

Evaluating your public events

This guide is aimed at staff and students across UCL who are putting on events with a public audience in mind. It will help you to define your reasons for hosting an event and to understand how well your event has succeeded in fulfilling your own aims.

This document has been prepared by staff of the UCL Public Engagement Unit, who have a lot of experience in putting on events and in their evaluation. It shares some of the lessons we've learned (often the hard way!) and some of the best ideas we've seen other people using.

1. Why evaluate?

Events cost money, and they take time to organise. They can be a fantastic method of connecting members of the public with your work. They can also send all the wrong messages, by alienating an audience with their format or content.

Evaluation is essential to learn from events. The benefits of good evaluation include: providing evidence of what works and doesn't work; improving practice and performance; showing others that you are effective, and understanding the impacts of your work. Evaluation can be useful to provide feedback to your funders and partners, which can ultimately help to justify future funding for events. A funder who can see that an applicant is committed to evaluation knows that their money won't be wasted. Even if the applicant is trying experimental events that might not succeed in their aims, the learning about why this happens will be valuable to other event organisers.

Evaluation involves monitoring, but they aren't the same thing:

Evaluation is the process of measuring event success
Monitoring is the collection of data about your event

2. How to evaluate?

2.1 Aims

The first question to ask yourself, before planning your event, is why you are doing it in the first place. You can't tell whether your event was a success unless you have decided what it was supposed to accomplish. A good event has an impact, on the participants, the audience or both. In the UCL Public Engagement Unit, we often think of these possible impacts on a grid such as this:

	Knowledge and awareness	Attitudes	Skills	Empowerment
Participants (i.e. staff)				
Audience (i.e. publics)				

The main funders of academic-public engagement use similar tables to judge the impact of events.

First of all, it's important to know the difference between aims and objectives:

Aims are the changes you hope to bring about as a result of what you're doing
Objectives are the things you do in order to make these changes happen

A typical aim would be 'to increase Londoners awareness of UCL's work in nanotechnology'. This would lead to the objective 'to host a series of public events that effectively increase this awareness'. Aims should be as specific and detailed as possible, as they will form the basis for any evaluation undertaken.

Before you plan your event, all the people involved in putting the event need to agree on your aims– this will make life much easier for you as the event is put together, and will make it easy to judge success (since you will all share the same definition of success).

2.2 The planning stage: objectives

Once you have your aims, you can begin to shape your objectives. A big part of this will be thinking about the audience for any events you organise. If your aim is to 'increase Londoners awareness of UCL's work in nanotechnology', for example, your event needs to be held in London, advertised in London, and needs to attract an audience who are not UCL staff, and who aren't already well-informed about UCL's nanotechnology research. You can be even more precise about your audience, for example intending to reach 'residents of the Kings Cross area between the ages of 20-40'. This sort of precision will help you shape your event, because the more your audience have in common with one another, the more your event can be designed with their shared interests and learning styles in mind.

Once you start thinking about the audience, you will realize very quickly that in order to attract a specific group of people, you need to think about what they want from an event. You might have been planning a formal consultation event, but will this work for your audience if they are used to informal events? Will the lecture you were planning really be the best way to attract and engage young adults who aren't used to listening to one speaker for an hour?

You'll also need to think about how to reach the audience by advertising the event in places where they look. A lot of event organizers don't think about this, and some of them advertise 'public' events by UCL all-staff email. This is an effective way to get bums on seats, but doesn't reach anyone outside the University (i.e. the event isn't public at all!).

You'll also need to think about what you want to learn from your evaluation of the event. If you have filled in more than one box of the grid in part 2.1, which ones matter the most to you? What questions do you have about your audience's existing knowledge, awareness, attitudes, skills or empowerment?

All these questions will, eventually, give indicators that can be used to measure the success of your event. There's no one-size fits all indicator, you have to determine your own, based on what you are planning and hope to achieve.

Evaluation is research, and can be treated in the same way as any experiment. After your first event, you might want to take standard elements of your event (i.e. venue, audience, learning) and vary them to see if this changes the impact of the event.

2.3 Undertaking the evaluation

Once you know what you want to evaluate there are lots of different methods and models that can be drawn upon. The more you think about your aims, the more you will be drawn towards particular methods of evaluation. The clearer you are in your objectives, the more you will be able to use 'monitoring' to judge your success (for example, to find out whether you have attracted your target audience).

The table below outlines some of the most common evaluation techniques, providing a guide to encourage event organisers to think through and choose the most appropriate techniques to evaluate their event. You shouldn't restrict yourself to this list – if your thinking about your aims has given you ideas for new and better ways to measure success, don't be afraid to use them!

Technique	Numbers	Strengths	Weaknesses	Who to use it with and when to use it
Individual interviews	Likely to be low (below 5) for a 'live' event because of time constraints, however you could undertake in-depth interviews post event	Great to understand different people's experiences of being involved. Allows you to explore in-depth reflections, and can uncover surprising findings.	Interviews can be staff intensive. There is a limit to how many interviews you can conduct, so you might end up with small numbers. You can end up with a skewed sample.	Any person that you require more in-depth and qualitative answers from. Useful to use at the end of the event, or anytime post event.
Questionnaires	Potentially everyone who comes to an event (if you handout enough copies or collect enough email addresses). In practice 30% is a decent rate of return.	Potentially big data sets. Multiple choice questions are better for providing statistics, but you do need enough people to complete them for the statistics to mean anything.	Questionnaires do not tend to access the underlying reasons for responses; the why's and how's. Only interested people will respond. Answers will be limited to pre-chosen questions (unlike interviews).	Can be used with everyone who comes to your event, immediately after the event. Usually self completing (handed out on paper, or later online).
Observations	Dependent on the number of observers.	Useful for studying and gathering information on an activity (what happens, what someone does or how they behave). Uncovers what people really do, rather than what they say they do.	Only useful for some participatory and interactive events. Observations can be very subjective: a template should be generated outlining the activities to be recorded.	The event planning and the event itself can be observed (e.g. team, audience/participants). Most useful for participatory and interactive events.
Focus Groups	Dependent on budget and the need to evaluate with different audiences. Focus groups work best with 6-8 people.	Useful for organised discussion with a group of individuals to understand their views and experiences of an event. More qualitative information than a questionnaire will provide you (the how's and why's) and will take less time than administering several individual interviews.	Focus groups require good mediation. As it is an open-ended process, you may not get the precise answers that you would expect from a questionnaire or interview. The size and composition of the group are important considerations.	Can be used with a selection of the event team or audience. Most useful after the event.
Poster exercise	Potentially everyone who comes to the event.	Useful for simply and visually displaying evaluation categories. The technique is useful to gauge and compare opinions on a range different aspects, criteria or qualities of an event. It is an excellent visual way to understand different peoples' opinions and experiences of an event.	Openness and honesty: if undertaken as a group exercise look out for shy individuals who may feel intimidated by the situation and require encouragement.	Could be used with all event attendees. Could be undertaken both at the start and end of an event.

The important thing is to collect evidence that relates to your initial aims. This is the evidence that will be most useful for future events, and this is the sort of information that funders are keen to see. The object of evaluation is to allow you to know whether you have succeeded in your own terms.

3. What to do once your evaluation is complete

Good evaluation will be useful to you, because it will help you to improve your future events. It will also be useful to other people, and therefore you should write it up in a format that other people can use and understand. A short 'evaluation report', detailing what your event was, what your aims were, who attended, how you evaluated and what you found out, doesn't take long to prepare if you have followed the process in this guide.

You could share the final report with other people in your department, as well as supplying the UCL Public Engagement Unit with a copy that they can share across the University. If your event has been funded, your funder will also want a copy of the report.

Don't be afraid of sharing the evaluation if you find that you haven't met your aims well. We've all taken part in lots of activities that didn't meet their aims – the crucial thing is to learn for next time, rather than continuing to repeat the same mistakes. Once you've evaluated a couple of events you'll very quickly spot issues with events run by other people who aren't evaluating properly, aren't learning how to define their aims and are missing opportunities in making their events a success.

4. Further information

UCL works closely with the National Co-ordinating Centre for Public Engagement, who are trying to improve interaction between all UK universities and members of the public. Their website includes a page collating the very best guides to evaluation:

<http://nccpe.pbworks.com/evaluation%20toolkits>

The UCL Public Engagement Unit are also happy to help with evaluation of public events, and can also advise you on how to put together your events to make success more likely.

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