

# Focusing on your audience

## Having an intended audience

Public engagement events give you the chance to share your research with those outside academia and to think anew about the impact of your work beyond universities. Members of the public can also bring knowledge, fresh perspectives and 'real-world' experiences to the discussion that you may well find invaluable.

When thinking about potential attendees, it is important to move beyond a general idea of the 'public'. Think about what particular groups and communities you wish to attract and why they would be interested in your research. For example, are you looking to engage with LGBTQ+ adults, families with young children or people passionate about a certain social cause? Having a clear intended audience will help guide you through your event's planning, promotion and delivery, because at every stage you can ask yourself 'what would work for my audience?'

## Tailoring your event

When planning an event, you should consider whether each element of it will appeal to your intended audience. Place them at the centre of your decision-making process and think about their needs, asking yourself questions like:

- What type of events are they normally interested in attending?
- What type of content would they like to see?
- Do I understand and am I responding to the values, interests and concerns that are important to them?
- Do I know the logistical factors, e.g. time of day, capacity, etc. that will make it easy and comfortable for them to attend?

Certain communities are sometimes described as 'hard-to-reach' because for multiple reasons they have limited participation in academic activities. However, rather than perceiving such groups as 'unreachable', focus on whether your event has been purposefully tailored towards them. They should clearly feel that they are the target audience and this should be represented in every aspect of your event.



## Making your research relevant

One way of tailoring your research to the interests and concerns of your intended audience is to consider its relevance to everyday life. Think about how your research can be applied to issues that impact our society or affect the communities of your intended audience. People are often more engaged and willing to participate when a topic is directly related to them. Your community/cultural partners could help you shape your event in this way and it is always useful to talk with a representative of your intended audience during the planning stage.

Although your research may be considered very interesting amongst your peers, don't assume a non-specialist audience will instantly find it appealing. Instead, find a 'hook' that will entice your audience and make a connection with their pre-existing interests. If you cannot find this connection, then it may be worth considering whether your project is a good match for your intended audience or whether you need to change one or the other to make a successful public engagement event.

## Having a two-way conversation

One of the great things about public engagement is meeting other people who have fresh perspectives and different opinions. Create a space where attendees feel comfortable to contribute and have a two-way conversation. Have clear moments for contribution, perhaps based around an activity or informal chats. In these moments you are likely to find that organiser and attendee can both share valuable knowledge and experiences.

People may respond to your event in ways you did not initially expect. Again, think carefully about what issues are important to your intended audience and whether something about your event could be provocative or create debate. For instance, an event held in Heathrow about the history of air travel might have some local attendees sharing strong opinions about the topic. Here, you may reconsider aspects of the event, put out clear messaging about your intentions and create a non-judgemental space where people can share their views and feel heard.



## Being inclusive

Although your event will have a specific intended audience, this will still include a wide and diverse range of people who should feel welcome and able to attend. To be as inclusive as possible, ask yourself:

- Is there anything that could feel exclusive or off-putting for potential attendees?
- Have I made my event access-friendly, e.g. have I made seats available for those who can't stand for long periods?
- Is there anything about the subject, venue or format that could feel insensitive or offensive?
- Have I supported my inclusivity statements with the decisions I have made, e.g. using a diverse range of speakers and an accessible venue?

Be as clear and transparent as possible with attendees about what they can expect. Display access information on your event's listing page and provide opportunities for attendees to contact you about their requirements in advance. Remember, it's not public engagement if only certain people feel able to participate.

## Top tips: putting your audience first

- **Don't try and parachute in** with your event, especially if your intended audience is a so-called 'hard-to-reach' group. If you haven't laid the groundwork with the community the event will not resonate.
- **Keep it jargon-free** and avoid specialist language so that everyone can understand. Perhaps run things by a friend who is unfamiliar with your research and ask for their feedback.
- **Don't be patronising**, as while your audience might be non-specialists in an academic sense, they may well know a lot about the topic.
- **Create opportunities for participation** that people will feel comfortable with, e.g. group discussions or activities, anonymous voting or message writing. Many people don't like talking in front of large groups!

# The roadblock test

Use the roadblock test to see if you are removing barriers that could prevent your intended audience (IA below) from attending your event. If you find yourself stuck at a stop sign you may need to think afresh about this aspect of your event, or reconsider whether your intended audience is the natural and best fit for your proposed activity. When thinking about how to respond to different barriers to participation, you may find it useful to look at our other training resources on topics such as venues, formats and partners.

