

How do I evaluate my public engagement activity?

Reflecting on your project and evidencing your success

This guide will help you build an evaluation strategy for your public engagement. As well as explaining the function of evaluation, it will discuss how to evaluate at different stages of a project and various methods that can be used to ensure you can get the data you need.

1 | What is evaluation and why should I do it?

Evaluation is a process of reflecting on your project or activity to determine its effectiveness. Through evaluation you can:

- Improve your public engagement by understanding what worked well and what could be better.
- Show what you accomplished, either for your own reflection or to share with others.
- Evidence your achievements and impact.
- Produce new learning that can be shared to help colleagues who are doing something similar.

As well as being an important tool for your own reflection and learning, your evaluation will be of interest to:

- Funders - When completing funding applications, you will often be expected to outline how you plan to evaluate your engagement activities. You will also need to share the findings of your evaluations in end-of-grant reports.
- Policy-makers - Policy drives an interest in evaluation. Research impact assessments include the broader impact of research on society, sometimes achieved through public engagement.

In both planning your research (and writing funding applications) as well as demonstrating its success (such as in Research Excellence Framework impact case studies) evaluation is required to collect evidence of impact through engagement.

- Managers - Your manager might wish to see the impact of engagement activities through evaluation. This can help to make the case for support for time spent on engagement by showing its value and importance.
- Partners, participants and collaborators - Evaluation can help to show those you work with the value and outcomes of the activities you do together.

Evaluation can be simple, quick and easy. It doesn't need to be complicated. While you might imagine it can involve a lot of reporting, reviewing literature and analysing statistics, evaluation can be as simple as discussing some key questions with your participants or taking a quick 'show of hands' poll. Remember, any level of evaluation is better than none at all!

What's the difference between evaluation and research?

Evaluation analyses the value of something. Did this project achieve the aims it set out to? If not, why not? If so, what worked? Academic research on the other hand, is about furthering knowledge, identifying something new that no one has discovered before. Research aims to build evidence that can be applied to other contexts.

It may be that through evaluating your activities you discover something new, such as a novel technique or understanding. So while evaluation on its own is not always research, it may contribute to it!

2 | When should you evaluate?

We often think of evaluation as something you do at the end of a project, but you should aim to embed it throughout.

Before your project starts - This usually involves research into your audiences. What do they already know? What are their current attitudes to your topic? This kind of evaluation guides your overall approach and enables you to potentially track any changes in knowledge, attitudes or behaviours if these are part of your project aims.

While you develop your content - This usually involves testing out your ideas. Does this activity work well? Will people engage with this? Is it pitched at the right level? This kind of evaluation helps you tweak and refine your methods.

During or after your main activity - This may involve asking participants and collaborators how they experienced it. Did you achieve what you set out to? What factors contributed to this? This kind of evaluation helps you evidence successes and the reasons behind them.

3 | Developing a strategy

It's helpful to consider your evaluation strategy as you develop your public engagement activity and think about your goals. You can break down your goals by defining your overarching aim, your key objectives and the anticipated outcomes and outputs of the project. Together, these goals will help you decide what your key indicators for success are and how you might measure these.

Aim - What do you aim to achieve?

E.g. I want to increase the participation of girls in Physics.

Objectives - How are you going to achieve your aim?

E.g. I will achieve my aim by running six afterschool sessions that positively change attitudes towards physics amongst female KS2 school children and empower them to consider further study or a future career in the field.

Outputs - What exactly do you plan to do and when? How many people do you aim to have participate?

E.g. I will run six physics-related activities over the Spring term for at least 15 female KS2 school pupils.

Outcomes - What will change as a result of that activity?

For larger or longer term projects it is useful to think about defining short and long-term outcomes.

E.g. Participants will gain a new understanding of physics, develop positive attitudes towards it and will be inspired to consider pursuing a career or further study in physics.

Once you've considered your goals, it's easier to determine what exactly you will evaluate and how.

Make your goals

SMART:

- **Specific**
- **Measurable**
- **Achievable**
- **Relevant**
- **Time-based**

The goals in the example to the left are SMART. Use this acronym to help you clearly define and articulate your goals.

Indicators - What are the indicators that will demonstrate that you have achieved what you set out to do?

E.g. Students attend regularly and enjoy it, increased confidence and intent to continue physics.

Measures - How will you measure this?

E.g. I will record attendance, make observations during the session to assess enjoyment and record attitudes to physics before and after the sessions. In the long-term, I will follow-up with students' GCSE choices.

Top tips for your indicators and measures

It's important to think carefully about what data you are gathering and why:

- Is it relevant to your aims?
- Do you need to know it? Will you use it?
- Will it help you make future decisions?
- Will you have enough information on which to base these decisions?

4 | Evaluation methods

Evaluation methods can be categorised into three groups:

Can you see it? – Sometimes you can collect data simply through observation. You can tell if participants are enjoying an activity through their body-language

and behaviour. Are they smiling? Are they eager to participate? How many people are there? How long did they spend on each part of the activity? Taking photos (with consent) allows you to evidence your observations. If possible, recruit an external observer to reduce bias.

Can you ask it?

If you can't observe it you may need to ask it and there are various ways to do so:

Interviews: Either quick interviews with limited questions during an activity, or post-activity interviews that go into more depth.

Surveys: These can be paper-based or digital, used before, during or after an event, and can be filled in by the participant or an evaluator can fill it out on their behalf.

Polling: Polling provides a quick way to get a lot of data. It's easy and simple so people are usually happy to take part. You could gather responses before and after an activity to track a change.

Idea-mapping: This involves writing a chosen topic in the middle of a sheet and the participant is asked to surround it with everything they know or feel about the topic. This can be repeated before and after an activity with different coloured pens as a good way to demonstrate a change in knowledge and perception.

Expression wall: Often part of the activity, this is a large space to write or draw feedback. It may be headed by a question to prompt discussion, such as 'What would the world look like without science?'

Focus group: Invite a group of 5-7 people to have a focussed discussion on a particular topic. This is good for exploring the issues in great detail.

Team de-brief: After a particular stage in the project, having a quick discussion with your team can be extremely helpful. They are the ones implementing your project and will know what challenges they faced and how it could be avoided in future.

Case study: Heart and Lung Repair Shop

What is it?

The Heart and Lung Repair Shop was a pop-up science shop in Hammersmith, London over Summer 2014 that was visited by 2752 people. Passers-by could visit the shop and take part in drop-in activities, watch science demonstrations, have their lung capacity measured, and speak with scientists or explore installations, objects and displays.

Why is it a good example?

The organisers set themselves nine SMART goals and used a variety of evaluation methods to assess whether, and to what extent, the project had achieved its goals. Evaluation methods included pre- and post-event surveys, customer review cards for visitors to leave feedback, written observations, mini interviews, and

Can you find out indirectly?

The information you're looking for may already exist. Try the following:

Desk research: Typically front-end evaluation will involve some desk research to learn more about your audience or perhaps getting information from those who have done a similar project.

Social media: You could look at the conversations happening on social media, particularly if you have created a hashtag related to your engagement that you can track.

Check with others: Will others be collecting this information already? For example, if running a stand at a festival, the organisers may gather demographical information themselves meaning you don't have to. If delivering an activity in a school, the teacher may be able to provide you information.

Top tips

- Tailor your methods to your audience. This can be particularly effective when engaging children. You could consider using cartoon characters or emoji as part of your evaluation method for example.
- Take a look at our resource on 'gathering public opinions'. It has great creative ideas (with helpful images) that can double up as evaluation methods.



social media analysis.

This mixed-methods approach (see ‘Triangulation’ below) enabled the team to evidence positive impacts on visitors to the shop including learning, sparking curiosity and reaching new audiences in the local area. Surprising outcomes were also surfaced that could help develop the activity in the future: following interviews with the engagement volunteers, it was found that the “repair” theme caused some confusion amongst participants with some expecting to be fixed or cured.

Triangulation – covering your bases

All methods have different strengths and weaknesses, which is why we recommend using a variety to ensure your bases are covered. The strength of one method can make up for the weakness of another. The table below outlines some of the strengths and weaknesses of different methods to help you decide on your approach.

Quantitative - Can tell us what is happening	Qualitative - Can tell us why it’s happening
Self-reported - Greater detail but may be subject to bias in who responds and how	Observation - Potentially less subject to bias but limited in scope and requires interpretation
During event - Higher participation but short-term impact only	Post-event - Lower participation but shows long-term impact

In deciding on your evaluation methods you may wish to consider the following:

Who do you need to involve?

Public participants: Those taking part in your activities or attending your events (or those you hope to engage). They might have been involved in or advised on the development of the project or they may have taken part in the main activity. Think about the groups you might encounter, would you like to speak with children as well as adults in family groups for example, or teachers and parents as well as school students?

Collaborators: Those involved in the creation of your project. They might be artists or creative producers who have designed the activity, patient and community advisors, members of other departments or those working in your venues and spaces.

Team: You and your colleagues leading the project. You might wish to reflect on the project with those most closely involved, and anyone participating in its delivery such as volunteers.

Control group: Do you need to conduct any evaluation with those who have not taken part in the project in order to compare differences to those who have?

You may wish to consider the following:

- What are the specific needs of the groups you would like to involve? (such as language, accessibility or physical needs to get to spaces)
- Are you hoping to involve children, and are your evaluation activities suited for that age group?
- Are your intended participants vulnerable in any way, or will you be covering sensitive issues, and therefore would it be useful to involve a trained facilitator?

What are the practical restraints?

Time: How much time will you have available for evaluation? (Take data analysis into account.) When do you need to conduct evaluation e.g. pre and post activity? Is there an existing time slot that you could utilise such as a team meeting for a post-event debrief?

Cost: Does your evaluation require a lot of materials or equipment and do you have the budget for this? Will you need to reimburse people for the time spent participating in evaluation (this might be appropriate for focus groups for example). Will you need advice from an external expert such as a statistician? Will you require an incentive to get people to participate in your evaluation and therefore need to cost in a prize?

Space: At your event or activity, depending on your evaluation methods, you might want a dedicated space for your evaluation. This may be important to consider if your evaluation covers sensitive topics that will require a quiet space.

Wi-Fi: If you are hoping to conduct any evaluation online does your space have reliable free Wi-Fi that you or your participants can connect to?

The physical environment: Your surroundings may impact the methods you choose. Will there be loud music, performances, or lots of people moving past for example? Is the event held in the dark where a paper survey may be difficult to read? Or outdoors where sunlight may effect readability of surveys on screens such as iPads? All of these are really useful to think about and could make a difference to the success of your evaluation.

5 | Analysing qualitative data

While many researchers are used to analysing quantitative data (for example to create means and ranges), some have not had to work with qualitative data before, particularly if their subject of research is not human beings! Below is a basic technique for looking at qualitative data called 'content analysis':

- Read the responses a few times and become familiar with the content
- Identify some themes that seem to be appearing and give them codes – for example if someone talks about difficulty parking at an event, then 'lack of parking' may be a code
- Examine the codes quantitatively – how many people mentioned 'lack of parking'?

- Examine the codes qualitatively – did anyone expand on the subject? Perhaps someone mentioned that a football match was on nearby at a similar time so it was busy.

Now you have a base to make some conclusions. Combine your quantitative and qualitative data. If 20% of people were slightly dissatisfied with the event but the only negative comments were related to parking, perhaps this is why they were dissatisfied. If there was a football match on nearby at the same time as the event, perhaps a recommendation for the future is to keep an eye on what is going on in the area and schedule accordingly.

What does good evaluation look like? Six key principles

In both the work we develop and conduct ourselves, and the guidance we provide to others, we see the following as key to good practice in quality evaluation:

1. Rigorous and fair – Select and apply suitable methods and analytic approaches in a rigorous and unbiased manner. Take steps to avoid leading questions and bias in interpretation of data, and give findings a fair and proportionate voice within reporting.
2. Inclusive and accessible – Encourage a diversity of voices and perspectives, and design methods to be accessible, appealing and suitable to the activity.
3. Triangulation – Use various methods to account for weaknesses (e.g. using both qualitative and quantitative data).
4. Internally focused and externally situated – We mostly focus on the activities and work carried out within the College and its partners, make sure to situate this within a wider context of other universities and engagement departments, broader literature and previous studies.
5. Long-term and realistic – Where possible aim to make conclusions and recommendations that have longevity and identify findings that hold true beyond the immediate context. However, we acknowledge that there will be instances where it is not possible to conduct an evaluation over the term required to make conclusions on longer term impacts. In these situations value the use of proxy indicators – those which might suggest a likely long term outcome, based on previous work and research.
6. Creative and fun – evaluation methods should be integrated into engagement activities where possible, projects should utilise a diverse range of approaches and evaluation activities should be fun to take part in.

Related links and resources - Let us know of others!

- [The National Coordinating Centre for Public Engagement](#) has many examples of evaluation tools
- [Fast Track Impact](#) share resources and articles about research impact measurement.