

The Bloomsbury Festival 2013

Overview and Context

This case study outlines the learning from the UCL Public Engagement Unit's contribution to the Bloomsbury festival.

The Bloomsbury Festival is an annual, free celebration taking place across Bloomsbury. It was a programme of over 200 cultural events and activities taking place over six days (15-20th October 2013). The festival aimed to showcase art, music, dance and literature in order to celebrate the area's unique cultural identity and creative history.

This was the first time a cohesive public engagement programme has been co-ordinated by the UCL Public Engagement Unit (PEU) within the Bloomsbury Festival. This case study identifies key findings from the activities and makes recommendations for future events.



The specific aims of the UCL PEU's contribution to the Bloomsbury Festival were to:

- Create specific opportunities for public engagement at UCL;
- Expand audience and recruit new researchers for existing public engagement activities at UCL;
- Increase understanding of UCL as a entity where engagement can happen;
- Develop UCL's role in the Bloomsbury community.

Our objectives were to:

- Run 3 public engagement activities through the PEU
- Support 3 two-way activities going on elsewhere at UCL through advice and funding;
- Offer advice on other activities going on at UCL during the festival;
- Work with 1 local community group on activities.



What happened?

The UCL PEU contributed to the festival through a series of events and activities targeting a range of audiences (e.g. local residents, local workers, community groups, festival attendees). These activities were organised over a range of locations within Bloomsbury. A summary of the activities is outlined below:

- **The Ideas Salon** –12 discussion sessions led by UCL academics, attended by **234** people, spread over the weekend of the festival;
- **Bloomsbury Walks and Talks**- one location based talk lead by Professor Philip Schofield (UCL Laws) and one walking tour led by Dr Carole Reeves (UCL Science and Technology Studies), attended by **40** people;
- **Bite-Sized Bloomsbury** – 3 short lectures by UCL researchers held in Wellbeing of Women, attended by **13** local workers;
- **Night of Light** – light installation organized by Dr Kevin Mansfield, (Bartlett School of Graduate Studies) and MSc Light and Lighting students, for the opening night of the festival, attended by **c.100** people.

The UCL PEU also supported the following activities:

- **The Natural History of Poo** - coordinated by Dr Lena Ciric (UCL Civil Environmental and Geomatic Engineering), attended by **c.150** people
- **Sandwich Street a Tasty Performance**, coordinated by Dr Marina Chang (UCL Civil Environmental and Geomatic Engineering), attended by **c.100** people
- **Museum Mile Showoff**, coordinated by Dr Steve Cross (PEU), at the UCL Grant Museum, attended by **c.100** people

Facts and Figures

Total cost: **£8603** (£2,385 for PEU led activities; £5,000 funding for Sandwich Street; and £1,218 funding for the Natural History of Poo)

67 UCL students and staff at all academic levels were involved in UCL's contribution to the festival)

29 staff and **38 students** from **21** UCL departments participated

Over **730** people attended UCL activities during the festival

Emerging themes from the evaluation

The evaluation was designed and delivered by the PEU Evaluation Officer, with support from colleagues, and used the following methods: observations, a log book, open response (i.e. graffiti table cloth) for festival goers; and email feedback and interviews following the event, with a sample of UCL participants, to capture feedback and experiences.

The Bloomsbury Festival offered a valuable opportunity for UCL to engage directly with its neighbours in Bloomsbury. The public engagement programme provided an accessible route, for the audiences, into a range of subjects whilst promoting teaching and research happening at UCL. The organised activities showcased what UCL as an institution can offer not only as an academic body but as a cultural and creative institution: reinforcing UCL's role in the Bloomsbury community.

The festival also offered a chance for the researchers involved to develop their understanding of PE and the kinds of audiences that are interested in engaging with university research.

UCL's contribution to the Bloomsbury Festival was varied, in both subject matter and format; this variety offered something for everyone: as a result a range of audiences (e.g. young people, local residents, local workers, community groups) attended the events.

Integrating UCL's offer into an established festival provided a route to a new, public audience. This model also saved "time and worry" on the part of the contributors who would normally have to draw in their own audiences.

The Bloomsbury Festival established meaningful new connections, and reinforced existing ones, between UCL and local organisations/cultural institutions and between staff and students within UCL. However, it was felt that more could have been done to work with local community groups – the PEU did not manage to work with a community group in the way initially envisaged e.g. co creating an event.

All contributors were committed, enthusiastic and many respondents acknowledged the importance of contributing to the Bloomsbury Festival. For example, this was articulated by one participant who stated "It was good to contribute to the local community, to demonstrate that UCL was not stuck in an ivory tower and that the talent of the students could be displayed to the general public".

Most respondents commented upon how the experience was enjoyable and inspiring. The interactive nature of the events was commented upon, for example one contributor stated "I really enjoyed the discussion and wouldn't change any of the format or arrangements". Another UCL academic noted "It is both fun and interesting to get feedback as well. Some of the most interesting questions come from people from a very different background. It is also our responsibility to discuss the research we are doing". However, a quote from another contributor succinctly sums up the general feeling: "a worthwhile exercise".

In summary, the programme succeeded in meeting aims and objectives that were set. We have received positive comments from speakers and contributors.

Learning from the Process

What worked well?

- Integrating with existing festival meant that the planning and organisation workload was shared, and UCL could tap into a "new audience".
- Keeping things simple. The PEU offered easy and quick routes for UCL staff and students to take part in public engagement.
- Organising and supporting a diversity of activities showcased the variety of services UCL could offer.
- Planning, planning, planning. Time and effort went into ensuring that things were delivered smoothly.
- Enthusiasm. All staff and students involved were very keen to be involved, and thought it was important that UCL contributed to festival.

What could be done differently?

- Coordinate with others at UCL who are contributing to the festival (e.g. UCL Museums).
- More time could be spent building relationships with local networks and community contacts.
- Promotion of other events at the festival would have been a good idea to engage new local audiences.
- Clarity of the Bloomsbury Festival's overall aims
- Festivals offer a challenging environment (adverse weather conditions, sound bleed) and there are often unpredictabilities. It is important to accept this, but also deal with issues as they arise.

Next steps:

- The PEU have formats activities/events that can be used elsewhere (i.e. other festivals)

