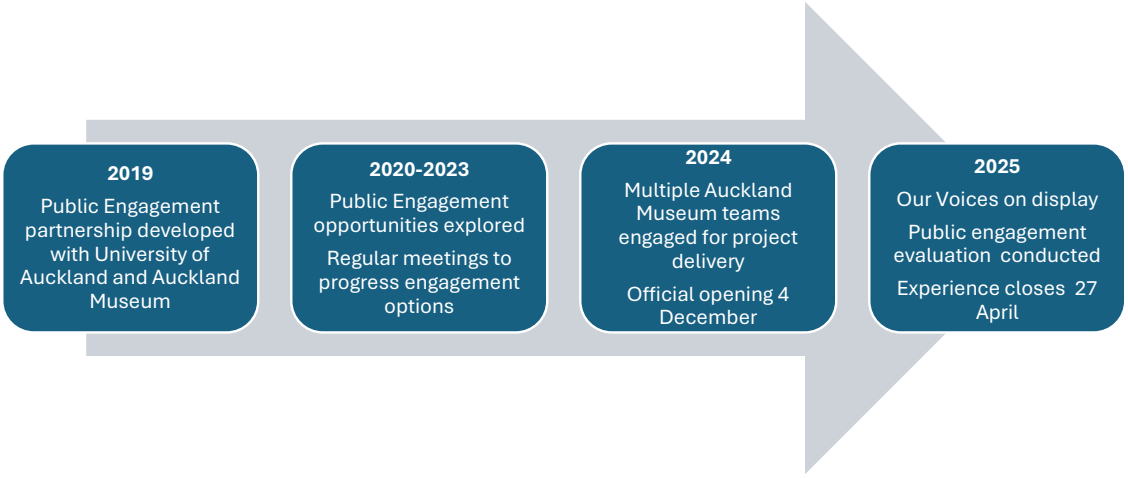

Figure 2. Our Voices partnership timeline. All rights reserved.

The learning outcomes were developed to align with an intuitive and engaging experience without being overly complex for the target audience to navigate. The target audience was identified as 8–12-year-olds with a tuakana-teina relationship between the 13-year-old study participants sharing their thoughts with their younger museum audience, and as the experience was planned for the summer holiday period, this group and by extension their caregivers would be the core demographic of visitors expected over this time.

Our Voices content

Over 56,000 pieces of qualitative data were collected via the 'Our Journey' app, including text, audio, images and video. The 'Our Voices' team selected the topics to be used in the exhibition based on the app themes that provided the richest available data, and selected participant quotes in response to questions asked within the theme that represented a range of responses from the cohort. Eight quotes were selected for each of the themes of 'School', 'Society', and 'Support' with a total of 24 quotes voiced for the experience.

Examples of questions:
School
How do you feel about school?
Which groups of students do you feel have a tough time at your school?

Societal issues
What do you think are the two biggest issues in our society?
How do you think COVID-19 has impacted life in Aotearoa New Zealand?

Support systems
Who or what helps you get through tough times?
Who or where do you go for help, support or advice?

The 'Our Voices' experience

The final concept for the experience brought the voices of rangatahi to life through an engaging, interactive digital experience on the large media wall using colourful spotlights on moving characters inspired by the avatars from the 'Our Voices' app. The spotlights tracked the playful characters – some on skateboards and scooters, across the screen, drawing the eye and inviting interaction. On the gallery floor, corresponding coloured light spots encouraged visitors to step into the experience. Standing on the floor spot revealed the character quote on the screen and triggered an audio recording of a study participant quote through directional speakers positioned above the spot where the visitor stood (Figure 3). This immersive

Figure 3. Activating the spotlights in the 'Our Voices' experience. Image Credit: Auckland Museum. All rights reserved.

design allowed each visitor to connect directly with the voice of a young person in the experience (https://youtu.be/YU86hxqME4Q).

Each spotlight colour represented one of the core themes of 'School', 'Society' and 'Support' with icons to help visitors navigate the context of the data. Additionally, a coloured question mark popped up on the screen intermittently inviting visitors to stand on the corresponding spotlight to display an animated graph visualising key quantitative data from the study, adding extra depth to the experience (Figure 4).

In addition to the media screen, labels providing context and study background gave a brief overview of the study in te reo Māori and English and acknowledged stakeholders in the project.

The opening of the 'Our Voices' public engagement experience was celebrated with an official launch with invited guests including the Chief Children's Commissioner for New Zealand, Dr Claire Achmad, as well as the young people who contributed to the development of the app (Figure 5).

Consideration was given to including an opportunity within the experience for the public to be included in the conversation as active participants, using a provocation to spark reflection and encourage visitors to share their own perspectives on the themes explored. A multi-directional interaction between the public and the 'voices' on display would aim to deepen engagement and offer insights into both visitor opinions on the topics and the overall impact of the experience. This level of engagement was unable to be achieved within the scope of this project but would be worthy of further exploration for future public engagement experiences.

An evaluation

An evaluation of the 'Our Voices' public engagement experience provided an insight into the visitor's view of the experience, with an overall positive response. Analytical data revealed 169,000 activations of the experience

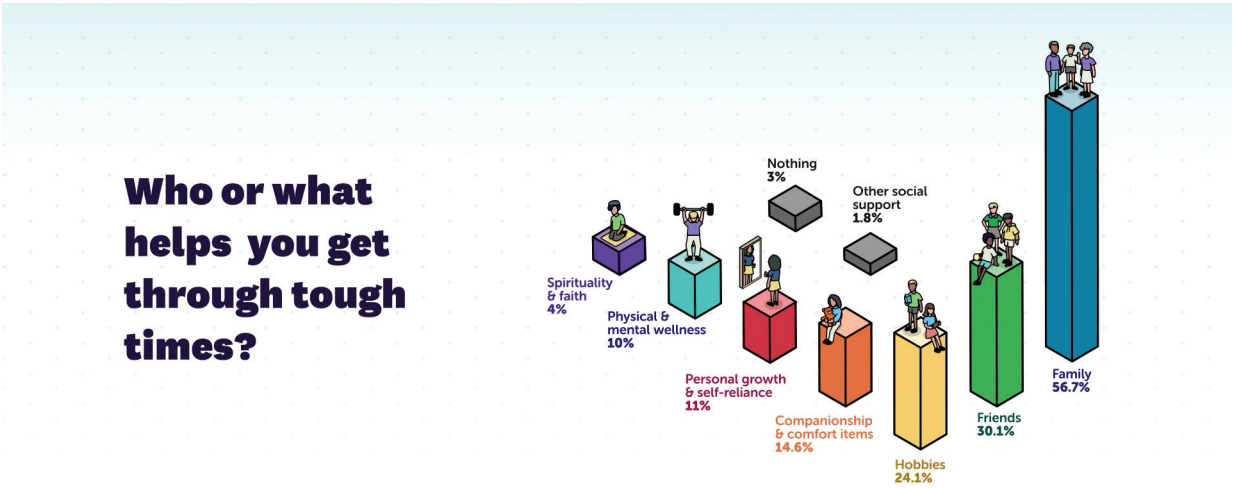

Figure 4. Quantitative data presented in an animated graph. Image Credit: PHQ analytics. All rights reserved.

during its 5-month run, suggesting a successful reach and impact to elevate the concerns, hopes and experiences of young people in Aotearoa.

The evaluation drew on a combination of sources, including analytics data, visitor interviews and observations conducted by a summer student, and input from the Auckland Museum Audience and Impact Research team. Together these insights affirmed the success of the engagement approach and will help to inform future initiatives aimed at supporting meaningful public participation and dialogue at Auckland Museum.

Figure 5. Opening event with invited guest Dr Claire Achmad. Image credit: Auckland Museum. All rights reserved.

Evaluation method

The main objective of the evaluation was to assess the success of public engagement including whether the learning objectives were met, gauge numbers attending and dwell times in the space.

Interviews with museum visitors included a set of targeted questions to 8–15-year-olds (with an accompanying adult who was able to provide consent), plus a separate set of questions for adults (16 yrs and over). The questions were designed to assess whether the experience met the visitor learning outcomes of knowledge, inspiration and enjoyment. The questions were tailored to suit the age of the audience, with a simple 5-point pictorial Likert scale show card for the younger visitors with a smiley face response scale ranging from "I liked it a lot" to "I didn't like it at all", and a more detailed Likert scale statement for the adults who were asked additional attitudinal and demographic questions.

Visitation patterns were assessed through click-counting and dwell time tracking, supplemented by analytics data.

Visitation and demographics

Approximately 50,000 visitors interacted with the exhibit over the 5-month period. The majority of visitors interviewed (93%) did not come specifically to see 'Our Voices' but encountered and engaged with it as part of their broader museum visit. This highlights the success of the project in capturing opportunistic engagement and underscores the strategic value of its high-visibility placement within the Orientation Space.

The audience was roughly evenly split between local and international visitors, with a significant proportion being first-time attendees.

Almost half of visitors (49%) spent less than one minute in the space, indicating brief engagement, while the average dwell time was approximately 1 minute and 18 seconds.

Visitor responses

- Insight Gained: 91% of adult visitors felt they gained insight into young people's views.
- Desire for Similar Experiences: 87% expressed interest in seeing similar experiences at the Museum.
- Relevance: 67% found the experience personally relevant.
- Enjoyment: 87% of adult visitors reported enjoying the experience.

Key themes from visitor feedback

- Positive Aspects: Visitors appreciated the opportunity to hear young voices, the technology used in the experience, and the interactive nature of the exhibit.
- Suggested Improvements: Many adults requested more context and information regarding the project, while young visitors wanted more visual and interactive elements.
- Young visitors (ages 8–15) enjoyed listening to their peers and learning about different perspectives. They also highlighted the interactive technology as a positive aspect of the experience.

Evaluation results and summary

The evaluation results indicate that the 'Our Voices' experience successfully engaged both adult and youth visitors with positive responses to the key learning outcomes of 'Knowledge', 'Inspiration' and 'Enjoyment'.

The 'Our Voices' experience, elicited high levels of enjoyment among both adult and youth visitors, and interest in seeing similar future offerings at Auckland Museum. While the initiative effectively highlighted young people's perspectives, the evaluation revealed that there is potential for improvement in sustaining visitor engagement with some younger visitors wanting more interactivity and adults wanting further background detail, providing deeper contextual information.

Summary

Overall, the 'Our Voices' experience demonstrated a successful partnership between Auckland Museum and the University of Auckland to present well-being research results in a playful and engaging way, making research outcomes accessible and elevating the voices of the rangatahi who took part in the 'Our Voices' study.

Collaboration with internal teams within the museum and external agencies combined expertise and resources to create a meaningful experience reaching a broad audience in a gallery space that attracted opportunistic interactions from visitors who may not have been reached otherwise. The creative production enabled stories to be shared about issues that matter to young people in a trusted civic space, connecting with rangatahi, informing the public and in turn potentially influencing policy makers to support the study's overarching theme of 'Making a Difference'.

Despite the positive engagement, there are opportunities to enhance the experience by deepening visitor interaction, including a chance for museum visitors to contribute their thoughts on the themes by providing a provocation to respond to, and presenting more contextual information about the research within the museum space. Potential opportunities also exist to expand the experience beyond the walls of the museum to other physical spaces or as an online digital format to maximise impact.

Acknowledgements

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