

The ICOM Museum Definition for the 21st Century

Results of the Online Member Survey of ICOM Germany on the ICOM Museum Definition in December 2019

English Summary

This member survey is linked to the initiative of the World Association ICOM to question the sustainability of the museum definition contained in Article 3 of the ICOM Statutes, last edited in 2007, for its sustainability for the 21st century. The proposal for a completely redrafted museum definition sparked lively and controversial discussions. The Extraordinary General Assembly in Kyoto on September 7, 2019 decided to postpone the decision in order to enable a more detailed opinion formation in the national and international committees of ICOM. For this purpose, ICOM Germany conducted the online survey evaluated here among its members in December 2019.

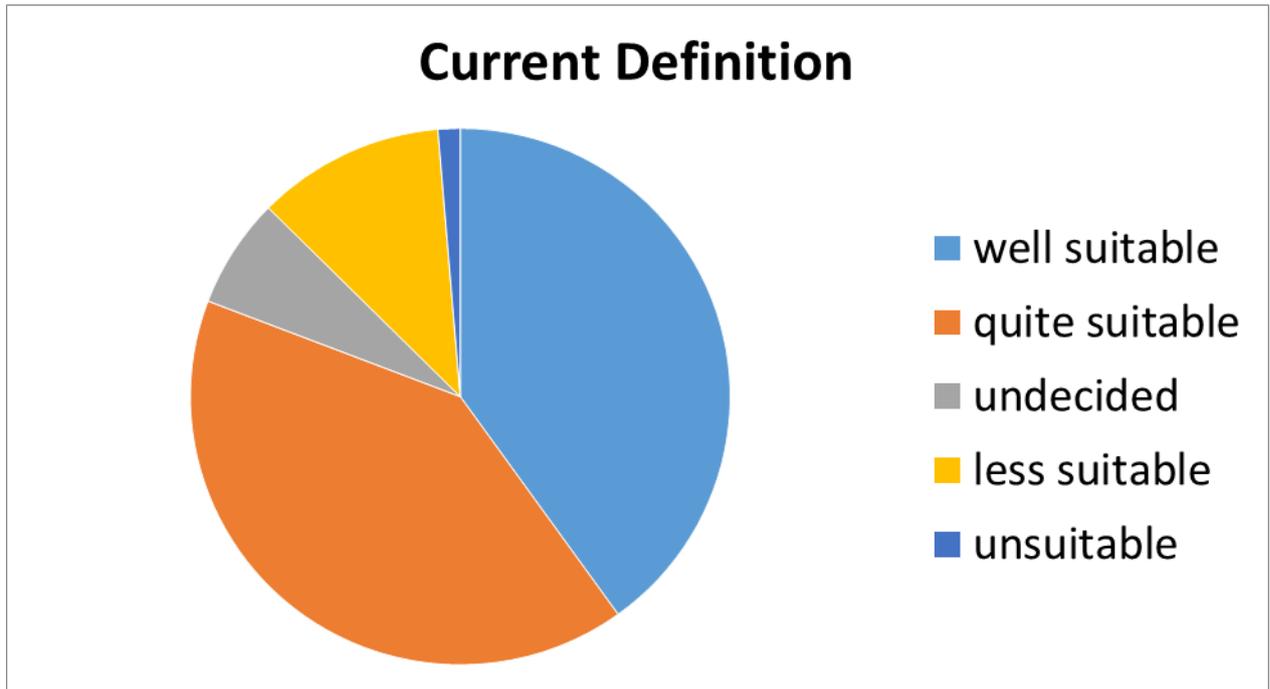
A total of 309 completed questionnaires were submitted electronically, seven came from people without ongoing membership. The total of 302 valid questionnaires corresponds to a participation of 4.6 percent among 6,501 members of ICOM Germany. The spatial distribution seems appropriate: ICOM members from Germany in their entire extent have participated, each federal state is represented. Large regional holdings are plausible due to large cities with large museums; Areas without any participation extend to a maximum of two adjoining postal routing regions (areas whose postal codes match in the first two digits).

The position of the participants regarding the current ICOM museum definition is coherent and shows broad approval: in the worst case, individual formulations are valued at least 66.3 percent, at best 98 percent. For an overview, the text is marked according to the results of the survey: excerpts with an assessment as "important" with

- at least 80% ($x \geq 243$) in **bold and bright green**,
- lower, but at least 66.6% ($243 > x \geq 202$) in **bold and dark green**,
- less than 50% ($152 > x$) in **bold italic and magenta**,
- but if less than 30% ($91 > x$), in **bold italic and bright red**;
- a text in normal black has therefore achieved at least 50%, less than 66.6%.

[A museum is] **a non-profit, permanent institution in the service of society and its development, open to the public, which acquires, conserves, researches, communicates and exhibits the tangible and intangible heritage of humanity and its environment for the purposes of education, study and enjoyment.**

At a glance, 80.8 percent consider the current definition to be a good museum definition or one that needs to be improved only in certain areas. Only 1.3 percent consider it unsuitable.

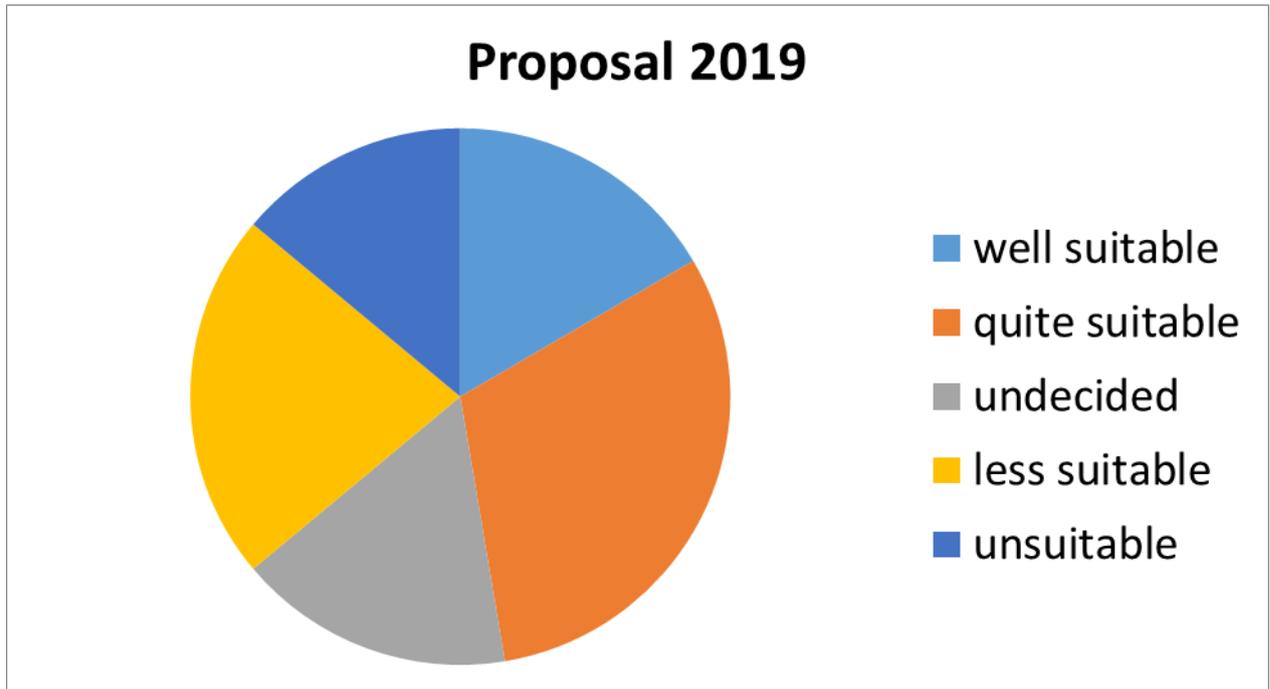


The response behavior to the Kyoto resolution proposal differs fundamentally. The assessment of the individual text excerpts as important components of the definition varies between a minimum of 26.5 and a maximum of 72.8 percent; 11 of the 27 text excerpts rate less than half of the participants as important components of the definition. The same system of marking the text as it was used above, gives again an overview:

[Museums are] **democratising**, inclusive and **polyphonic** spaces for critical dialogue about the pasts and the futures. **Acknowledging and addressing the conflicts and challenges of the present**, they hold artefacts and specimens **in trust for society**, safeguard diverse memories for future generations and guarantee **equal rights** and **equal access to heritage** for all people.

Museums are not for profit. They are participatory and transparent, and work in active partnership with and for diverse communities to collect, preserve, research, **interpret**, exhibit, and **enhance** understandings of the world, **aiming to contribute to human dignity and social justice, global equality and planetary wellbeing.**

In the case of statements that are closely related in terms of content, the current ICOM museum definition compares better, in some cases markedly better (with one exception, possibly due to translation). At a glance, 47.4 percent of the participants consider the Kyoto resolution proposal to be a good museum definition or one that only needs to be improved in certain areas; however, 13.9 percent consider it unsuitable.



This striking difference looks more confrontational than it is: 36.1 percent of the participants consider both texts to be either “well suited” or “more suitable”. This view is shared by 76.2 percent of those who view the Kyoto resolution proposal positively; as a result, the Kyoto resolution proposal appears to many participants as an extension rather than a contradiction to the current museum definition. The wording of the proposed Kyoto decision (with four exceptions) is more highly valued as elements of a mission statement than as part of the definition; only two statements miss the 50 percent mark for “important” formulations in the mission statement.

The additional question regarding overarching concepts and umbrella terms basically showed that the participating ICOM Germany members are considering a wide range of such options with a similar appreciation: the idea of multiple connectivity of the museum system prevails.