Using analytics to improve your website

Note: While this toolkit provides ideas and guidelines as to how to plan your analytics, it doesn’t go into detail about how to set the software up, or how to actually use the various applications involved. Further links are given below which explain how to do these things.

What are website analytics?
Website analytics are programs that allow you to track, measure and analyse the traffic of your website. Many UCL websites use Google Analytics, which is freely available to Google account holders.

Google Analytics contains almost 100 different reports about website traffic and provides information on a wide range of metrics, such as numbers of page hits, geographic data about visitors, which devices visitors are using, and so on.

Before getting started
It’s very easy to get lost in the huge variety of reports and data provided by Google Analytics. Before using it, it’s important to think through what you actually want to get out of such a package.

Goals
Firstly, work out what your website’s measurable goals are, and then what the key performance indicators (KPIs) might be for understanding whether these goals are being achieved.

Table 1 below lists example goals, KPIs, and (when they’re not obvious) what the metrics (i.e. the relevant units) might be for measuring these KPIs. Don’t worry about some of the terminology used here – this will be explained later:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Goal</th>
<th>KPIs</th>
<th>Metrics</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Recruit new students/conference delegates</td>
<td>Number of visitors who reach applications page/ filled application form</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disseminate research online</td>
<td>Number of research page views/ document downloads</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provide key information online that is used by prospective students, staff and other key audiences</td>
<td>User experience of site</td>
<td>Bounce rate on key landing pages</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Time spent on key landing pages</td>
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</table>
It’s really important to think about goals that have meaningful outcomes. Goals such as ‘Increasing numbers of website hits’ or ‘Building a presence on new social media platforms’ don’t tell you why these activities will help you meet your organisation’s aims.

Other uses
You may also have particular website elements that you need to find out about. For instance:

- Did recent search engine optimisation work actually increase the number of visitors coming from search engines?
- Did a change in your menu structure decrease the bounce rate of visitors in key landing pages?
- What are the most popular posts in your blog, and what is common between them (e.g. the theme of the posts, whether they contain multimedia, etc.)?
- When is the best time in the day to do maintenance work or have a website outage? (That is, what time of the day do the fewest people come to the site?)

Metrics
There are a huge number of possible metrics that Google Analytics can use to analyse KPIs. Table 2 below lists some metrics that may be useful for work with UCL websites.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Metric</th>
<th>Description (where necessary)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Provide accessible content to users of a</td>
<td>Website usage of alternative devices compared to ‘standard’ browsing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>range of devices</td>
<td>Bounce rate of mobile devices, old browsers, smartphones, etc. on key landing pages, compared to bounce rate of visitors with modern browsers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expand audience reach</td>
<td>Number of unique visitors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Number of external websites referring visitors to this website</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Number of social media followers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Develop UCL profile among international</td>
<td>Number of visitors from other countries</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>audiences</td>
<td>User experience of international audiences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Bounce rate of certain international audiences on key landing pages, compared to bounce rate of UK audiences</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Users | Number of different visitors
---|---
Session duration | The time spent on the website in one session
Exit rate | Number of visitors who leave the site immediately after visiting this page
Visitor location/language
Browser/browsing device
No. of returning visits
Referring sites | External sites linking to this site

Please note that metrics are most useful when considered in context. For instance, if the bounce rate of a webpage was very high, it may be an area of concern. However, a high bounce rate may actually be expected of certain webpages which visitors may regularly visit without needing to go to other parts of the website (e.g. returning visitors to a blog who are just checking for new posts).

**Further tips**

Google Analytics provides plenty of ways to make analysing traffic easier, such as:

- **Segments**: Take advantage of Google Analytics’ powerful segmentation tools¹. You can easily create segmented reports for particular audiences (e.g. visitors from USA; visitors from mobile devices; visitors from an email campaign) and compare how they use the website to other users. This can highlight problems on your site (e.g. a high bounce rate for visitors using a certain browser, compared with other users, could indicate that some pages may not be accessible to them).

- **Goals²**: Consider using Analytics’ goal tools to measure how often visitors achieve particular objectives - from visiting a particular page, to how many pages they visit. Analytics allows you to assign a value to a goal (e.g. £100 for a conference signup form submission). You’ll then be able to see how valuable certain pages or actions are in achieving this (e.g. how valuable a particular page was in pointing people to this signup form). Goals are another powerful tool that should certainly be considered if one of your website’s targets is to push people to a particular page or action.

¹ [http://www.google.com/support/analytics/bin/answer.py?answer=108040](http://www.google.com/support/analytics/bin/answer.py?answer=108040)

² [https://support.google.com/analytics/answer/1012040?hl=en](https://support.google.com/analytics/answer/1012040?hl=en)
Further reading and links:

- **Google Analytics** - [www.google.com/analytics](http://www.google.com/analytics)
- **How to set up Google Analytics on Silva webpages**
  [http://www.ucl.ac.uk/isd/how-to/silva-cms-support/google-analytics](http://www.ucl.ac.uk/isd/how-to/silva-cms-support/google-analytics)
- **Google Analytics Help** - [http://www.google.com/support/googleanalytics/](http://www.google.com/support/googleanalytics/)
  Full details about setting Analytics up, using it on your website, and its various reports.
- **Google Analytics Blog** - [http://analytics.blogspot.com/](http://analytics.blogspot.com/)
  Google Analytics is continually developed, and following this blog helps to keep up to date with updates.
- **Occam’s Razor** - [http://www.caushik.net/avinash/](http://www.caushik.net/avinash/)
  Analytics expert Avinash Kaushik’s blog, which covers a range of issues (and is highly recommended for those wishing to learn more in this area).