

Evaluating Exhibitions and Displays

A recipe for evaluating museum exhibitions and displays



Welcome

This recipe is for researchers and engagement facilitators who would like to evaluate a museum exhibition or display; or those interested in creative methods for evaluating other Public Engagement with Research projects.

Follow this Exhibitions and Displays Evaluation Recipe and learn how to gather your own data and evidence to:

- **understand what works and where improvements can be made**
- **demonstrate outcomes and impacts (i.e. what difference has been made)**

Contents

Step 1:	Review or define the project objectives	8
Step 2:	Draft your evaluation questions	10
Step 3:	Design your feedback letter	12
Step 4:	Data protection and ethical considerations	16
Step 5:	Synthesise the data	18
Step 6:	Report and share the results	20
	Planning your own evaluation	22
	Further information	23
	Acknowledgements	25
	Notes	26

A RECIPE FOR AN EFFECTIVE EVALUATION

INGREDIENTS

- 1 museum exhibition or display
- 3–5 project objectives
- 3–5 evaluation questions
- 20+ museum visitors

RECIPE METHOD

- a bowlful of feedback letters
- a dollop of data gathering
- a spoonful of data synthesis
- a splash of data reporting

This recipe will take you through six key steps for planning and conducting an evaluation of a museum exhibition or display.

- Step 1:** Define your project objectives
- Step 2:** Articulate your evaluation questions
- Step 3:** Design your feedback area
- Step 4:** Build in ethical and data protection requirements
- Step 5:** Synthesise and visualise the data
- Step 6:** Write the report and share it

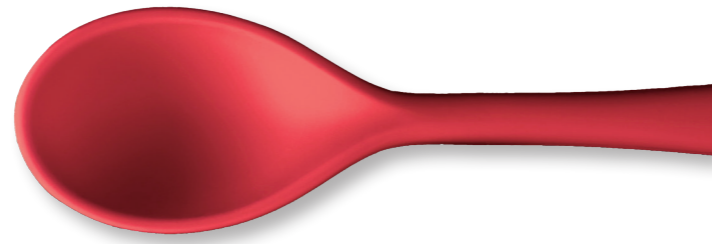
It includes guidance and top tips and demonstrates a real evaluation of *Traces of the Past*, a Public Engagement with Research project involving a museum case display and video installation, which you can adapt to evaluate your own display or exhibition.

The *Traces of the Past* evaluation, on which this evaluation recipe is based, used **feedback letters** to gather data and evidence to explore the outcomes and impacts of the display on museum visitors.

There are many other different evaluation methods and tools that you can consider, for your particular evaluation, such as:

- Questionnaires
- Interviews and focus groups
- Feedback postcards
- Observation
- Creative methods e.g. drawing or photography
- Graffiti wall and post-it notes
- Voting / tokens

Selecting the appropriate evaluation method and tools depends on the nature of your engagement activity and its objectives; the purpose of your evaluation; your respondents and how you can reach them; and the resources available for the evaluation.



Traces of the Past case display at the PRM

About the evaluation case study featured: Traces of the Past

Traces of the Past was a case display and video installation at the Pitt Rivers Museum (PRM) that aimed to provide a platform for remembering the lives lost in the 1994 Genocide against the Tutsi in Rwanda, raise awareness of the Genocide and support Genocide survivors to share their stories with museum visitors. *Traces of the Past* was a joint project and collaboration between Dr Julia Viebach (African Studies, University of Oxford); Jozie Kettle (PRM); the National Association of Rwandese Communities in the UK; and seven members of the Rwandan community.

Between May 2019 and January 2021, *Traces of the Past* displayed seven objects of remembrance that symbolise a connection to dead loved ones, which were loaned to the PRM by members of the Rwandan community. The case display was accompanied with a video installation, featuring the survivors' stories of loss, pain and resilience.

An evaluation of *Traces of the Past* was undertaken to explore the outcomes and impacts of the project on museum visitors; the researcher and their research; and to provide recommendations for how *Traces of the Past* could be enhanced in the future.

The aim of the evaluation was to provide:

- Valuable evidence and data for the researchers and creative practitioners.
- A real example of an evaluation case study to share and encourage others curating exhibitions and displays at the University of Oxford to conduct their own evaluations.

LINKS & RESOURCES

For more information about *Traces of the Past* see: <http://bit.ly/Traces-of-the-Past-PRM>.

Step 1 | Review or define the project objectives

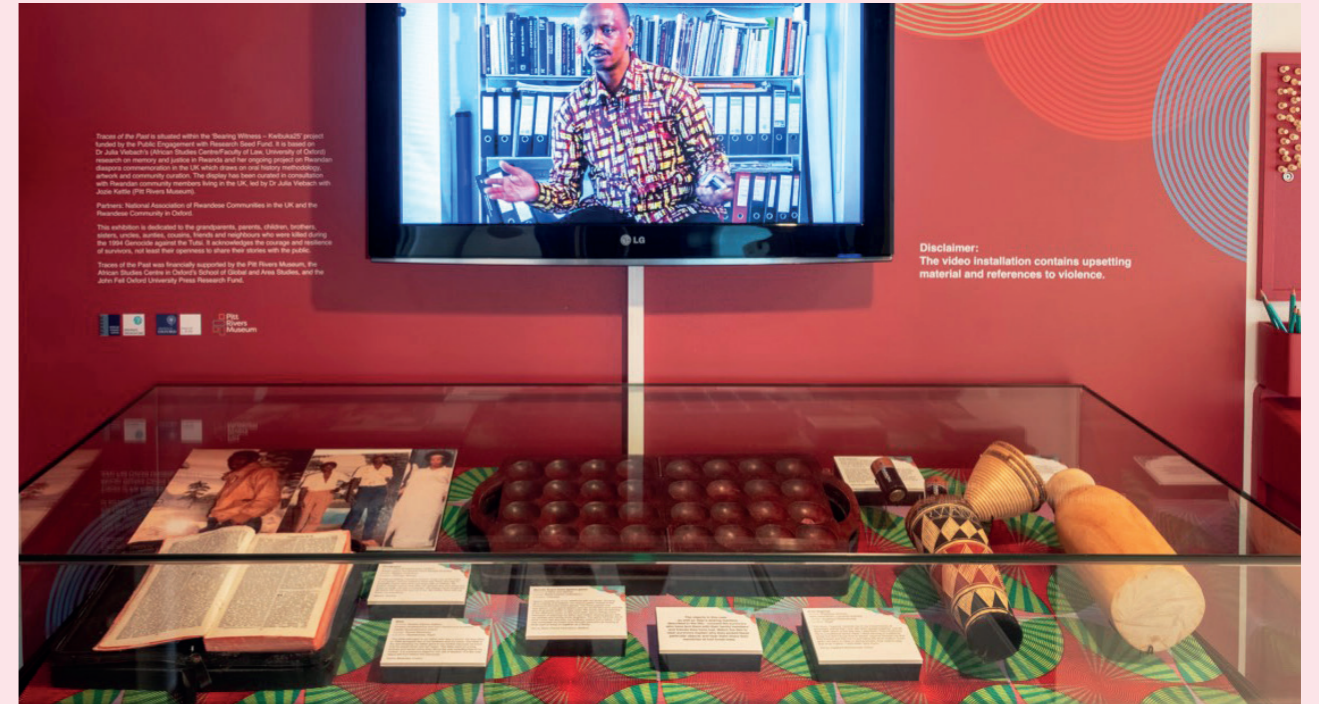


Firstly, review the objectives of your museum exhibition or display.

If your objectives have not yet been articulated, do this now (even if your project is already underway and you are doing this retrospectively). We advise setting between 3–5 objectives which should be **SMART**:

- S** **pecific:** well-defined, clear and focused on what you are aiming to achieve.
- M** **easurable:** how will you measure your progress towards these objectives? How will you know once the objective is achieved?
- A** **chievable:** the target is realistic and can be achieved with the available resources, skills and people.
- R** **elevant:** the objectives are consistent with each other and directly relevant to what you are aiming to achieve.
- T** **ime-defined:** within a particular time period that is realistic and achievable.

01 | Traces of the Past: objectives



Traces of the Past objects of remembrance and video installation

The key project objectives for *Traces of the Past* were as follows:

- 1 To create a tangible commemoration space in which members of the Rwandan community could share stories that were most important to them.
- 2 To raise awareness of the Genocide and how people are able to rebuild their lives after such catastrophic events through sharing video interviews with survivors.
- 3 To facilitate a collective space that brings together academics, diaspora communities and museum staff to curate together content around particularly contested areas of PRM collections.



Bible. Victims: Tensiya Eliphaz (father), Charles Ukulikiyimfura and Dani Harelimana (brothers), Odette Nyirahabimana (niece). Location: Nyakabanda, Kigali, Rwanda. Lender: Sophie Masereka

TOP TIP
Setting clear objectives is an important first stage when planning an evaluation. Take a step back and think *what am I hoping to achieve through this exhibition / display?*

Step 2 | Draft your evaluation questions



Explore the overall **purpose** of your evaluation. This might be:

- To provide feedback on how to enhance a project (**formative evaluation**), whereby you gather evidence on the successes and challenges and then make changes in response to the findings.
- To gather evidence of the outcomes and impacts of your museum exhibition or display (**summative evaluation**).

Many evaluations are a combination of both formative and summative.

Then write out 3–5 clear and focused **evaluation questions**:

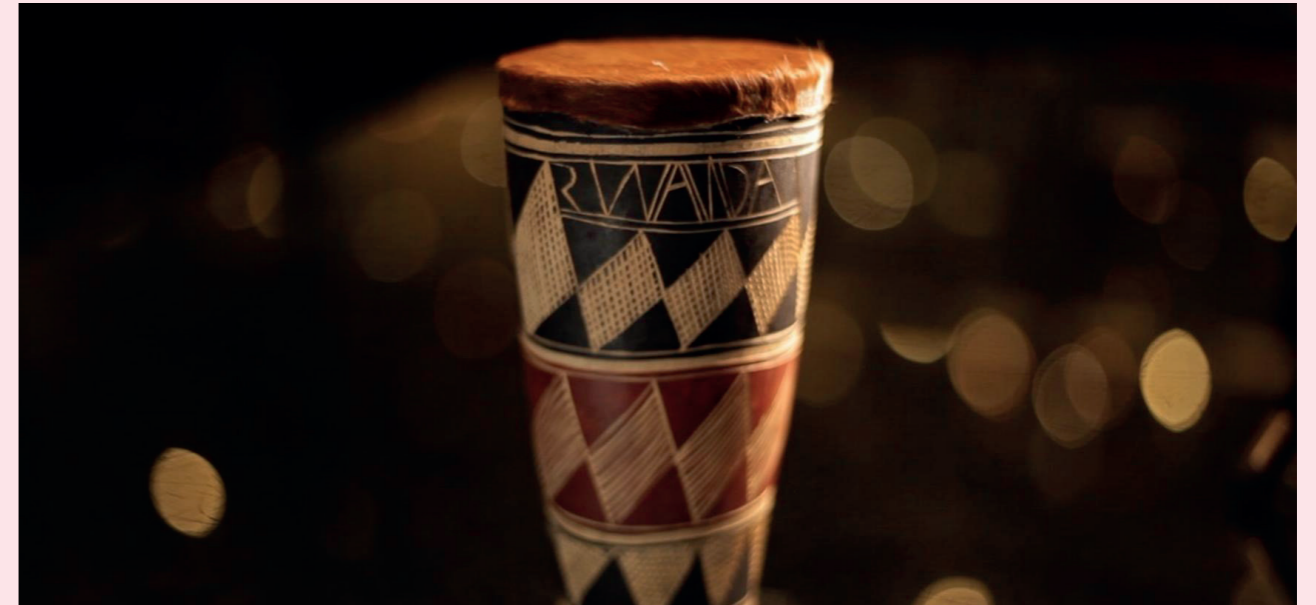
- These are not the questions that you ask in the evaluation i.e. the questions that might appear in a feedback letter; these are high-level questions that you would like to be answered by your evaluation.
- These questions capture: what you REALLY need to find out from an evaluation – for yourself, the project team and any other parties such as funders (or potential future funders) and/or project partners.
- Your objectives will help shape your evaluation questions – as they remind you what the project aims to achieve.

TOP TIP

Consult your project partners and collaborators when planning the evaluation and writing the evaluation questions, to ensure the evaluation is focused on gathering data and evidence which is relevant, useful and important to collaborators.

02

Traces of the Past: evaluation questions



Drum (Ingoma). Victims: Angelique Ishimwe, Alida Uwamahoro, Laurence (friends). Location: Kigali, Rwanda. Lender: Angelique Ndamukunda

The purpose of the evaluation was both summative and formative and the key evaluation questions for *Traces of the Past* were as follows:

- 1 **What were the inputs and outputs of the project?**
 - i. How many researchers; museum staff and members of the Rwandan community were involved in the curation of the display and video installation?
 - ii. What creative outputs were produced through the project?
- 2 **What were the outcomes and impacts on museum visitors?**
 - i. Did members of the public learn about the Genocide and spaces of remembrance?
 - ii. Did the display and video raise awareness of survivors' traumatic experiences, and their resilience and creativity in building new lives in the UK diaspora?

- iii. Did people feel empathy towards the suffering of those who have been involved in mass atrocity?

3 What were the outcomes and impacts on the researcher and their research?

- i. What were the benefits (if any) to the researcher involved and/ or their research?
- ii. What was the legacy of the project?

4 What learning and recommendations can be made for future commemorative spaces and curated content around contested areas of PRM collections?

TOP TIP

When writing your evaluation questions, think about what is most important to find out. Having a set of key evaluation questions will help you to decide what data to collect, how to analyse the data and how to report on the results.

Step 3 | Design your feedback letter

Before designing the feedback letter – ask yourself: which evaluation method will be most appropriate to reach your target respondents and gather the data you are looking for? What people and resources are available to design and create the feedback area?

For the *Traces of the Past* evaluation, **feedback letters** were used as a creative method to invite museum visitors to share their thoughts and emotional responses to *Traces of the Past*, by writing a short letter. When designing the feedback area, we worked with the exhibition designers from the start to ensure the feedback area was integrated as part of the overall display.

The image below illustrates the *Traces of the Past* case display, video installation and feedback area.

03 | Traces of the Past: feedback letter

Museum visitors were invited to write their thoughts about *Traces of the Past* in a letter; and could either pin their letter to the pinboard or place their letter in an envelope provided and post this into the feedback box.

The sharing of photographs, messages and thoughts on pinboards has been used in Genocide memorials, and this approach inspired the pinboard used in the *Traces of the Past* feedback area to ensure we invited reflections and thoughts in a culturally sensitive way.

Traces of the Past feedback area

Guidance was included next to the case display to encourage visitors to share their comments and responses.

TOP TIP

Design and create your feedback area at the same time as the display or exhibition is curated. Use a similar colour scheme and style for both the display and the feedback area to help integrate the feedback area as part of the overall museum display.

While we would advise designing the feedback area to fit in with the colour and style of the exhibition, you should also make it clear that this area is for feedback by distinguishing it in some way from the rest of the display to encourage visitors to share their thoughts.

Traces of the Past case display and video installation.



A small writing table was added to the feedback area so that respondents could easily write their answers.

TOP TIP

Assign a member of your project team to re-stock the feedback letters and any stationery required (i.e. pencils, envelopes); and to also regularly review feedback letters posted on the pinboard and remove any offensive material.

03

Traces of the Past: feedback letter

The feedback letters were designed to enable museum visitors to share their open thoughts, reflections and emotional responses to the display. When writing their letter, visitors could choose to address their message to the victims, survivors, researcher or museum staff.

TRACES OF THE PAST
my letter

Dear

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

PROS & CONS OF UNSTRUCTURED TEMPLATES

An unstructured template is one without any specific questions – respondents have the freedom to share any thoughts.

An advantage of unstructured templates is that they can elicit richer, more in-depth information that may not have been captured in a more structured question guide – as respondents have the opportunity to share the information that is most important to them.

A disadvantage of unstructured templates is that respondents may misinterpret the purpose of evaluation, or it may be more challenging to gain the data needed to answer the evaluation questions.

TOP TIP For the *Traces of the Past* feedback area, some museum visitors misinterpreted this and shared their feedback about their whole experience of the museum – rather than solely reflections about the specific display. When creating your own feedback area, ensure you accompany the feedback letter with clear guidance about the purpose of the evaluation activity and instructions on what you would like museum visitors to do.

Thank you for sharing your thoughts about
Traces of the Past.

Please either pin your letter to the notice board, or post your letter into the box.

How we use your data

We will use your data for the purposes of exploring your thoughts, emotions and feelings about the *Traces of the Past* display.

This letter will inform the overall learning from and evaluation of *Traces of the Past*. The results will be published in internal reports and an evaluation case study, and may also be used in research publications. This evaluation is being conducted by Annaleise Depper (Evaluation Officer, Public Engagement with Research) at the University of Oxford. If you have any questions about the evaluation please contact: annaleise.depper@admin.ox.ac.uk.

Please note, your responses will be anonymised and no names will be shared publicly.

If you have a question or comment about *Traces of the Past*, please contact Julia Viebach (African Studies Centre, University of Oxford): julia.viebach@afria.ox.ac.uk.

REFLECTIONS ON THE IMPACT OF COVID

The COVID-19 pandemic posed significant challenges to *Traces of the Past*. The Pitt Rivers Museum was closed for much of 2020 due to lockdown measures, and we had initially planned to facilitate a focus group with members of the Rwandan community to explore their thoughts about the display in more depth. Due to COVID-19 we were unable to facilitate this additional evaluation activity within the timescale of the exhibition.

Virtual or online platforms can provide alternative evaluation opportunities for when in-person engagement cannot take place, for example facilitating a focus group or interview via video conferencing platforms.

Step 4 | Data protection and ethical considerations

The next step is to follow appropriate ethical procedures and abide by data protection standards. Below are some key actions:

Data and informed consent

Highlight the purpose of the evaluation and how respondents' data will be used (including whether responses will be attributed or anonymised).

Only collect data for specified, explicit and legitimate purposes. For example, only ask what is strictly necessary to gather the data and evidence needed to answer your evaluation questions and avoid collecting data that you are not likely to use or need.

Provide respondents the opportunity to decide whether they would like to share their feedback letter with other museum visitors by posting this on the pinboard; or by sharing their thoughts confidentially by posting a letter into a feedback box.

Storing data

Remember to securely store any data shared by respondents. For example, if your feedback area includes a postbox, ensure this can only be accessed by museum staff or the evaluator. After the responses are removed from the display, store paper-based data in a secure place (i.e. a locked office) and once transcribed store any digital data on a password-protected device. Destroy all data once this is no longer required for the evaluation.

Ongoing

Think about data protection and ethical considerations throughout your evaluation. Ensure you maintain respect, confidentiality and are worthy of people's trust when carrying out data collection and also when synthesising and sharing the results. Ensure you process and synthesise the data fairly and transparently – and be open to sharing both successes and challenges when reporting on the results.

DO I NEED TO SEEK UNIVERSITY ETHICAL APPROVAL FOR AN EVALUATION?

In short, it depends on why you are collecting data – and how it will be used. For example, if you are collecting data for evaluation purposes (i.e. to reflect and explore the outcomes and impacts of a project), then you will not necessarily need to seek ethical clearance. However, if you plan to utilise the data for research purposes and intend to share participants' data (such as direct quotes) in an academic publication, then ethical approval will most likely be required – as this would be distinguished as 'research' activity. Further advice about ethical approval at the University of Oxford can be found here <https://researchsupport.admin.ox.ac.uk/governance/ethics>.

LINKS & RESOURCES

University guidance on data protection and handling personal data: <https://www.ox.ac.uk/about/organisation/governance/dataprivacy>.

04 | Data protection and ethical considerations for Traces of the Past

On the back page of the feedback letter, summarise how people's data will be used.

How we use your data

We will use your data for the purposes of exploring your thoughts, emotions and feelings about the *Traces of the Past* display.

This letter will inform the overall learning from and evaluation of *Traces of the Past*. The results will be published in internal reports and an evaluation case study, and may also be used in research publications. This evaluation is being conducted by Annalise Depper (Evaluation Officer, Public Engagement with Research) at the University of Oxford. If you have any questions about the evaluation please contact: annalise.depper@admin.ox.ac.uk.

Please note, your responses will be anonymised and no names will be shared publicly.

If you have a question or comment about *Traces of the Past*, please contact Julia Viebach (African Studies Centre, University of Oxford): julia.viebach@africa.ox.ac.uk.

We highlighted how respondents' data would be used and for what purpose; who was conducting the evaluation; and emphasised that any information they provide will remain anonymous.

Include your contact details should respondents have a question.

Respondents could decide to either add their feedback letter to the pinboard next to the display or could keep their response hidden from other museum visitors by posting their letter into the feedback box.

It was important to be aware that when other letters were visible, this may have influenced what other museum visitors decided to share.

Step 5 | Synthesise the data

After the respondents have completed and returned their feedback letters, the next step is to synthesise the data you have gathered. This involves an iterative process of categorisation, interpretation and reflection; and will enable you to make sense of the results and any patterns emerging from the data.

The following steps involve identifying patterns of themes within the data:

- 1 Prepare and organise the data**
First, type up the completed feedback letters into a Word document or Excel spreadsheet.
- 2 Familiarise yourself with the data**
Start by reading through all the responses, and repeat twice more. You may want to keep a separate note of any key ideas emerging as you read through the responses.
- 3 Searching for themes**
Read through the responses once again – this time highlight any key words or phrases; and assign a theme to the data, which is a brief description or summary of the response. You can add these themes either by inserting a comment to a word document or in the columns next to the response in an Excel spreadsheet. Once complete, look back through all the themes and identify recurring ideas – then group these into key overarching themes. If you prefer, you can highlight key words or phrases physically using highlighter pens/ stickers, or on the Word document / Excel spreadsheet that you have created.
- 4 Define and name themes**
Name and describe each of the broader themes identified in the previous step. This final step involves capturing the essence of what each theme is about. The theme names should be concise and immediately provide the reader a sense of what the theme is about.

If you have a large number of responses – it may be worth thinking about utilising software, such as NVivo or SPSS, that can organise and synthesise qualitative data for you. Both of these software packages are available for University of Oxford staff and students to download for free here: <https://help.it.ox.ac.uk/shop/downloads>.

TOP TIP
When synthesising the data, it's important that you respect the respondents' data and aim to represent the responses and information gathered as honestly as possible.



Milk container (Icyansi). Victim: Augustin Ndayambaje (father). Location: Rutobwe, Muhanga, Rwanda. Lender: Caritas Umulisa.

Here is an example of a feedback letter from the *Traces of the Past* evaluation, which illustrates how to synthesise rich and in-depth qualitative data.

Feedback letter (response typed up into a Word document).

Highlighted key words and phrases.

Key themes were added as comments within the Word document. Each theme is a brief description or summary of the highlighted.

Dear Survivors,

Thank you for sharing deeply personal memories that are so **painful to recall and share**. It is an honour to be trusted with them and it is **our responsibility to share and disseminate them and to stand for and with survivors**. Your grace, dignity, beauty and courage are profound and an extraordinary tribute to your people and to the family and friends you lost in the genocide.

Please know how powerful and impact your stories have, how important they are and you are, and how **deeply grateful we are for your generosity and bravery**. May you be blessed with health, peace and well-being.

Emotional response to the survivors' life stories
Reply Delete < >

Understanding the importance of disseminating survivors' stories
Reply Delete < >

Powerful and impactful stories
Reply Delete < >

Gratitude to the survivors for sharing their stories
Reply Delete < >

TOP TIP When identifying key words and phrases, it is useful to add different colours for each theme to help illustrate the key themes that are recurring in the feedback letters.

Step 6 | Report and share the results

The final stage of an evaluation is to pull all of your findings together, write your report and share it with your team and other target readers and audiences.

Before drafting your report

- Consider – who is the report for? This could be one or many target groups such as: the project team; funders; participants or volunteers; researchers; engagement practitioners; museum staff; press office; partners or other internal or external audiences. Ensure your report is structured, written and presented in a way that is appropriate for your key readers and users of the report.
- Draft an outline plan for the structure of your report. Depending on the nature of an evaluation, a report may include the following key elements:
 - an executive summary or abstract to summarise the report
 - an introduction to the museum exhibition or display you are evaluating
 - project objectives and key evaluation questions
 - describing the evaluation methodology used
 - presenting the findings
 - reflecting on the outcomes and impacts
 - sharing the success, challenges, lessons learned and recommendations
 - appendices – with examples of the data collection tools

Drafting your report

- When describing and interpreting the findings, you might discuss why outcomes were achieved or not achieved; what worked and what did not; and reflect upon the project objectives and evaluation questions.
- Focus on the information that is the most important to share and use a variety of means to present the data. For example, this might involve quotations; charts and graphs; word clouds and infographics.

Sharing your report and its findings

- A range of methods can be used to share evaluation findings. In addition to sending it directly to key individuals and groups, you can also share a link to the written report via social media; blog post; newsletter; video; infographic; or presentation, depending on which is most appropriate for your target audiences.

TOP TIP

When presenting the findings, highlight the key themes and choose respondents' quotes that bring the outcomes to life and reflect the range of responses received. Try to select quotes that are representative of the results, rather than those that present your exhibition or display in the best light.

06 | Reporting and sharing the Traces of the Past evaluation results

Here is an extract from the *Traces of the Past* evaluation report:

Increased understanding about the importance of commemoration

Respondents highlighted an increased understanding about commemoration as an important way to remember the lives lost in the Genocide against the Tutsi in Rwanda. In particular, respondents emphasised how they learned about the devastating consequences of the Genocide and dangers of racist oppression, violence and denial of human rights and democratic values.

Traces of the Past raised awareness of the importance of memory and commemoration amongst museum visitors, who highlighted that we must learn from history and advocate that genocide should never happen again. Respondents emphasised the need to preserve history and commemorate the victims of the Genocide; and how they had learned about the role of commemoration in providing hope for a future world without violence.

“Dear Museum, thank you for appreciating and preserving history as it should be. Without you our past would be forgotten. It is so vital to not only commemorate our history but to learn and grow from it.”

“Dear Survivors, thank you for sharing deeply personal memories that are so painful to recall and share. It is an honour to be trusted with them and it is our responsibility to share and disseminate them and to stand for and with survivors.”

Theme title

Paragraphs to describe the responses and findings related to this theme – to illustrate what was said and felt by the respondents.

Extracts/quotations from respondents' feedback letters.

In addition to the evaluation report, we also included a summary of the visitor responses to the exhibition on the museum website (see links and resources).

LINKS & RESOURCES

Traces of the Past evaluation report: : <http://bit.ly/Traces-of-the-Past-evaluation-report>. PRM webpage with a summary of the visitor responses to the exhibition: <https://www.prm.ox.ac.uk/event/traces-of-the-past#:~:text=Traces%20of%20the%20Past%20>



Planning your own evaluation



Further Information

A recipe for effective evaluations

This case study illustrates the key steps involved in evaluating a museum display using feedback letters.

We hope the examples in this booklet provide you with inspiration and ideas for getting started with your own evaluation.

While these key steps should stay the same, there are many different ingredients that can make an effective evaluation. For example, there are different evaluation tools to gather evidence and multiple ways to interpret and report on your findings. We encourage you to think about what tools and approaches would work best for your specific project and your evaluation questions.

TOP TIPS

- Design your feedback area at the same time as the exhibition is curated.
- Where possible, embed your feedback area as part of the overall exhibition or display.
- Consult with your collaborators and project partners when planning and carrying out an evaluation.
- Don't just report on successes – highlight the unexpected findings and failures as well.
- Avoid trying to evaluate everything – focus on what is most important to explore and evidence.
- We would recommend spending a third of the time on planning and designing the evaluation and the tools; a third of the time collecting data; and a third on synthesis and reporting.

Public Engagement with Research at the University of Oxford

This case study is part of a wider building capacity programme at Oxford that aims to equip researchers and engagement professionals with the skills, knowledge and support to plan, deliver and evaluate Public Engagement with Research activities.

For further information see: <https://www.ox.ac.uk/research/public-engagement>

For more support on evaluating Public Engagement with Research at the University of Oxford

- Plan your own evaluation using the Evaluation Planning Template [single sign-on required] <https://researchsupport.admin.ox.ac.uk/innovation/per/evaluation>
- See the current Public Engagement with Research opportunities, including for evaluation: www.ox.ac.uk/research/public-engagement/support-researchers
- Contact the Public Engagement with Research team: publicengagement@admin.ox.ac.uk

Additional evaluation resources

There are many guides, toolkits and resources to help you evaluate engagement activities, including:

- *Evaluation Recipe 1: Online Citizen Science* – this first Evaluation Recipe in the series includes the key steps for planning and conducting an evaluation of an online Citizen

Science activity utilising an online survey [single sign-on required]: <https://bit.ly/Evaluation-recipe-online-citizen-science>

- *Evaluation Recipe 2: Performances and Events* – this Evaluation Recipe includes the key steps for planning and conducting an evaluation of an event or performance utilising feedback booklets [single sign-on required]: https://sharepoint.nexus.ox.ac.uk/sites/uasmosaic/research/Documents/PER_evaluation_Recipe_2_Performance_and_events.pdf
- *The Little Booklet of Evaluation Tools* highlights a series of easy-to-use and creative methods to evaluate activities that aim to inform and inspire the public from the University of Oxford's *European Researchers' Night – Curiosity Carnival*: <http://bit.ly/Little-book-evaluation-tools>
- Arts Council England provide guidance on Generic Learning Outcomes and how to gather evidence of the outcomes of art and cultural activities: <https://www.artscouncil.org.uk/measuring-outcomes/how-support-evaluation>
- The National Co-ordinating Centre for Public Engagement (NCCPE) has a range of helpful evaluation resources: www.publicengagement.ac.uk/doengagement/evaluating-publicengagement/evaluation-resources

Acknowledgements

The evaluation cooks that brought you this recipe are Dr Annaleise (Depper) Wood (Engagement & Evaluation Facilitator, Public Engagement with Research, Research Services) and Dr Lesley Paterson (Head, Public Engagement with Research, Research Services) at the University of Oxford.

The programme to build capacity in evaluating Public Engagement with Research is supported by the University's Public Engagement with Research Advisory Group, with representatives from across the Academic Divisions and the Gardens, Libraries & Museums.

The evaluation of *Traces of the Past* was supported by Dr Julia Viebach (African Studies) and Jozie Kettle (Pitt Rivers Museum) at the University of Oxford.

Traces of the Past was funded by the University of Oxford's Public Engagement with Research Seed Fund.

Thank you to the museum visitors who took part in the evaluation of *Traces of the Past* – your time and feedback in contributing to this evaluation are very much appreciated.

Notes



Caution: once opened consume
within 3 days.



UNIVERSITY OF
OXFORD