

# **Evaluation of public engagement funding mechanisms: the UCL Public Engagement Unit's approach to grant funding**

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## **Executive Summary**

Between December 2008 and March 2011 73 public engagement projects have been funded by the Public Engagement Unit (PEU) through a range of funding mechanisms. The PEU have taken a fresh approach to funding public engagement activities and the mechanisms that are used are worth consideration. The PEU often get asked about their approach to funding and this document sets out the model of funding adopted.

The PEU strive towards providing ongoing support to UCL staff and students involved in public engagement activities. The development of effective working relationships between the PEU and staff and students is fundamental to achieving the broader, strategic goals of the operations of the PEU in terms of building capacity for, and sharing experience and learning from, public engagement within UCL. The PEU champion a model of funding which aims to benefit the public engagement activity delivered. The approach to funding undertaken by the UCL Public Engagement Unit challenges more traditional models of funding where the funder and the funded each have distinct, separate, or even hierarchical roles.

This document attempts to synthesise the learning and experience in this area by describing the funding process employed and sets out the key features of that approach in terms of eight principles for good grant funding (detailed in section 4). The eight key principles applied during all stages of the funding process and outlined in this document are:

- 1) Involvement and support. UCL staff and students are given the opportunity of support, advice and guidance from the PEU throughout the whole funding process, from developing the initial idea into an application to after the grant has been awarded.
- 2) Transparency. The funding processes aims to be transparent and accessible to all.

- 3) Simplicity. There is a straightforward application form and process.
- 4) A focus on outcomes. Rather than be a target or output obsessed funder, the PEU give recognition to the multiple results that public engagement activities produce, even if these aren't those originally expected.
- 5) Sharing knowledge. The PEU have knowledge and expertise in funding, planning, running, monitoring and evaluating public engagement projects. The team use this experience, as well as contacts across UCL and beyond, to, where possible, assist staff and students to carry out public work.
- 6) Informality. Creating conditions of trust and openness between funder and awardees requires the flexibility of working relationships and formal boundaries.
- 7) Guiding and steering. The PEU can play an important steering role in projects.
- 8) Supporting learning and encouraging risk. The funding schemes encourage risk, creativity and innovation on a number of levels (e.g. methods, subject matter, and the audiences). There is an emphasis on understanding and learning, both in terms of challenges and opportunities for university-public engagement, which is consistent with the ethos of the UCL PEU.

It is recognised that a diversity of projects, in size (i.e. time and budget), and nature (i.e. activities and issues covered), comprising a variety of partnerships, are being funded by the UCL Public Engagement Unit. However, there are core elements of the grant funding process, contained within this document that underpins the PEU's approach to funding.

The PEU allocate time and resources to provide learning, networking and developmental opportunities for awardees alongside the grant funding. This support can help the project leads to deliver their projects effectively, but also contributes to the development of effective working relationships between the PEU and UCL staff and students involved in public engagement activities. This approach is suitable for the PEU in order to achieve broader, strategic goals of their operations in terms of building capacity for, and sharing experience and learning from, public engagement within UCL.

## **1 Introduction**

The UCL Public Engagement Unit (PEU) is committed to increasing the activity in, capacity for, and understanding of public engagement across the university. Through funding and facilitating public engagement projects the PEU provide hands-on opportunities for staff and students to take part in public engagement activities.

Since December 2008, 73 projects (as of March 2011) have been funded by the PEU through a range of funding mechanisms, including the Beacon Bursary small grant scheme, the Beacon Fellowship, the PEU and Volunteering Services Unit's (VSU) Step Out programme, the REVEAL festival competition, the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) funded Train and Engage project, Beacon Mentorships and the Innovation Seed grant scheme. These funding schemes are detailed in the UCL-led Beacon for Public Engagement Six Month Review reports (March 2010, September 2010 and March 2011) and the UCL web pages (<http://www.ucl.ac.uk/public-engagement/funding>).

The PEU have taken a fresh approach to funding public engagement activities and the mechanisms that are used are worth consideration. The PEU strive towards providing ongoing support to UCL staff and students involved in public engagement activities. The development of effective working relationships between the PEU and staff and students is fundamental to achieving the broader, strategic goals of the operations of the PEU in terms of building capacity for, and sharing experience and learning from, public engagement within UCL. The PEU often get asked about their approach to funding and this document sets out the model of funding adopted. The document does not cover what has been funded or should be funded, rather it attempts to synthesise the learning and experience in this area by describing the funding process employed and sets out the key features of that approach in terms of eight principles for good grant funding.

There are many different types or models of funding that exist to support public engagement activities (e.g. contracts, small grants, programme grants, people-centred awards). Whatever the approach taken it is likely that the relationship between the funder and those receiving the funding (i.e. the awardees or funded) will involve certain exchanges beyond the financial sum. In practice the level of involvement of the funder may vary, for instance some funding is awarded with precise specifications on what is to be done by whom and how in the form of a

detailed contract (e.g. the 2003-2006 UCL-led knowledge transfer UrbanBuzz programme), and some funding mechanisms are open and flexible allowing the awardees to plan out their goals and how they will achieve them (e.g. the current UCL Volunteering Services Unit's Innovations Programme). Whatever the nature and structure of the funding relationship the funders' role is key; they have a significant opportunity to shape the direction and scope of activity or project undertaken.

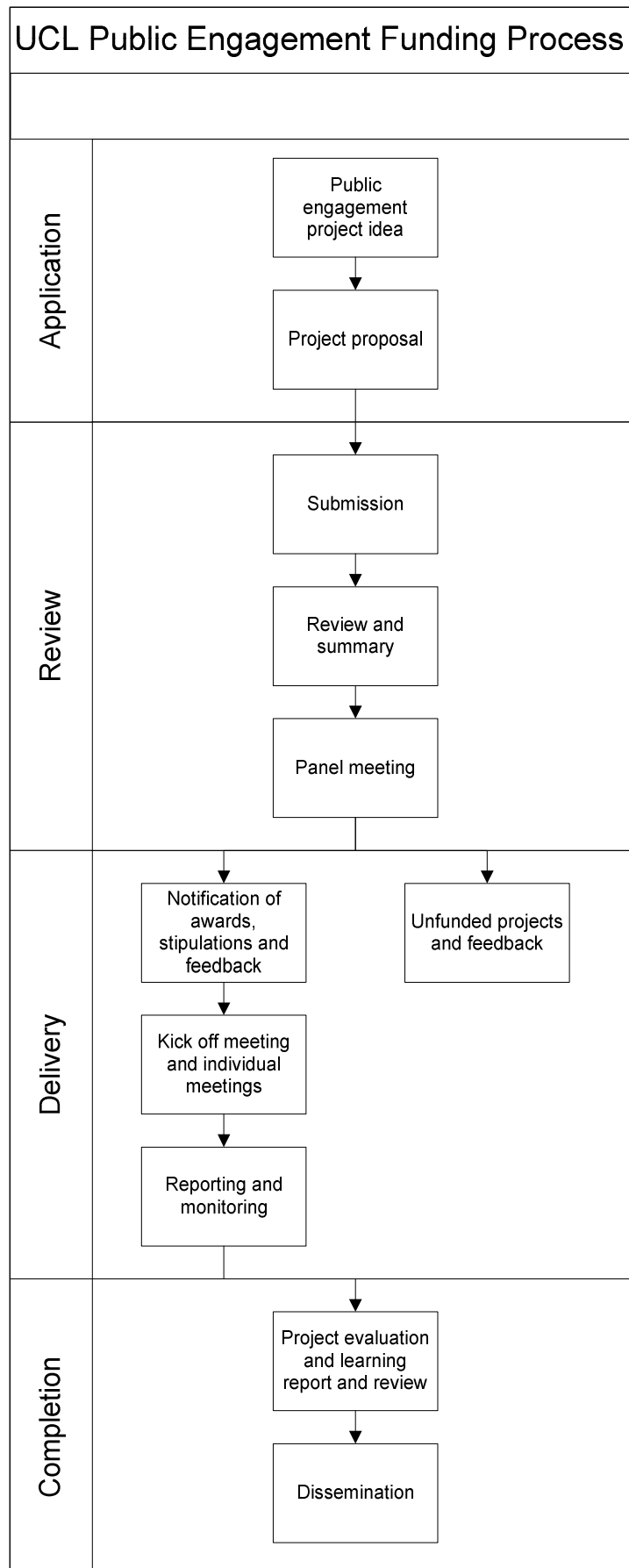
The UCL Public Engagement Unit champion an approach to funding which encourages the formation of relationships between them (in their role as a funder) and those receiving financial support in the form of grants for public engagement projects. The funding relationship strives to be more than the PEU handing over money, UCL staff and students are given the opportunity of support, advice and guidance throughout the whole funding process, from the initial application to after the grant has been awarded. By taking this approach the PEU aim to improve the terms of funding to maximise the capacity of UCL staff and students to deliver 'successful' public engagement projects.

## **2 The grant funding process**

This section outlines the process of funding adopted by the PEU. There are ten steps which can be grouped into four distinct, yet interlinked, stages to describe the funding process adopted by the PEU. This interpretation of the PEU funding model is illustrated within Figure 1.

The **first stage** is the 'application stage', which incorporates the generation of project ideas and applications for public engagement projects and activities. Some funding opportunities are based on complex guidelines and application forms. The funding opportunities provided by the PEU, however, have a straightforward, simple application process. Applications for grants are via a short form, on average two pages in length, downloadable (with application guidance) from the PEU web pages. The application form was developed following a brief consultation exercise with a sample of UCL staff that are active in public engagement.

Figure 1: An outline of the PEU funding model



In terms of the support offered by the PEU those interested in applying for funding are offered advice and guidance during the application process. As a result, the PEU concentrate time and resources on helping staff and students who request support through the application process (e.g. meetings to discuss ideas, responding to queries, reviewing draft applications). The nature of support is responsive varying in scope depending upon the request. For example, during the application stage rather than rejecting unsuitable applications outright some applicants are directed to other UCL services (e.g. UCL's Communications and Media Office, the Widening Participation Unit, the Volunteering Services Unit) or relevant external agencies or other funders and event organisers (e.g. the Wellcome Collection, the Dana Centre) . If appropriate, the PEU intervene to try and ensure the development of an idea into a proposal. Thus, the PEU do not just process applications, they can, if requested, assist the initial, exploration stages of project development.

Guidance for applicants is provided on the UCL public engagement web pages in the form of guidelines. The guidelines are adjusted at each successive call for applications incorporating learning and feedback from the previous calls. Furthermore, a completed application form for an example public engagement project (an educational comedy night) is also downloadable from the web page to provide a real life, worked out example of how to translate an idea into a project proposal, with specific aims, objectives and a budget.

**Stage two** of the process can be described as the 'review stage'. Applicants are asked to briefly summarise the proposed project, the intended audience, predicted outcomes, and any proposed evaluation on the application form. The applications also request a simple budget breakdown. Following the deadline, the applications are read, reviewed and summarised by two members of the PEU. The applications and summaries are sent to a review panel, who decide upon how the funding is allocated. The panel judge the application on four broad criteria: 1) the idea, 2) project delivery, 3) impact on the public and 4) impact on UCL staff involved. Generally in practice, the panel consists of four members of UCL staff, chaired by the Director of Museums, Collections and Public Engagement.

**Stage three** of the funding process is the 'delivery stage'; projects have been reviewed, selected and awarded funding, possibly with stipulations or

recommendations from the panel. Applications that have been unsuccessful are offered detailed feedback from the PEU documenting the panel's discussion (where available) and decision. However, not all unsuccessful applications request detailed feedback on their application. A small proportion of unsuccessful applicants reapply for funding in subsequent rounds. An evaluation exercise is currently being undertaken to track the outcomes of projects and applications that were not funded under the PEU's funding schemes.

The grants provided by the PEU vary, some cover the full costs of a project, and others are only a contribution; some grants cover one activity or event, whilst others cover a programme of activities. Funded projects and the project team are detailed on the UCL public engagement web pages (<http://www.ucl.ac.uk/public-engagement/funding>).

Those awarded funding under a round are brought together at the start at a 'kick-off meeting'. There are three main aims of this meeting: 1) to introduce the awardees to one another; 2) to inform awardees of the practical information about beginning the project and give an opportunity for those awarded funding to ask questions; 3) to inform those awarded on what support the PEU can provide and what is expected from them.

Public funding is often associated with burdensome monitoring and reporting requirements. The PEU stipulate relatively little monitoring requirements, but offer support to maximise the chances of the grant being used well. Ideally there is a continuous conversation between the PEU, as project funder, monitor, supporter and advisor, and the awardees throughout the life of the funded project. In practice this can take different forms: a member of the PEU maybe a representative on a project committee, attend project meetings is as a 'project partner', or receive project updates. The offer of support is open to all awardees, but the take-up is not universal. For some the relationship is purely limited to the administration of the grant.

For larger financial grants (such as those funded under the Innovations Seed) the PEU stage funding; giving 50% up-front and the rest at a halfway point once an interim report has been submitted where the PEU are happy that the project is achieving what it is supposed to achieve (and that the money is not being diverted or the project sidelined).

**Stage four** is the completion stage, which involves the completion of the project, subsequent write up in the form of a report and dissemination.

Once the funded project is completed the PEU request that the project lead completes a project evaluation and learning form. This form aims to provide a simple way to document what the funded project has done and achieved. The project lead is asked to reflect on their experience, explain any problems they had, summarise what they have learned, and lessons they would pass on to other projects or that can be applied elsewhere. Although a template is provided, the nature and scope of the completed form will depend on the project undertaken.

The completed report is reviewed by the UCL PEU, usually generating questions and responses back to the project lead, and then summarised for the PEU's records. The PEU are keen to share experiences of public engagement, thus some completed reports (with approval from the project lead) are published on the UCL website, used to develop UCL public engagement case studies (<http://www.ucl.ac.uk/public-engagement/research/CaseStudies>) or circulated directly between other staff and students interested in undertaking similar or related projects.

UCL staff and students who have been involved in the grant schemes are also given the opportunity to share their public engagement experiences and projects at the Annual UCL Public Engagement Symposium, run by the PEU. The symposium is one means of sharing current engagement practice, in all its many forms, between staff and students across the university.

### **3 Grant funding in practice**

Due to the nature of the UCL PEU's operations, a responsive, qualitative evaluation approach has been adopted, incorporating a range of methods including the analysis of documents and reports, semi-structured interviews and participant observations.

The PEU's approach to funding is strong on the necessary processes and procedures for both the developing of proposals and the commissioning of projects. Opportunities for advice and support are provided for prospective applicants alongside comprehensive guidelines which are made available on the UCL public



engagement web pages. These cover information on the procedures and also the criteria by which proposals are judged.

Despite the variety of projects funded under the PEU funding schemes and the variations in support provided (both in terms of extent and type) the monitoring and evaluation undertaken indicates certain common experiences and emerging themes related to the approach to funding. One of the themes emerging from the project learning and evaluation reports and discussions with funded projects was how the positive attitudinal qualities of the PEU enhanced the grant funding process; making a crucial difference in the challenging reality of managing and accounting for a small award within the university.

“From the very beginning it was great to receive so much support from the Public Engagement Unit ... This support really helped to shape the project plans and particularly helped to organise the UCL south cloisters exhibition. This support helped to widen the engagement of the project to include members of staff, students and the public in the UK.” (Beacon Bursary Project Evaluation and Learning Report, January 2011).

“Even with the extremely helpful, imaginative and patient support from the Public Engagement Unit and elsewhere in UCL, activities like this depend on having administrative backup in the home department”. (Beacon Bursary Project Evaluation and Learning Report, December 2009)

The encouragement and support offered by the PEU, including informal phone conversations, face-to-face meetings, networking and training opportunities, was important to funded projects, not only because it helped staff and students to realise and then utilise their own skills and capabilities, but also because personalised contact can build trust and long-standing relationships between people.

“Being able to meet [with the PEU] individually to discuss ways in which we could promote and manage our event and how to evaluate it was very helpful. We used some of these ideas and in the process have learnt new skills (facebook groups, eventbrite, post-its to capture ideas)” (Beacon Bursary Project Evaluation and Learning Report, August 2010).

“In light of the project’s success, I would hope further Beacon funding will be applied for by The Slade [UCL’s School of Art]”. (Beacon Bursary Project Evaluation and Learning Report, March 2010).

For many, the focus on delivering a personalised service was vital when circumstances changed, requiring a shift in project plan, direction or budget.

“The [project] aims developed further in discussion with the UCL Public Engagement Unit to include:

- a. Developing engagement understanding and expertise at UCL
- b. Sharing the experiences with UCL researchers
- c. Evaluating the experience of focus group participants and facilitator towards single culture i.e. professional alone or mixed culture (professionals and patients)” (Beacon Bursary Project Evaluation and Learning Report, October 2010).

Some of those awarded funding reflected upon the specific advice and guidance given by the PEU, which included help in organising and planning the events and activities. For example, when asked to reflect upon what things worked well and why within their funded project a project lead stated:

“The day was a success largely because of the work put in ... We took advice from the Public Engagement Unit and attended PEU meetings ... We were helped by advice from the PEU about devising the feedback form, ordering tables and boards, etc”. (Beacon Bursary Project Evaluation and Learning Report, April 2010).

Others noted how the PEU provided opportunities for networking and brokerage:

“The UCL public engagement team were particularly helpful in pointing me to relevant people to help with various issues”. (Beacon Bursary Project Evaluation and Learning Report, December 2009)

The support and resources which make the difference between challenges and opportunities within planning and delivering a project can be relatively small: hire of a

meeting room, ideas on how to promote a project, making contact with people who have undertaken similar initiatives. However, providing grants without such support mechanisms means that staff and students who already possess the skills to deliver are likely to succeed and less experienced staff and students may find the process difficult. It is important to note that for some project the support of the PEU became an essential part of their project both during and after their funded projects (e.g. as a steering group member, project partners, promoter, trainer and/or advisor), while for others their relationship was purely limited to the administration of the award. Some note how they obtained guidance and advice from others with similar experience, both inside and outside the university:

“Those with experience of PE within healthcare services have alerted us to a range of challenges that we had perhaps underestimated ... We feel we need to work more closely with such experienced individuals and organisations in order to overcome these challenges and this has led us to make some amendments to our plans”.  
(Innovation Seed Interim Report, 2011)

Interim reports and project evaluation and learning forms provide an opportunity for those awarded funding to reflect on their experience, explain any problems they had, summarise what they have learned. Through such formal feedback mechanisms the PEU not only capture the achievements and challenges of the funded projects, but also identify areas where they can improve practice:

“I wish I had known how much effort training and finding volunteers would take” (from a Beacon Bursary Project Evaluation and Learning Report, January 2011)

“The project needed more direction from the outset, a more coherent plan. As mentioned above [in the report], the flexibility of the project had advantages but it did make the process stressful for all involved”.  
(Innovation Seed Project Evaluation and Learning Report, March 2010)

#### **4 Principles for effective funding**

The PEU champion a model of funding which aims to benefit the public engagement activity delivered and the people involved in delivering it. The approach to funding undertaken by the UCL Public Engagement Unit challenges more traditional models of funding where the funder and the funded each have distinct, separate, or even hierarchical roles. Eight key principles are applied during all stages of the funding process:

- **Involvement and support.** UCL staff and students are given the opportunity of support, advice and guidance from the PEU throughout the whole funding process, from developing the initial idea into an application to after the grant has been awarded. There is a clear separation between the support provided and the funding decision-making process as members of the PEU are not on the funding panel.
- **Transparency.** The funding processes aims to be transparent and accessible to all. Transparency is applied in many different ways throughout the funding process: for example, there are clear guidelines regarding the application process and funding criteria for those seeking funding; the panel members involved in reaching funding decisions are given the applications along with comprehensive summaries of those applications; information on the grants awarded are available on the PEU web pages. Furthermore the strategic goals of the PEU are outlined in funding documentation and subsequent meetings (e.g. kick-off meeting).
- **Simplicity.** There is a straightforward application form and process. The simple structure of the form is suitable for encouraging diversity of the public engagement projects – not just in terms of disciplines but also the types of activities that could be undertaken.
- **A focus on outcomes.** The PEU motivate staff and students to think through the potential and wide-ranging outcomes from their public engagement projects and activities. Outcomes relate to the changes resulting from projects and activities, project leads are encouraged to think about outcomes (potential and actual) throughout the whole funding process, from setting aims in the application to reflecting upon the project's achievements in the evaluation and learning report. Rather than be a target or output obsessed funder, the PEU give recognition to the multiple results that public engagement activities produce, even if these aren't those originally expected.

- **Sharing knowledge.** The PEU have knowledge and expertise in funding, planning, running, monitoring and evaluating public engagement projects. The team use this experience, as well as contacts across UCL and beyond, to, where possible, assist staff and students to carry out public work.
- **Informality.** Creating conditions of trust and openness between funder and awardees requires the flexibility of working relationships and formal boundaries. The contact between the PEU and awardees can build an arena to share experiences and openly tackle any issues or problems when they arise.
- **Guiding and steering.** The PEU can play an important steering role in projects. For example, much of the progress in monitoring and evaluation of public engagement projects has been led by the PEU. The PEU encourage requests for evaluation to be included in grant applications, and suggest to applicants that it is worth incorporating in their project plans.
- **Supporting learning and encouraging risk.** The funding schemes encourage risk, creativity and innovation on a number of levels; in terms of methods used to engage (e.g. drama, art, debate), subject matter considered, the audiences involved (e.g. youth groups, patients) and individuals involved (i.e. those with limited engagement experience). There is an emphasis on understanding and learning, both in terms of challenges and opportunities for university-public engagement, which is consistent with the ethos of the UCL PEU.

## 5 Conclusion

It is recognised that a diversity of projects, in size (i.e. time and budget), and nature (i.e. activities and issues covered), comprising a variety of partnerships, are being funded by the UCL Public Engagement Unit. However, there are core elements of the grant funding process, contained within this document, that underpins the PEU's approach to funding.

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the PEU in order to achieve broader, strategic goals of their operations in terms of building capacity for, and sharing experience and learning from, public engagement within UCL.