

Finding the right venue

Taking your event off-campus

Public engagement activities offer an exciting opportunity to take your research off-campus. While universities have great facilities, sometimes they create an 'academic' atmosphere and can be unfamiliar and even intimidating to those that don't often frequent them. It is therefore essential to host your event in a venue that feels welcoming and accessible to your intended audience. The public should not have to come and find you, you should go and find the public!

Finding the right venue can really help with reaching your intended audience. Venues that serve local communities or particular interest groups, such as community centres and libraries, will often help promote your event to their stakeholders. Venues that are open to the public, such as museums and galleries, can also provide you with a ready-made passing audience.

Using a venue to its full potential

Venues can play a big role in shaping your event format and can even be the main selling point. A great 'hook' for an event is a behind-the-scenes tour or free access to a venue that is normally closed to the public. This offers audiences something out of the ordinary and can really set your event apart as a special occasion.

Venues can also help strike the right tone for your event, signalling to audiences what to expect e.g. holding a music performance in a pub suggests a fun, relaxed evening. This can have a big impact on whether someone feels comfortable and willing to give up their time to attend.

Building a positive relationship with a venue can be key to an event's success. Try to make events mutually beneficial – you can provide venues with new audiences and possibly help generate revenue (e.g. with bar sales). In return, if a venue shares your event on their social media platforms and print materials it will lead to a better turnout.



How to find a venue

It can be quite helpful to create a shortlist of potential venues. There are lots of ways you can go about making this list, for example:

- Ask your public engagement, outreach and events teams whether they have worked with any local venues before or if your university has an affiliation with any local spaces such as museums or galleries.
- Talk to your community partners, see if there are any spaces they regularly use or that are popular with your intended audience.
- If you live in the area, think about local spaces that serve the community. Is there somewhere you regularly take your children or has the opening of a new arts space recently been in the newspaper?
- Search local venues online and give their events team a call. Check if they have separate education and corporate event teams and that you are talking to the right person as different hire prices may apply.

Making sure a venue works for you

Do site visits to potential venues and talk with staff before you book. This is your time to ask questions and to visualise your event in the space. Take along the venue checklist (overleaf) and make sure it ticks all the boxes.

Think carefully about what you need from a venue. While you might find a space that fits perfectly with your topic, it is important to also think practically about how it will work. For example, if you are running a Tudor costume making workshop then you might assume the local museum's Tudor gallery is a perfect fit. However, if the museum has conservation restrictions, which prohibit scissors and sharp objects being used in the space, this could result in you having to significantly change your event. There is a fine balance to be achieved between finding a practical and intriguing venue.



Accessibility

It is important that everyone feels welcome and able to engage fully with your event. It is therefore essential that you check how accessible a site is before booking. Often venues will have designated webpages about their access or they should be able to provide this information upon request.

You should also discuss access when you do a site visit. For example, if a venue describes itself as 'step-free', does this mean that there is an elevator or chair lift? Is there a disabled toilet near the room you will actually be using? A venue might have hearing loops, but do you need to book one for your specific room?

Top tips for venue hunting

- Ask a friend to do a test run to the venue. Could they get there OK on public transport, could they find the room easily? Getting lost before an event often doesn't put attendees in a good mood!
- Beware hidden costs! Venues can charge additional fees for use of AV equipment, furniture, catering staff, security etc. Make sure you know all the charges involved before agreeing to use them.
- Make sure venues will waive entrance fees to their site for your attendees. An event is not free to attend if attendees have to pay to reach the activity!
- Think about the infrastructure you will need for your event to run smoothly. Will you need access to a kitchen? Are there toilets nearby the room? Do they have a spare storage space you could use?

Checklist for venue site visit

AUDIENCE APPEAL

- Is the venue regularly used by your intended audience? YES / NO
- Will the venue create the right atmosphere and fit with your topic? YES / NO
- Will the venue help promote the event? Is there a cost implication for this? YES / NO
- Is the venue easy to find? Is it a well-known location for your audience? YES / NO
- Is it easy to find the room you are using within the venue? YES / NO
- Is the venue fully accessible e.g. accessible toilets, step-free etc.? YES / NO
- Are there good transport links to the venue and car parking spaces? YES / NO
- Will the venue waive any entrance fees to the site for attendees of your event? YES / NO

PRACTICAL CONSIDERATIONS

- Does the space have the right capacity in the layout you need e.g. cabaret, theatre? YES / NO
- Is there a good place for a reception desk? YES / NO
- Does the venue have the AV equipment you need and is there a hiring cost? YES / NO
- Does the venue have the furniture you need and is there a hiring cost? YES / NO
- Does the venue have catering facilities or can you bring your own food? YES / NO
- Are there any implications if the event is outside the venue's normal opening hours? YES / NO
- Are there any conservation concerns that will restrict the activities you can do? YES / NO
- Is the total hire cost good value for money and within budget? YES / NO

EVENT DELIVERY

- Will the venue want to use their own booking system to manage attendance? YES / NO
- Do you have a point of contact at the venue to help throughout the organising process? YES / NO
- Does the venue have an events team that will be on hand to help on the day? YES / NO
- Will the venue be hosting other events on the day that could impact your event? YES / NO
- Will you have enough time to set up and pack down the event? YES / NO