

Experiences in hosting Public Engagement Awards

Some lessons learned

Experiences in Holding Public Engagement Awards

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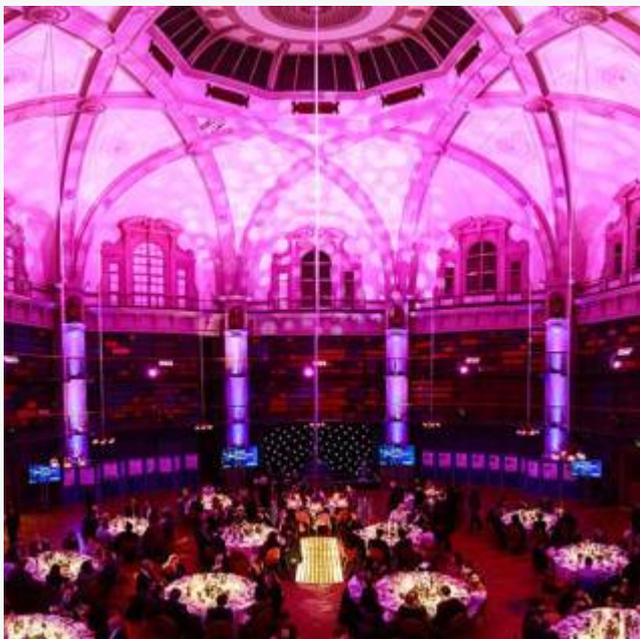
<https://londonpen.wordpress.com/2017/04/04/experiences-in-holding-public-engagement-awards/>

London PEN members [Daniel Taylor](#) and [Tadhg Caffrey](#) give us the organisers' view on running awards for public engagement from their universities, [Queen Mary, University of London \(QMUL\)](#) and [University College London \(UCL\)](#).

In February we were both able to celebrate the end product of much planning as our respective universities held their public engagement award ceremonies. The months of planning have provided many learning points for next time, which we wanted to share with others thinking about or currently planning their own awards. Despite our ceremonies looking quite different, when we chatted about it, we found that our 'top tips' matched up neatly.

So, in this post we give a short description and rationale for each ceremony followed by our joint 'top tips', please do add your own or ask any questions in the comments box below!

The QMUL Experience



The **QMUL ceremony** takes the form of a sit down dinner for over 150 people from across the institution, including some external partners and collaborators. Prizes are awarded across four categories of public engagement, academic innovation, student enterprise and media relations, with short videos and a poster produced for each finalist to be displayed on the night, along with a short project description given in a commemorative booklet.

QMUL has been able to build to an awards ceremony on this scale as a result of working in collaboration with other areas of the institution over several years. This is a chance for us to reward

excellence in public engagement, but also academic innovation. Including student enterprise and media relations allows us to showcase and celebrate a broad range of complimentary activities from across QMUL.

Creating an awards ceremony which showcases “external enhancement, application and dissemination of research and learning” as well as public engagement allows us to firmly position public engagement within a wider context of “impact”, while not compromising on what excellence in public engagement looks like. This means we can showcase the positive changes public engagement can have on research and teaching, and on individual academic’s careers, as well as celebrate impacts generated outside of the institution. It also allows us to showcase the shortlisted projects outside our immediate circles to people we wouldn’t have otherwise reached, identifying links between projects in the different categories.

While a sit down dinner is more expensive than some other styles of awards ceremony, this format, and a painstakingly curated table plan, paid dividends as every table left the night having formed new connections or had valuable conversations. Whatever your format, I felt this was the most rewarding part of the night, so I encourage you to think hard about how to ensure that your event not only showcases past activities but facilitates new connections and conversations.

The UCL Experience

This year marked the 8th UCL Provost’s Awards for Public Engagement. It’s always a fun party and a great opportunity to meet up with people we’ve worked with in the past and new people who would like to collaborate in the future.

Celebration really is at the core of our awards and we offer accolades in six categories, while also celebrating all those nominated and the impact their projects have made.

We split the awards between different career stages (e.g. Early Career Researcher, Established Career, Student) and have an award for a community partner who has worked with UCL in the previous year. Bringing our 50+ nominees and winners together for the celebration is an excellent networking chance and a fantastic way to recognise their work. It’s a huge advantage that the Provost, Michael Arthur personally presents the awards and shows his support for the importance of engagement within the institution.

The ceremony itself has short presentations from the Head of Engagement, Laura Cream, the Provost and the Head of UCL Culture Simon Cane, followed by short citations for each award winner. We try to keep the talking bit to a minimum, to allow people to mingle and chat. We also set up small stalls for winners and nominees to present their work, and created a rolling Powerpoint of photographs from projects.

Our Top Tips

How do the awards fit with your strategy?

Awards only make sense if they’re useful for your institution, timetabling the ceremony with new funding and training programs allows you to use them as a chance to launch new projects and this year’s UCL awards even launched the new Public Engagement strategy.

To ensure their usefulness make sure that you evaluate your awards and integrate them into your yearly planning. This will ensure that you'll make the most of a captive, receptive audience who are excited about engagement and looking to you for leadership.

Other questions to consider from the start would be “who do you think would be a good addition to your panel for making awards decisions and who do you think would learn from being part of that process?” and “how will we evaluate the awards and share this learning?”.

The Winner *Doesn't* Take it All

With any awards ceremony there are winners and losers. Make sure you have a strategy in place to reward everyone in some way so that everyone feels rewarded and recognised and that it was worth applying.

We both followed up with all unsuccessful nominations, making it clear how we'd use application content for internal and external promotion, giving specific examples, such as sending details to heads of department. In QMUL's case each project received a personalised letter from the Vice Principal for Public Engagement and Student Enterprise thanking them and detailing particularly impressive elements of their project.

Make Good News Travel

The main aim of any awards ceremony is to showcase projects, but how can you do this effectively while getting the most out of it? Consider how best to present as much information as possible about projects while not boring audiences. Using videos, as QMUL did, ensures you have control of content and the length of project descriptions, while making projects feel valued and providing them with reusable content, but they are expensive.

Both QMUL and UCL featured public advocates presenting awards, and in UCL's case they enlisted public engagement advocates and community partners to read short descriptions of winning projects. Planning who you want to involve strategically ensures you're leveraging every opportunity to engage internal and external partners in the celebration.

Following up ceremonies with a strong communications strategy ensures that attention is drawn to the winners and their projects, raising the profile of the awards and your teams in the process.

It's a Celebration, Make Sure it Feels That way!

Running a conference, or a symposium, is very useful for bringing engagement projects together, but awards ceremonies are supposed to be light, fun and exciting. This is the chance for everyone to come together and enjoy the fruits of their labour, so try to create a relaxed environment with music, catering and a light tone.

Conclusion

Awards are great and something we both look forward to every year! They're a lot of work, but it's worth it to see the delight of the winners, the new collaborations that come from people meeting at the event and the increasing weight that engagement gets at the institution as a result.

You can find out more about our departments by looking through the webpages of either [UCL Culture](#) or the [QMUL Centre for Public Engagement](#).