Pitfalls for Public Engagement Funding Applications

The Public Engagement Unit at UCL was established in 2008 and since then, we have had over 1,000 applications to our funding streams. This document outlines some of the most common pitfalls we see in applications and is a reference for anyone applying to our funding schemes or to external public engagement opportunities.

We always recommend that applicants contact the Public Engagement Unit before applying for our funds, and we also offer advice to anyone applying for external engagement funding. For more information, please contact publicengagement@ucl.ac.uk.

Definitions of Public Engagement
Public Engagement has many differing definitions depending on the funder or area that you might be working in. The Public Engagement Unit at UCL follows the National Coordinating Centre for Pubic Engagement's (NCCPE) definition:
https://www.publicengagement.ac.uk/explore-it/what-public-engagement

There are different definitions of public engagement, and engagement can cover a range of university agendas (i.e. volunteering, innovation and enterprise, public policy). As such, it is important to make sure that your application fits with the type of engagement the funding scheme supports. For instance our Beacon Bursary scheme will not provide support for projects that have a focus on: one-way communication or dissemination (e.g. public lectures, media appearances), recruitment of participants for research, affecting policy change or working with schools for reasons not linked directly to your research or teaching. Criteria change from scheme to scheme so make sure you chose the right scheme for you. If the criteria of an application do not fit with your project, look for other, more appropriate avenues of funding.

Audience needs
Have you considered what the public group(s) will gain from taking part in your project? The strongest applications that we receive articulate the benefits of the project for you as an applicant and for the public participants that are involved. A public engagement proposal that centres on the needs of all project partners is more likely to meet our expectations of a mutually beneficial activity and will show the panel that you have considered the nuances that your public partners will bring to the project.

Planning a public engagement project raises a number of questions that must be considered. Applications our panels fund describe well-thought-through projects, in which applicants have contemplated their audiences' needs, such as the following: Have you thought about how you will reach your audience or public partner and how you will ensure that their voice is heard within the project? What will the public group(s) need (e.g. training, advice, reimbursement, catering, childcare) to ensure their participation will be willing and useful? How will you ensure that you've addressed the needs that you initially identified? Are there ethical concerns for the groups you are proposing to work with?

No community involvement at an early stage
Some project leaders who aim to involve community or public groups with their work do not involve those same groups in the planning stages of the project. Involving the intended external groups early on in the planning stages – to ask them what they want to gain from the process, to gauge their skills and what they can bring to the project and to find out their expectations – can ensure a better collaboration and alignment of aims.

Without early involvement from your identified external group(s), the funder may feel that this is a project that uses public groups rather than creates useful and balanced partnerships with those groups.

Starting with an activity or format
We find that project leaders who start with an understanding of who they want to engage with, and why the engagement needs to be done, tend to run more effective public engagement projects. A good idea of which specific audiences might participate, and an understanding of those participants' – and your own – needs, is an excellent basis for developing a public engagement idea and choosing a suitable format. Once you know with whom you want to engage, the ideas for what will actually happen can even be done, if appropriate, in partnership with your intended audience.

The Public Engagement Unit strives to fund projects that facilitate conversation and create opportunities for engagement and as such, we do not base our decisions simply on the types of activity you propose.

Appropriate expertise is missing from the application
Have you considered or approached the most obvious stakeholders and experts for your project? For example, if your project proposes to create a collaborative film with homeless people, who on your project team has practical experience with filming and editing? Who will help you to contact the homeless people and help you to facilitate the project? Can you bring in appropriate expertise or use some of the funding to train your team?

Even if your project does not align with their aims, or is outside the remit of these external stakeholders, it is important to show any funding panel that you have given the most appropriate groups due consideration and that, where possible, you will create an opportunity for others' expertise to contribute to your project. It is often helpful to have these conversations early, to show the panel that you have a clear sense of future partners, but at the very least, ensure that your application acknowledges people you intend to contact and collaborate with in the event of your success.

Issues with evaluation
The Public Engagement Unit has a focus both on evaluating our own work, and on encouraging others to do the same. Applications to our funding schemes are often rejected by our panels due to a lack of thinking in this respect and in particular, underdeveloped evaluation plans or techniques that do not appropriately assess whether the project has achieved what it set out to do. Other funders are likely to have similar concerns.

Linking your evaluation plans to your project aims is of paramount importance. While interesting methods of evaluation are encouraged, the funding panel will want to see the most relevant and appropriate means of evaluation used for your project. If you are applying for our funding, we want you to learn from your successes or failures and we want to learn from them too: the funding panel will expect a clear, appropriate and useful

evaluation framework to achieve this. It is also crucial to think through how you will share the learning from your project, and with whom.

Technical language in application
While technical language might be part of your everyday, the diverse selection of people on most funding panels may not be familiar with the intricacies of what you do. As such, try to keep your application free of jargon. If you do need to use technical language or acronyms, please explain their meaning. We recommend that, to help with this, you ask a critical friend from outside your discipline to review your application.

Ineligible costs
Each funding stream will have different expectations of how you will spend the money. Most of our streams, for example, do not support international travel or the buying out of your UCL contract.

Along with this, please make sure that your budget is sensible and appropriate. Get quotes or estimates on your costs beforehand so that you can make a credible case for what you will spend the funding on. Appropriate costings reassure the panel that you understand how to make your project happen and that you will approach budget management in a sensible way.

Appropriate scale
We sometimes receive applications for funding that are not at an appropriate scale for either the funding offered, or the expertise and experience of the applicant. If you are new to public engagement or are connecting with a new group, consider running smaller activities to establish your relationship and build a methodology for future, larger scale work.

Working early with your public partner and thinking through your aims and your costings will help you to ensure your project is at the right scale. Don't be afraid to articulate in your application your vision for future work, so long as you keep your proposed activity to an appropriate scale.

And finally…read the guidance
Last but not least: make sure that you take a look at all of the guidance associated with the scheme that you're applying for. Occasionally we see applications that are clearly lifted from a different scheme and pasted into our forms. Without tailoring your project to the scheme you're applying to and without reading the guidance – designed to provide clarity and help improve your application – you are unlikely to be successful.