

Evaluating arts impact on campus and community

1. Summary of impact

UTS ART Live brings artists and students together to participate in public performances and events on campus. In doing so, it seeks to not only transform every day spaces with art, but also to build a sense of belonging and a way for different, often under-represented, groups to express themselves.

Until recently, the program relied on anecdotal reports rather than data to measure its impact. This changed when Carmel Foley and Deb Edwards from the UTS Business School were brought together with UTS ART under the aegis of a Social Impact Grant.

Using a mix of surveys and interviews, Carmel and Deb were able to establish that the program contributes to the social fabric of UTS.

“We found that ART Live events made people feel they were part of, that they really belonged to, a diverse community on campus,” says Carmel.

The program also opened people’s eyes to new ways of seeing the world, with four in five respondents to evaluation surveys reporting a “light bulb” or “ah-ha” moment that changed or deepened their appreciation of an issue or space.

It’s hoped the positive results from Carmel and Deb’s evaluation will contribute to the ongoing viability of the ART Live program by demonstrating its worth to funding decision-makers.

2. The problem

“UTS ART believed that their programs and their work were having impact but they didn’t know how to document that. The evaluation was about helping them to demonstrate the power of what they were doing in an academically rigorous way,” says Deb.

3. Beneficiaries

The UTS ART Live program benefits from being able to demonstrate its positive impact on participants – continued funding relies on convincing decision-makers that its work is important. But in a broader sense, the whole campus stands to profit from the opportunities that ART Live gives to sometimes marginalised groups.

“Communicating those voices is very important. The evaluation shows that participants in ART Live have more understanding of how different people experience spaces at university. The more people who understand this and empathise with this, the more likely we’ll be able create a sense of belonging amongst students, staff and the inner city community more generally,” says Deb.

4. Approach to impact

Carmel and Deb undertook two surveys – one with participants in the Queer Tour, and another with those in the Deborah Kelly collage workshops.

Participants could give gradated responses to the surveys but were also given room to provide more open-ended feedback for selected questions.

Interviews were then undertaken with participants in the collage workshops, including the artist.

Using a Grounded Theory approach, the researchers regularly reviewed participant responses in order to recognise repeated ideas or concepts. This enabled them to divide responses into several broad categories, including ‘intellectual stimulation’, ‘meaningfulness’, ‘inspiration’ and ‘comfort zones’.

The survey questions were based on those developed by Carmel and Deb for the Sydney Entertainment Centre in order to better understand its audience, but the interviews were much more open ended, enabling responses to be less mediated.

5. What has changed as a result of this work?

5.1 The outcomes

In the short and medium term, the evaluation will be used to support continued funding for UTS ART Live, giving others the opportunity to engage – not only with ideas but with each other – in new ways.

5.2 Impact

In the longer term, both Carmel and Deb hope the positive results of the evaluation can contribute to creating a more vibrant, connected and inclusive community at UTS.

“We learned a lot from participating, particularly about the painful parts of normative spaces and what it’s like when you don’t seem to fit into them. The more people that understand that the better,” says Carmel.

UTS ART Live may also have a role to play in increasing a sense of inclusion in a wider sense, according to Deb.

“I think UTS ART has an opportunity to do other things that help various communities within UTS express themselves, whether that be around gender or with culture or international students,” she says.

6. What has helped you accomplish this work?

The evaluation was a first-time collaboration between the business faculty and UTS ART – a pairing that wouldn’t have been possible without the input of the Centre for Social Justice and Inclusion.

Carmel and Deb were also able to draw on previous work they had undertaken with the Sydney Entertainment Centre.

7. Challenges

The collaborative nature of the project was one of its strengths but it also was one of the initial challenges.

“I didn’t have the language used in the arts space, it was something I had to learn,” says Deb.

The potential sensitivity of the topics covered also required careful attention.

“In crafting the survey we had to be very mindful about how we asked the questions – we didn’t want to contribute or to perpetuate the unhelpful stereotypes already out there.”