

# What opportunities can university museums offer for academic-public interaction? Some lessons from London's Beacon for Public Engagement

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## Abstract

*UCL has recently been named one of the UK's Beacons for Public Engagement, a group of higher education institutions tasked with finding ways to change the culture of Higher Education to include the public better. UCL's new Public Engagement Unit has identified a number of barriers to university staff working with the public, and, alongside UCL Museums & Collections, is working to break these barriers down.*

## The Beacons for Public Engagement

The Beacons for Public Engagement (BPEs) are a network of UK Higher Education Institutions, and other partners, funded by the UK funding councils, Research Councils UK and the Wellcome Trust.

The central purpose of the Beacon scheme is to strive for culture change in UK Higher Education Institutions. One of our key roles is to identify the barriers that are keeping academics away from working with the public outside the university, and to develop strategies to dissolve these barriers. We are experimental programs, looking to learn lessons that can be used to change culture across the Higher Education (HE) sector.

Most of the network of BPEs include university museums in their formal partnerships. The UCL Public Engagement Unit, which co-ordinates all Beacon activities in London, sits within UCL Museums & Collections, and works closely with staff from all of UCL collections.

## London

London's BPE is UCL, working to develop public engagement opportunities with six partner organizations:

- Birkbeck, University of London
- City & Islington College
- Southbank Centre
- Arts Catalyst
- British Museum
- Cheltenham Festivals

These organizations all reach out to different public groups, and share their engagement expertise with UCL staff in return for UCL input into their programs.

The UCL Public Engagement Unit works to support activities that encourage a culture of two-way conversations between university staff and groups outside the university. We recognize that there are a number of different ways in which staff can involve the public in their work, and we encourage staff to move from dissemination of their work to full participation and co-production of knowledge with the public.

The techniques that we use to improve UCL's public engagement work include:

- Training
- Recognition, including promotion and awards based on engagement work
- Mentoring staff

- Lobbying on behalf of public engagement
- Providing networking opportunities
- Co-ordinating projects
- Funding projects and staff
- Finding opportunities for staff

## Research

In May 2008 an online survey of UCL staff's attitudes to public engagement was conducted by Freshminds.<sup>1</sup> The survey had been drawn up following in-depth interviews with senior staff at UCL, looking into the engagement issues that challenge this particular university. 708 UCL staff took part in the survey. The results were very encouraging, and revealed a real appetite for this type of work. Only 7% of staff who replied were not interested in doing any public engagement work.

A number of major barriers to academic-public engagement were identified. For example:

- 73% of respondents feel that they need to spend more time on research or teaching duties, and don't have the spare capacity to do engagement work;
- 40% of respondents feel that they have no opportunities to engage the public with their work.

Staff were also asked what would help them to do more public engagement work. 40% of respondents would like help finding opportunities, and 37% need partner organizations to work with. After funding, these are the biggest needs for UCL staff in this area.

These findings tally well with those of the Royal Society's *Survey of factors affecting science communication by scientists and engineers*,<sup>2</sup> despite the fact that they include staff from a much wider variety of disciplines.

Anecdotal evidence, based on in-depth conversations with over a hundred UCL staff, corroborates these findings: staff with an eagerness to work with the public often don't know where to start in developing projects; the first steps in public engagement are always the hardest; people are short of time, and need projects constructed to allow them to work around existing duties; staff often don't have relationships with partners who can help them deliver projects, or know where to start in making these relationships; staff have little knowledge of the importance of audiences for activities, either in terms of recruitment or tailoring of content.

## The role of museums

University museums can play a vital role in providing the bridge between academic staff and public groups. Museums bring an expertise in communication and interpretation of academic subjects, and neutral spaces that break down the power divide between academics and the public.

University museums also have existing audience relationships, often working with groups representing communities that are under-served by HE. In the UCL survey, the two biggest areas in which staff would like to see more engagement work are with schools and local communities, both groups with existing relationships with the museums.

Museums can bring all of these strengths to bear when they create opportunities for academics to engage the public. UCL Museums & Collections, for example, hosted the launch of *The Big Draw* 2008, in partnership with Wellcome Collection.<sup>3</sup> *The Big Draw* is an annual festival of drawing, organized by The Campaign For Drawing,<sup>4</sup> that takes place in many venues nationwide.

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<sup>1</sup> A full report is available at [www.ucl.ac.uk/public-engagement](http://www.ucl.ac.uk/public-engagement) (accessed November 18, 2009).

<sup>2</sup> Available from [www2.royalsociety.org/downloaddoc.asp?id=3074](http://www2.royalsociety.org/downloaddoc.asp?id=3074) (November 18, 2009).

<sup>3</sup> [www.wellcomecollection.org.uk](http://www.wellcomecollection.org.uk) (accessed November 18, 2009).

<sup>4</sup> [www.thebigdraw.org.uk](http://www.thebigdraw.org.uk) (accessed November 18, 2009).

A vital part of the launch, which attracted 1200 visitors to UCL, was the creation of a framework into which academics could drop events tailored to their research interests. Staff from across UCL's spectrum of disciplines took part, including medical, biological and physical scientists, fine artists and lecturers in the humanities. Undergraduate students acted as guides, with PhD students, research staff and academics hosting activities alongside museum staff and artists. Some of the UCL staff involved were experienced public engagement practitioners, but a significant number had not been involved in an event like this before.

The burdens of event organization, venue-booking, audience-recruitment and marketing were lifted from academics, who worked with museum staff to ensure that experiences were tailored for the audiences. Museum staff also coordinated evaluation of the activities. A number of new relationships were created, some between UCL teaching staff, and some with UCL museums.

Given the success of the day, this is an avenue that UCL's Public Engagement Unit is keen to continue exploring, and we would encourage other university museums to think about how they can use their expertise to help research and teaching staff to bring the public into their work.<sup>5</sup>

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