

Public Engagement at Birkbeck

FESTIVALS GUIDE



I. INTRO/BENEFITS

Engaging the public with your research can take many forms and involve a variety of different publics. If you're interested in discussing your research in an informal public setting and making your research accessible to a wide range of the non-academic public, festivals could be a great option for you.

Whether at the local or national level, festivals offer a number of advantages to researchers interested in becoming involved in public engagement:

THERE'S SOMETHING FOR EVERYONE.

Literary festivals. Food festivals. Agricultural shows. Humanities Festivals. Science Festivals. Whether you research fruit flies or nineteenth-century gothic literature, chances are there's a festival for you. As well as a broad range of festivals across disciplines, there are also a variety of types of festivals you can participate in – those run by Universities themselves (like Cambridge's [Festival of Ideas](#)), sector-wide festivals (like [Science Live](#)) or even popular cultural festivals like Brighton's [Pride Festival](#) or Liverpool's [Chinese New Year](#) celebrations. Meanwhile, museums, libraries and other cultural institutions often work with researchers to develop exhibitions, workshops and other engaging event programmes.

THEY HAVE THE EXPERTISE.

If you have a specific public engagement activity in mind, but don't have the time or resources to tackle all the other work required to plan and execute a public engagement event, festivals could be the ideal public engagement context for you. Festival organisers ensure the appropriate infrastructure is in place, help with logistics and communications and all the other planning considerations necessary to run a large-scale programme of events. Festivals therefore present a great opportunity for busy research- and teaching-active academics to weave public engagement into their practice with comparatively minimal time commitment.

THEY BRING THE AUDIENCES.

Festival organisers, as well as staff in museums, libraries and other cultural venues have extensive experience with reaching a broad range of public audiences. They also have extensive experience of how to effectively engage those audiences, making them a valuable learning resource. Festivals and other events are a great option if you want to engage several audiences at once, including people who might not usually encounter academic research. Festivals have the added advantage of contact time – people at festivals often have time to stop and talk, presenting a unique opportunity to create meaningful connections.

II. COMMON PITFALLS

Although festivals present a number of opportunities for researchers, there are some pitfalls to watch out for:

THERE'S SOMETHING FOR EVERYONE.

For audiences as well as participating researchers. This means that although the festival organisers will typically handle a great deal of the communications and advertising for the event programme as a whole, you will also need to promote your own activity if you want to stand out from the crowd.

THEY HAVE THE EXPERTISE.

But you should also expect to pull your weight. Although festival organisers will do much of the overall organisational and logistical planning, you should expect to work with them to ensure your activity will go off without a hitch. Will you need a power supply or any other equipment? Will your activity work in a loud space or do you need a quiet corner of the venue? Working closely with festival staff will ensure your activity happens as you've envisioned.

THEY BRING THE AUDIENCES.

These audiences will vary significantly by event, in terms of numbers and demographics. It's a good idea to work with festival organisers to get an idea of what kind of audience is expected so you can ensure your activity is pitched at the right scale and appropriate tone.

III. GETTING STARTED

To get started, take a look at what's going on around you. At Birkbeck, opportunities to get involved include:

[Arts Week](#)

[Science Week](#)

[Law on Trial](#)

[Peltz Gallery](#)

[Bloomsbury Festival](#)

Birkbeck's main Bloomsbury campus is also fortunate to be located within the heart of academic London and among one of the world's greatest concentrations of libraries and museums, including the [British Museum](#), [British Library](#) and [Senate House Library](#). Smaller and/or niche museums and galleries are also within close reach and include [The Foundling Museum](#), [The Wellcome Library](#), and [The Warburg Institute](#). These institutions regularly work with academics, including many Birkbeck academics, to create new exhibitions or to develop events in support of larger exhibitions. Birkbeck is also a member of the [Knowledge Quarter](#), a focal point for one of the greatest knowledge clusters in the world, which opens

up access to a range of knowledge resources to students, researchers and people who live and work in the area around King's Cross, the Euston Road and Bloomsbury. They work with [a range of partners](#), and if you'd like to get involved, please contact the [Public Engagement Team](#).

Further afield, there is a plethora of larger-scale and often national opportunities to engage with:

If you're a Humanities researcher, [Being Human](#) – a Festival of the Humanities is a nation-wide public engagement festival led by the [School of Advanced Study](#) (right around the corner!) in partnership with the [Arts & Humanities Research Council](#) and the [British Academy](#).

Literary festivals are another great opportunity for researchers - literature scholars and others - and [literaryfestivals.co.uk](#) has details of 350+ community literary festivals throughout the UK & Ireland, as well as English-speaking gatherings across Europe.

If you're a science researcher, you're spoiled for choice! [BIG](#): Stem Communicators network has a handy annual calendar of festivals and the [British Science Association's](#) UK Science Festivals Network is another great resource. Other great options include [British Science Week](#), an annual programme of thousands of public engagement events; [Cafe Scientifique](#), which are informal fora for debating scientific issues, often set in cafes and bars; [FameLab](#), which challenges contestants to explain scientific concepts in three minutes; and [ScienceLive](#), which connects event organisers with researchers to put on live science events.

IV. MORE INFORMATION

For more information, please consult the [Birkbeck Public Engagement](#) website, or contact the Public Engagement Team at public-engagement@bbk.ac.uk.

You can also consult The National Co-ordinating Centre for Public Engagement's [guide to working with festivals](#).

The National Co-ordinating Centre for Public Engagement also has a [guide to working with museums and libraries](#).

And finally, the National Co-ordinating Centre for Public Engagement's [guide to working with science & discovery centres](#) is also worth reviewing.

[University Engagement in Festivals: Top Tips and Case Studies](#) is a practical guide to different aspects of engaging with festivals and although it mainly addresses why universities as a whole should engage with festivals, it makes great background reading for researchers as well.