

# Universities, Exhibitions, and Audiences: Measuring Public Response to Exhibitions in Academic Space

## Project Background

In 2009, to celebrate the bicentennial of the birth of Charles Darwin, as well as the 150th anniversary of the publication of *On the Origin of Species*, the Talbot Rice Gallery at the University of Edinburgh held two interconnected exhibitions. One, *An Entangled Bank*, asked modern artists to create work inspired by Darwin and his ideas. The other, *Darwin's Edinburgh*, was mounted in the Georgian Gallery, and presented a narrative about Darwin's brief time as a student at the University of Edinburgh, what the city and University was like at that time, and the ways in which the experience of Edinburgh shaped Darwin the scientist. It was hoped that through the historical exhibition visitors would learn not only about Darwin himself, but also more about the University's own history.



## Methodology

In order to assess if an exhibition like this can convey those messages to members of the academic community and the public, an impact study was launched. This included:

- participant observation, to map how visitors approached the exhibition, how long they spent, and which areas held their interest.
- questionnaires handed out to visitors, asking what they learned, what they found most interesting, and for other impressions.
- telephone interviews a month later to see if visitors retained particular information or had been inspired by their visit.

## Results

Reactions to the exhibition were overwhelmingly positive. Visitors were excited to learn about Darwin's connection to Edinburgh - a fact that was new to most. Both the public and student groups were

attracted to the most visually striking area, which dealt with the teaching of anatomy in the 19th century.

However, while students were drawn to the gory and spectacular, they also singled out less visually stunning objects that instead spoke of the normality of Darwin's student life. They connected intensely with the idea of him as a library-card holding, lecture-note taking young scholar like themselves, and expressed pride in their similarities with this important historical figure. Said one student: 'He was a normal student, even getting annoyed at his lecturers at times!'

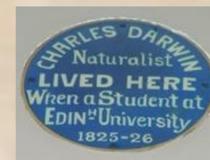


Members of the public were most likely to have wandered into the exhibition on the spur of the moment or after seeing a sign in town, rather than planning in advance for their visit. Once they were in, many were very taken with the space of the Georgian Gallery, as well as its former incarnation as the natural history museum. There was a sense from the public that they were getting to see 'behind the scenes' of the University and its past.

## The Big Picture

While this particular study involved a small sample and a small exhibition, it did highlight several much larger issues of importance to Universities.

- Visitors, particularly current and former students, loved the sense of connection that came with displays about the University's history. They then built on this sense of connection with statements of pride about their decisions to attend the University. The past of Universities can be a powerful tool in bolstering a sense of academic community.
- The general public like getting 'inside' a university and learning more about what goes on within it. Many people questioned were interested in other exhibitions or events that would allow them to learn about ongoing research.



Impact studies like this one show that exhibitions can be valuable tools in helping universities engage with new communities, as well as with their own staff and students. An ongoing exhibition programme, especially if tied to current research or other community events, can have a huge impact for Higher Education, exciting the public and making them feel a part of the University project, stimulating alumni to make return visits, and fostering pride in students and staff.