5. Taking part in dialogue about the direction of our research and teaching

Public engagement activities range from those which seek passive engagement, such as informing public groups about specific research, through to those where the agenda is driven by both members of the public and staff and/or students. The two examples below illustrate projects supported by the UCL Public Engagement Unit which aim for collaboration between patient groups and UCL staff, on a range of different aspects of the research process.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Example 11</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Public engagement in oral healthcare research, August–September 2009, Eastman Dental Institute</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The Beacon Bursary supported the organisation of focus group, with dentists, hygienists and patients on 20th August 2009. This followed two previous focus groups held in May and June (of these groups separately). The project aimed to improve the public engagement on research in oral healthcare, by seeking feedback on a funding application to the National Institute for Health Research (NIHR).

The focus group aimed to inform the development of a large grant application to the National Institute for Health Research (NIHR) through seeking feedback on the application in specific domains:

1. Research questions: Are we asking the right research questions?
2. Methods: Are we using appropriate research methods (including, types of participants, and ways of assessing outcomes, plans for analysis or bringing the data together)?
3. Reporting and dissemination: Do we have a good plan for communicating the findings?

The UCL Eastman Dental Institute has been developing a programme of studies which aims to develop a care pathway for periodontal (gum) diseases in the NHS by investigating patient experience and outcomes.

Involvement in the focus group studies has helped the project teams’ understanding of the value and importance of the public engagement and this approach to developing research ideas. The use of focus groups and public engagement to develop research has been shared. The team have discussed the focus groups with other researchers at the Eastman Dental Institute.

According to the project lead of Example 11:

"The focus groups achieved constructive comments from participants regarding the planned research. The feedback helped the team to improve the quality of the research and therefore strengthen the application".

Furthermore the project lead stated:
“Patients were impressed that their view were respected and sought. Dental professionals also reported that their understanding of patient issues and perspectives was improved”.

Example 11 illustrate public engagement projects which were organised where specific interests groups (e.g. patients, fellow practitioners) have some degree of power in influencing decisions about the direction of research being undertaken. The activities provide an opportunity for a two-way communication process between the public groups and the academic decision making bodies.

Within this project there is a clear application (i.e. funding applications, research projects) from the process of engagement. Influence is therefore a key aspect of this category: this project wanted engagement process to have a genuine impact and be seen to do so; otherwise, the process could be seen as ineffectual. If there is no detectible influence on the outcomes, be that a funding application, a conference, or a research project, the engagement exercise could be considered false or superficial.