

# Interviews

## Overview

Interviews are a great method to gain an understanding of the interaction between different project partners, stakeholders, and staff and/or participants experiences of being involved in a project or activity.

In general, people enjoy telling stories which makes the interview a really valuable evaluation tool. As people tell stories, they reflect on things in a way that they don't when just giving answers through a survey, which means that further subtleties and details can be drawn out. For example, a basic comment such as, "It was difficult", can be developed into a more useful answer by asking, "Give me an example of what you mean by that?"

## Why use it?

Almost without exception people like being asked what they think and being listened to, as long as you can relax them into the conversation. On the whole, once the interview has been agreed to, most people enjoy the experience.

Specifically, for evaluating public engagement projects and/or activities, interviews can be used to understand:

- the project process (the management, the partnership, the delivery);
- stakeholders' role and level of involvement in the project;
- expectations and aims of being involved in the project;
- feedback on the project, particularly feelings about the project outcomes and outputs;
- what changes, if any, have taken place;
- potential impact of the project on individuals;
- what worked well and what didn't work;
- how the project could have been improved;
- understandings of certain concepts or issues (i.e. science, education, public engagement).

## Instructions for use

Interviews can be structured or semi-structured. Semi-structured interviews give the interviewer the opportunity to be flexible and adaptable, therefore eliciting reflective discussions rather than 'yes' or 'no' answers.

There are some general, basic rules for conducting interviews:

- Ensure that the questions are worded in a simple clear language, free of unnecessary jargon.
- The interview should, if possible, be recorded and transcribed.
- Interviews should preferably be conducted face-to-face. However, if worded appropriately, they can be undertaken over the phone.
- Whenever possible, ask people to prepare in advance in some way, this can be through completing a very short survey to get them thinking, or by sending them some general information about the purpose or scope of the evaluation.

- It is useful to start the interview with a general introduction, explaining to the interviewee why you want to talk to them (e.g. in order for them to give their opinion on the project they have been involved in) and the purpose of the evaluation (e.g. to explore stakeholders' experiences and identify key lessons learnt from the project).
- Think about the sequence of questions; it might be useful to start the interview with some general, background or introductory questions which lead into more specific or probing questions.
- An interview is more than a conversation. The interviewer needs to have certain skills; questioning, probing, asking for clarification, listening, asking for explanations, posing alternatives. The interview engages in 'active' listening, which shows the interviewee that close attention is being paid to what they say, whilst also trying to ensure that the interviewee is focused on the subject under discussion.
- Think about the type of questions you are asking. In general, it is good to use a mixture of very straightforward and more reflective questions in order to provide two types of findings: 1. straightforward simple answers to some questions that can be compared or listed against each other; 2. interesting stories or narratives that are of value as individual assessments.

### **Who to use it with**

Any project partners, staff or students involved, and/or participants from whom you require more in-depth and qualitative answers.

### **When to use it**

It is probably best to use interviews at the end of a project or even after some time has passed to allow reflection following the completion of the project.

### **Limitations**

- Interviews do take time to organise, conduct and analyse. There is a limit to how many interviews you can conduct, but if you organise them well you can pack a lot into a short time period.
- Phone interviews are acceptable, and can be useful, particularly for the follow up interviews after a project is completed. Telephone interviews need to be relatively short as people can feel imposed upon. Do remember to check that the interview takes places at a time that suits the interviewee.
- It is important to remember that people's perception of a project or activity will change over time. Interviews that are held some time after a project or activity is completed need to be qualified by the term 'with hindsight'. As an aside, it is always interesting and useful to see what people remember and how they remember it, and what is still important to those involved in a project weeks or months later.
- Interviews are unpredictable; some will be rewarding, providing you with more information than you anticipated and perhaps the opportunity for a new project, however, some might be brief and uninformative.
- Arranging interviews with people can take time. Stick with it and try to be accommodating with times and locations. It is also important to know when to call it a day!

### **Considerations**

Assure interviewees that their responses will be confidential: good practice is to ask the interviewee to sign a consent form.

If you are collating any personal or sensitive information, you may need to assure respondents that their responses will be kept confidential. You may also need to declare the collection and storage of any personal data (i.e. information about a living person by which that person can be identified), under the Data Protection Act. More information on this matter can be obtained from your departments data protection officer and <http://www.ucl.ac.uk/efd/recordsoffice/data-protection/>

When projects and activities don't go to plan, interviews can provide valuable information about what went wrong, but individuals need to be assured that their answers are confidential if you want honesty.

## Timing

The time needed to undertaken interviews depends upon the questions you ask and who you are talking to. In general, you should allow at least half an hour to undertake each interview, bearing in mind that the timing of a semi-structured interview can always run over or under. Also, do not forget to build in time to write up notes and observations from the interview.

## Link with other methodologies

A semi-structured interview can be a good way to build on findings from other methods, such as surveys.

## Further reading

There are lots of articles and books on conducting interviews, below are some examples that come recommended by researchers within the field of social science:

May, T. (1993) Social research: issues, methods and process, Open University Press: Buckingham, Philadelphia

Kvale, S. (1996) Interviews: an Introduction to Qualitative Research Interviewing, Sage Publications: London

Denzin, N. K. and Lincoln, Y. S. (1994) Handbook of Qualitative Research, Sage: Thousand Oaks, CA

Bryman, A. (2004) Social Research Methods, Oxford University Press: Oxford

## Example 01

The interview guide below was used in the evaluation of 'Cradle to Grave: A learning initiative for Women Prisoners', a project supported by the UCL-led Beacon for Public Engagement programme.

The evaluation of the project aimed to explore stakeholders' (UCL staff, artists, museum curators, prison officers) experiences and identify key lessons learnt from the project which could be shared more widely.

### Introduction

- Thank you

- Who I am and why I am here evaluating
- The focus of the evaluation
- Consent form

**Broad project questions, to give an understand of how different stakeholders view to project:**

- Can you start by describing the project to me?
- When did the project commence?
- What were the initial aims of the project?
- Who would you say have been the key partners in the project? What were their roles?

**Your involvement**

- What has been your role in the project?
- How were you involved, for example what processes and activities did you take part in?
- Were there any reasons why you didn't get involved in certain processes or activities?
- Why did you get involved in this project?

**Outcomes and Impacts**

- Would like to think about some of the changes that have taken place as a result of this project. These could be changes to you, to partners or to the participants.
- Can you describe to me what changes have taken place as result of undertaking this project?
- WHY have you focussed on these aspects?
- Part of the aim of the project is to encourage learning and develop skills of people involved. Do you think the project contributes to these aims? What have you learnt? What skills have you developed? Note, these can be broad.

**General questions**

- Do you feel the project has met it initial aims?
- Did it turn out like you expected?
- What do you think was the biggest challenge within this project? How was it overcome?
- What do you think were the key successes? Why do you think they are successful?
- In general, thinking about the project as a whole what do you think has "worked" and what hasn't "worked"? Please elaborate: why do you think that is....

**Moving on**

- What do you want to achieve next?
- What do you need to do to achieve it?

## Example 02

The example below is taken from the evaluation of Bright Club. Bright Club is a public engagement project organised by the UCL Public Engagement Unit. Reactionnaires, of which this is an example, are face to face short direct questions to structure informal interviews with some of Bright Club's audience members. Reactionnaires have been undertaken during the interval and at the end of the event. The focus of this part of the evaluation is on enjoyment and experience.

**Reactionnaires:** Overall, what did you think of tonight's event? Did you find the event interesting, stimulating, boring?

What did you like best about the event? What did you like least about the event?

Do you feel that you have learnt something from the event? If so, what did you learn from the

event? What could be improved? Is there anything the team should do differently next time?

