

Putting on a public event

Last updated by UCL Public Engagement Unit in December 2014

0. Early stage checklist

When you start planning an event, there are three important questions to ask yourself:

- Why are you running the event? (what's the benefit to you?)
- Who is the audience?
- Why will the audience come to the event? (what's the benefit to them?)

In the Public Engagement Unit we recommend that the benefits to you are about perspectives on your research, experience or skills development. The benefits to the audience can be about learning, enjoyment or a chance to share their experiences. However the most important thing about a successful event is that you need to want to do it, and be committed to it happening, and that you have identified an audience who will want to come.

This guide will go through a number of different aspects you need to think about, but it will keep coming back to these basic principles.

1. Why are you running an event?

A lot of time and effort, and sometimes money, goes into planning and holding events. So having a clear idea of what you would like to accomplish is important.

Write a list of aims that you want to achieve. These should be changes you want to make: for yourself, the audience or the wider world.

It's probably a good idea to have a look at our [checklist for public engagement project planning](#) when planning your aims.

In the UCL Public Engagement Unit we often describe the aims of our events using a grid. In each section we write in the change the event will help to make in that category.

	Awareness	Attitudes	Skills	Empowerment
Participants (i.e. staff)				
Audience (i.e. publics)				

Having these aims clearly laid out will help you evaluate your successes later, as you will know what you were hoping to achieve.

2. Who is the audience?

A public event cannot exist without an audience.

The aims you identified earlier will probably help inform who you want your audience to be; who it is that will help you achieve your aims.

The 'general public' is never the right answer, because no event will ever appeal to anyone. Every event will attract particular audiences, whether the organizer has intentionally chosen these audiences or not.

If you think about events you have been to, the audience will mostly have something in common. This could be demographic (people of a particular age) or location based (e.g. North Londoners), interest (e.g. film fans), shared activity (e.g. people who work for Santander, planners, architects). You should try and find ways to define your audience in a similar way.

Example audiences could be:

- Amateur astronomers based in Surrey
- Residents of Somers Town
- Office-workers working within 5 minutes' walk of UCL
- Londoners aged 20-50 with no connection to higher education
- Participants in previous UCL medical research programmes
- Family groups interested in archaeology, based in South-East England
- Mothers using a neo-natal care unit in a specific hospital

3. What format should your event take?

Once you have identified your audience, you can plan a format that will appeal to them.

It is important, to think of the format from the perspective of the audience. What kind of event will appeal to them? Could you ask members of your intended audience or read reports on other events for similar audience? (There are Public Engagement [case studies on our website](#))

The wrong format will limit your appeal to your intended audience. For example if your event is for young parents with children, a formal lecture won't work as many will want to bring their children who won't be able to sit quietly for a length of time. An informal coffee morning conversation may be more appropriate, with games and activities to keep the children occupied.

It is fine to do something different or innovative, but you need to consider why it hasn't been done before, and address any possible issues.

There is a grid at the end of this document with ideas for event formats, with their strengths and weaknesses addressed.

4. Venue

Thinking about venue should be similar to thinking about your format. Where do members of your intended audience normally go to things? A good way of making an event feel like it's meant for a certain audience is to take it to their normal stomping ground. For example, if your event is aimed at members of a particular religious community, do they have a hall linked to their religious building or similar gathering place that you can hire?

Many UCL staff and students want to run their events on UCL campus. However, this is only a good idea if you know you can bring your audience to you. Even local residents and workers may find coming to the university off-putting, unless you can make it seem like an easy option. This can be booking a room that is really easy to get to, providing a map that's simple to follow, or even offering to meet people at the entrance to the campus.

Some audiences, like the University of the Third Age, will want to come on campus, or the whole point of the event may be to show people around your lab, so don't rule UCL out completely but definitely consider where works best for them.

If you do want to host your event at UCL, then you'll need to book a space for it. Room Bookings can be found at <https://roombooking.ucl.ac.uk> or your department may have a room you can book. Many UCL rooms can be difficult to find, even for staff and students so make sure you visit it first! A good source of advice for any event held at UCL is the Communications and Marketing team, who run high profile corporate events for UCL. Their website is <http://www.ucl.ac.uk/cam/events> and they also provide a [toolkit](#) for running events at UCL.

You could also consider collaborating with another organisation. If you work with somewhere like a museum, the Royal Institution or the learned societies on an event, it usually guarantees you a good turn out and a lot of peace of mind (e.g. they may handle all the marketing). The UCL Public Engagement Unit maintains contacts in a lot of these organisations, and are happy to help you identify the most appropriate people to approach.

5. Accessibility and inclusive thinking

You need to design your event or activity to be accessible to all participants (both audience and speakers). This is important no matter who your specific target audience is – you cannot make assumptions about who will or won't want to come and what their access requirements might be. And an event designed to be accessible for disabled people is likely to be welcoming to all.

The best way to be inclusive and run a truly accessible event is use the access checklist below.

a) Have I chosen an accessible venue for my event?

Is there step free access? Is the venue close to good public transport links? Is there any disabled parking nearby or ideally, bookable in advance? Are the toilet facilities accessible? What are the acoustics like?

b) Have I asked all participants (audience and speakers) whether they have any access requirements?

If you are using a formal booking form, make sure you include a question about access requirements, just as you do with dietary requirements. Make sure you act on that information to the best of your ability and budget and that you are open and honest about what you can and can't provide. Make sure that your whole team is briefed on access issues for the event and consider allocating some people a specific role for providing access support if needed.

For some events you might find it appropriate to book a British Sign Language Interpreter or palantypist, or to prepare Large Print or Easy Read versions of any literature or presentations being used. Let your audience know if there will be flash photography (it can trigger epileptic fits).

If your event is not bookable in advance, ensure that there are contact details in the advertisements for people to get in touch if they have any access needs

c) Does my marketing and publicity include access information?

Ideally, give information about the venue access and transport links – as well as being of practical use, you are also sending out a strong signal that disabled people are welcome. You should also include a contact point, both email and telephone number, for anyone who wants more access information and then make sure the contact person is equipped to answer any queries.

Remember, access is not just about disability. Don't forget to think about other needs you may need to consider:

Dietary requirements

- If you are providing refreshments, ask participants in advance if they have dietary needs. If there's no food provided, tell them so they have the option to bring their own.

Religious needs

- Is your audience likely to have dietary restrictions or need a space to pray?

Child care

- Is your audience likely to bring children with them? How will you handle this?

Language

- Are you likely to need to bring in translators, or should your event be held in the first language of your audience?
- All communication needs to be accessible. Brief speakers on the register of language you would like them to use, and ask to see any presentations/written materials in advance. Think about how you will explain any technical or academic terms and avoid all jargon!

Attention span of participants

- Make sure you tailor your programme to suit the likely attention span of your audience. Include regular breaks and avoid lengthy sessions which require the audience to listen without any chance for interaction.

The office for Disability Issues has a [web page](#) with advice on creating accessible events

6. Ticketing

Don't forget to consider ticketing for our event. Some events have no ticketing, so members of the public simply turn up and take part. Other events operate systems for booking in advance, either through an email address or website (like [Eventbrite](#)). Even if you don't intend to charge for entry to your event, a free event can still be ticketed.

Ticketing an event can help you to know the size of your audience and prevent overcrowding. However, be aware that up to 50% of your booked audience may not come on the day. We would advise overbooking by 10-30%, to ensure you have a good number of participants

If you're running a more complex event, with more than one parallel session, you may find it helpful to ask your audience to book into different sessions so that you can control the numbers in each session.

But you don't need to make your event bookable in advance. It could be drop in on the day, for example a festival activity or a workshop in a museum.

Always include a contact email and phone number for queries. This is especially important for non-bookable events as anyone with access needs will need to be able to get in touch.

7. Marketing

Once your format is chosen and your venue booked, it's time to start telling potential audience members about your event.

Again, it's a case of thinking where your potential audience will get their information about events and promote your event there. For example, if you want to get a group of people along to your event who have diabetes, then can you advertise in doctors waiting rooms, or is there a newsletter from a local hospital you can put an ad in?

The potential audience is likely to be interested in the subject matter, and probably the people taking part in the event too (speakers, facilitators, artists, researchers). Take advantage of these people's networks and personal connections to get the word out and get them to help you promote, both physically and online and via social media.

Think about organisations who share interests with your events. For example if it's about physics, could the Institute of Physics include it in their newsletter, or tweet about it? Even if not, it's best to ask.

If your event is going to be at UCL, or with an audience that already frequents UCL events, you can try advertising in Brain Food, a termly leaflet produced by Communications and Marketing (CAM). You can [submit events here](#). CAM may also create a press release about your event if it is particularly innovative or newsworthy.

One popular audience is culturally curious Londoners or young professionals. To reach this group, consider listing in [TimeOut](#), the [Londonist](#) or the [Evening Standard](#). But be warned: TimeOut will only print particularly exciting events in its print edition and they need at least 3 weeks notice.

Don't forget to use social media. It's free and often very effective. It's still really important that use social media in the same way as other marketing. Only tweet at groups who are likely to be interested, and tagging similar organisations in your post will hopefully ensure retweets.

All of this marketing takes time, and it is important to bear this in mind when planning your event. It can take weeks for word of mouth to build up and listing like Timeout need to be submitted 2-3 weeks in advance.

8. Running the event

Evaluation of UCL's public events has taught us poor organisation and management of events have a negative impact on the audience and can, potentially, detract from the content and purpose of the event. Organising your event in a professional manner and ensuring that any "performance" is of high quality will help your audience to get the most out of your event.

Some simple rules:

- Stick to time. If a speaker is due to speak for 30 minutes, with 20 minutes questions, keep them to this. Audiences can detect people over-running and will lose concentration, and get bored
- Speak in the way the audience are expecting. If the audience have been told that this is a lecture suitable for members of the public, don't deliver it in a dry, academic way and fill it with jargon. If the audience have been promised a debate, make sure that there are plenty of opportunities for them to contribute. If the audience have come expecting to hear about science, give them science. If they expect time for a Q&A, never cut it short for a longer lecture.

- Make sure that someone is on the door of your event to welcome attendees, help people find seats, ensure they're at the right event or to answer questions. It should be obvious who this person is (e.g. via a badge or clipboard). Because they see everyone who comes into the event, this person can also informally monitor the event (e.g. numbers attending, informal feedback) for evaluation purposes.
- Sort out technical issues before the audience arrives. Nothing undermines your message like not knowing how Powerpoint, microphones or projectors work.
- Think about maintaining their attention. Don't put the most exciting thing first followed by dry academic discussion, keep the audience interested and motivated to stay.
- If you're working with other people to run the activity, ensure that your roles are clearly defined, and check on this regularly. This will help to make sure that everyone knows what is expected of them, both in the planning stages and at the event itself.
- Plan ahead. Good event organisation takes time, and audience recruitment can take weeks or even months, depending on the event. You need time to invite people, then remind them, then remind them again to be successful.

9. Evaluation

Did your event accomplish what it set out to? Could you have done things slightly differently for greater success? Why didn't certain things work as well as you thought they would? Evaluation will help you answer these questions, reflect on your event and plan for the next thing you do. The key to evaluating the success of your event is to be clear about what you are trying to achieve. See our [guide to evaluating events](#) for help with this aspect and advice on ways to share your learning.

Types of event format:

Type of event	Strengths	Weaknesses
Lecture	Good for raising awareness of certain subjects. Excellent way to deliver a vast quantity of information to a large audience. Good for informing professional audiences.	Many public audiences aren't used to lectures, and take very little away from the format. The depth of engagement in terms of interaction and sharing knowledge is very low. The long-term effect can be limited.
'In conversation with...' format	Has all the strengths of a lecture. Interview format can help stimulate dialogue and interaction between the audience and the speaker.	Requires good facilitation. The interviewer needs to respond to needs of audience, not speaker.
Panel debate	Works for a wide variety of adult audiences. Discussion helps to maintain interest. Multiple viewpoints help more audience members to engage.	Again this requires good facilitation and careful management of time. Need to be clear in advertising whether the audience will be involved in the debate, as otherwise this format can be disempowering.
Participatory dialogue event (e.g. focus group, workshop)	Excellent levels of engagement, in terms of creating dialogue. There is a possibility of real learning outcomes for both the audience and staff involved.	Need to be clear and to communicate to all those involved what is being done with opinions gathered. This event also requires experienced staff in terms of facilitation.
'Hands-on' event (e.g. museum workshop)	Attracts a varied audience including families and children, or adults (depending on format). Depth of engagement is very high for those with their 'hands-on'. Taps into creative and practical skills.	Numbers that can be accommodated are low compared to lectures or panel discussions, and staffing needs to be intense.
Arts event (e.g. film screening, performance)	Can be used for 'stealth' engagement e.g. attracting film fans to a screening that includes science.	Can attract a very narrow audience of already-engaged individuals unless well-targeted (due to intimidating nature of much academic art).
Forum Theatre Performance	Good way to develop audience's understanding of a subject area, giving them a more personal view of a subject area or argument	Requires professional/experienced actors, facilitators, and a large amount of forward-planning.

	while giving them control over the direction of the debate.	
Exhibition	Good way to inform your audience about certain subjects and issues. Exhibitions can appeal to a varied audience (in terms of knowledge and demographics). Exhibitions can be held alongside other events including lectures, workshops and panel discussions.	They rarely create dialogue or interaction between those attending. Require professional exhibition expertise to be effective, and this can add to costs.
Festivals	Can attract a range of audiences. Great way to involve and develop partnerships with a range of organisations and groups.	Festivals can be time and resource intensive. They require effective collaboration. If unorganised they can be "hit and miss" for the audience - there needs to be a clear vision or focus for all the activities.
Conferences	Excellent way to communicate detailed information to a large audience. Good for networking. Mainly for professional audiences.	Require a lot of forward planning (e.g. recruitment and promotion). Conferences usually have a fee associated with them, which can be off putting to some audiences.
Training	The main way for people to develop skills and encourage learning.	Needs a follow up, post training, to see if skills and learning have actually been applied.