

# The Collaborative Futures Academy 2024

## Emotions in Engagement



CFA<sup>2024</sup>

## Evaluation Report

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# Introduction

The Collaborative Futures Academy is a free online programme for researchers and practitioners involved in public engagement with research, who seek to deepen their practice in an international environment. It provides a space to explore common themes and questions that arise in their work, to reflect on their practice, gain new perspectives and build their skills. CFA is international and cross-disciplinary in its focus, and helps to push the boundaries of the field. The programme is developed and delivered jointly by the Berlin School of Public Engagement and Open Science, based at the Museum für Naturkunde Berlin (Germany); the University of Cambridge Public Engagement Team; the engagement teams of Wellcome Connecting Science and the Kavli Centre for Ethics, Science, and the Public (all UK); and Stellenbosch University (South Africa).

CFA24 was the fourth iteration of the Academy, and focussed specifically on the role of emotions in engagement. It took place over three days in May 2024, and included a mix of presentations, discussion workshops and creative pieces. The programme was delivered uniquely online, and centred on the UTC timezone, reflecting the European and South African location of the organising team.

Applications to participate were submitted in early 2024. These included written statements and, in most cases, video applications that described applicants' backgrounds and motivations for wanting to join the Academy. The applications were reviewed to ensure that applicants were aware of the specific approach of the CFA, and to try and ensure a broad representation of disciplines and geographies. As CFA is a development programme for those involved in public engagement, applications were also assessed to exclude those without any public engagement experience, and priority was given to those with fewer opportunities for professional exchange in this area.

The programme was developed by the core CFA team, in consultation with their wider engagement network, with three thematic focus areas. The first day, themed around

“Connecting to Emotion”, began with introductions and a facilitated conversation around of personal stories of emotions in engagement from three previous Academy participants. Subsequent sessions introduced public engagement research on emotions and engagement, and presented an insight into the psychology of emotional engagement. These inputs examined the roles emotions play in creating, challenging, and complicating engagement activities.

The second day focussed on practical case studies of creative and emotionally attuned engagement practice, under the wider theme of “Creating Cultures of Care”. The morning session included presentations of the case studies, followed by an opportunity for small group conversation, exploring practical challenges and pathways. In the afternoon, participants had a choice of workshops exploring different creative approaches to dialogue, including facilitation through literature and time making.

The third and final day focused on “Meaningful Conversation”, specifically how those involved in engagement activities can establish trust through relational meetings and meaningful conversation. The Academy was rounded off by a Forum Theatre session during which participants explored different observations and responses to emotionally charged engagement situations. Throughout, CFA was facilitated by members of the programme team, and supported by a creative practitioner. Further details of the programme and its contents can be found in the CFA24 Emotions in Engagement Toolkit.<sup>1</sup>

The CFA was delivered online using Zoom, supported by a Miro workspace and Google Docs. Breakout rooms in Zoom were used throughout to enable small group discussions. Following the CFA, further action learning and mentoring sessions were arranged, and the Emotions in Engagement Toolkit was collated from activities and resources presented in the Academy. These activities were not covered by the evaluation work.

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<sup>1</sup> CFA 2024 Programme Team (Eds.) (2024). Emotions in Engagement Toolkit - A practice guide and insights from the Collaborative Futures Academy 2024. Museum für Naturkunde Berlin. <https://doi.org/10.7479/mim8-km40>

# Method

The evaluation of CFA24 consisted of two phases: a questionnaire circulated to all attendees and qualitative interviews. Background demographics were collected as part of the application process for CFA24.

The evaluation questionnaire was developed by all authors. It focused on the experience of participation, the value of the focus on emotions and the experience of the online Academy space and the tools used. Responses were collected using Qualtrics and analysed by RM using SPSS v28.

Qualitative interviews covered these themes in more detail. They were held using MS Teams, lasted around 30 minutes and were conducted by RM. Interview transcripts were read and reread to identify consistent themes, and compared with questionnaire responses to draw out points of convergence and divergence.

# Results

## Participant characteristics

CFA24 was attended by 45 participants from 16 countries across Asia, Europe, Africa and North and South America.

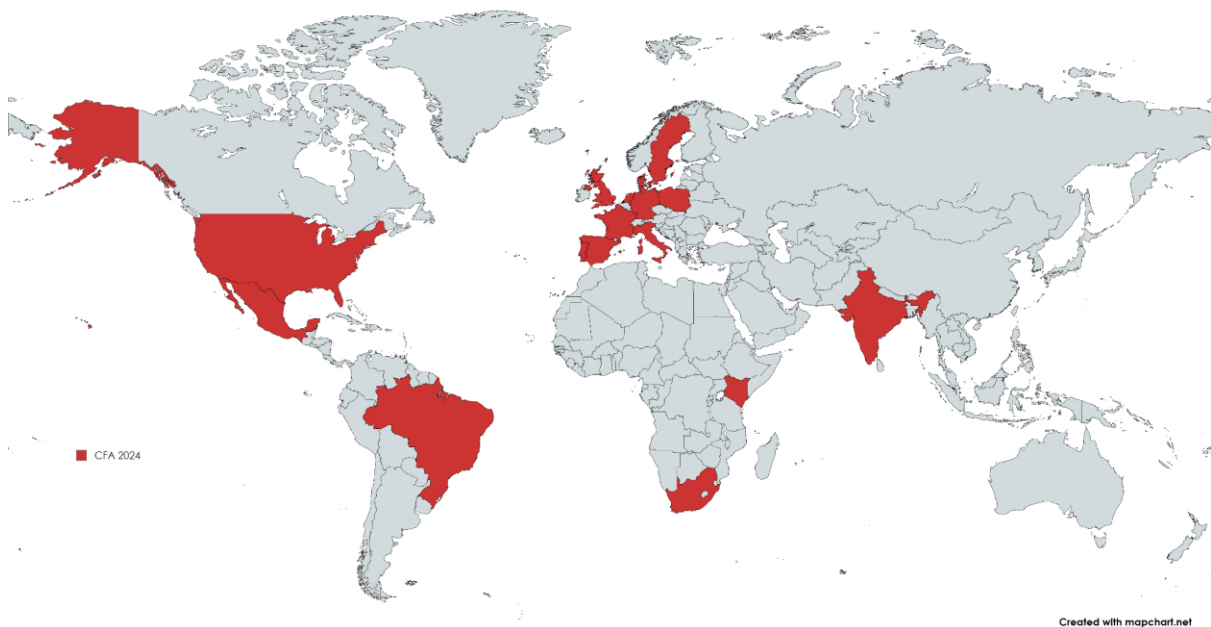


Figure 1: Country of residence and/or current location of CFA attendees

Participants were evenly split between those in research and non-research roles. The former was again evenly split between the natural and applied sciences and the social sciences and humanities, with the largest single group of attendees being those who worked in professional engagement roles in an institution.

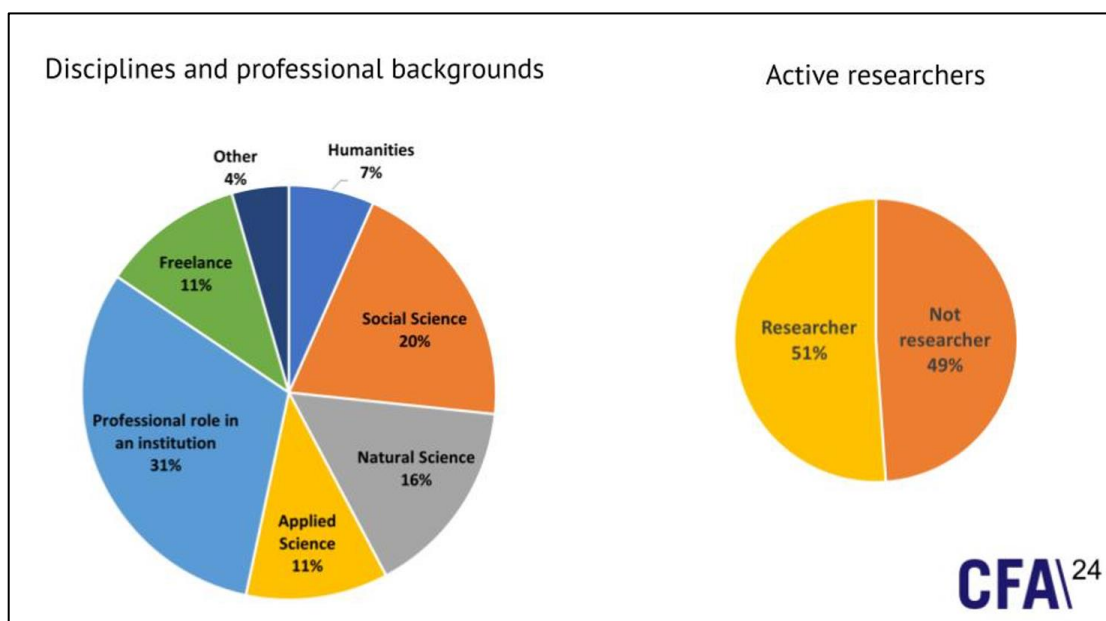


Figure 2: Background of CFA attendees

20 participants responded to the feedback questionnaire, a response rate of 44%. Respondents came from eight of the 16 countries represented at CFA24, with the largest representations from South Africa and the UK.

*Table 1: Country of residence of respondents*

<b>Country</b>	<b>Frequency</b>
France	1
Germany	3
Mexico	1
Netherlands	3
Portugal	1
South Africa	6
Sweden	1
UK	4
<b>Total</b>	<b>20</b>

Respondents were able to choose all academic and professional backgrounds that applied. Again, the largest individual field represented in responses was from the social sciences, here followed by humanities. Six respondents worked in subject specific public engagement and three in central public engagement roles.

*Table 2: Professional Background of CFA attendees*

<b>Professional background</b>	<b>Frequency</b>
Social science	6
Humanities	5
Life sciences	4
Physical sciences	2
Applied sciences	3
Centralised public engagement/outreach	3
Subject specialist public engagement/outreach	6
Other professional/technical support role	2
Freelance	4
None of the above	1

30% of respondents described themselves as early-career, 40% as mid-career, 15% as senior career and 15% as in the process of transitioning careers. 50% described themselves as experienced or very experienced in public engagement.

Six participants responded to requests for interviews. Due to the small numbers, no detailed demographics are presented on the interviewees. However, four (participants 2, 4, 5 and 6) were based in Europe and two in the global South (participants 1 and 3).

## Experience of CFA24

### The value of taking part

In open text responses, respondents described coming to the CFA with two primary goals: to learn new skills and to have a chance to connect and exchange with people in similar roles. 62.5% of respondents felt that the Academy had enabled them to achieve their goal very or extremely well, and 31% moderately well. No respondents felt that CFA24 had not helped them achieve their goal. This also came through in the qualitative interviews, with the exception of providing opportunities for networking and developing collaborative projects, discussed in more detail below.

In terms of direct benefits of participating (Figure 3), the greatest value was found in terms of engaging with the topic of the Academy, and giving the opportunity to reflect on their own engagement practice. The lowest impact was felt on being able to grow their network and learning and applying skills for engagement.



## How valuable has CFA been for the following?

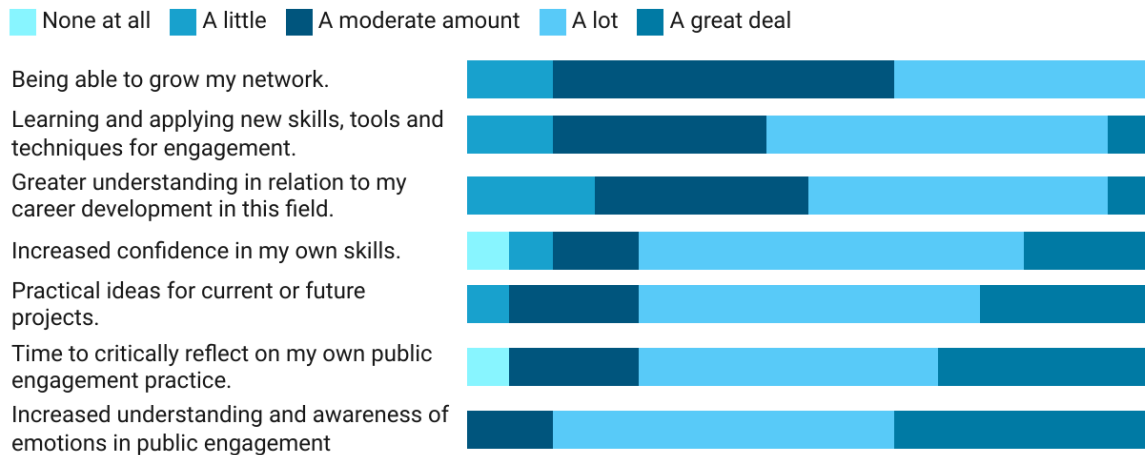


Figure 3: The value of CFA

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In terms of the focus of CFA24 on emotions, 68% of participants felt that CFA24 had helped a lot or a great deal to find international interdisciplinary connections. However, the greatest impact was in terms of helping participants practise skills of empathy, active listening and storytelling (93% a lot or a great deal).

## To what extent would you say that the CFA has helped you:

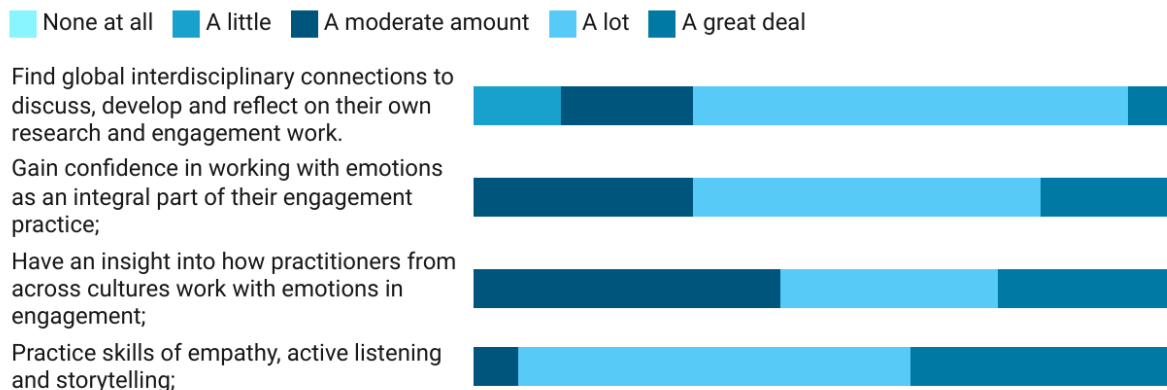


Figure 4: How has CFA helped?

## The programme

Feedback on the overall programme was exceptionally positive. 100% of respondents agreed that sessions were well-informed, open-minded, and well-facilitated, that the facilitators had the appropriate skills and confidence to lead sessions and that they had the opportunity to participate fully and effectively with the Academy. 94% agreed that the balance between presentations, shared practice and networking was good.

In open text feedback, participants expanded on these evaluations, commenting that:

“It was the best organized online academy I have attended so far. Very well done and many thanks to everyone. Would highly recommend the CFA.”

“You've done an amazing job, and for all three days I started the day engaged and looking forward to the day (and I ended always with a smile on my face!)”

“The passion for the programme shone through from the team running it - that added a real sense of investment for participants”

This was reflected in the interviews, which were overwhelmingly positive about the programme and the Academy experience. As one put it:

“I was amazed at all the activities that we were doing during these three days. And I really liked the dynamic that you organised in the small groups, the chance we had to talk to interchange ideas and experiences, and the reflection in collective about emotions and the importance of emotions ... and also listening, not more talking, but more listening to other people, taking into account the local context, the cultures, the diversity of points of views. So I really liked that, and it was a very respectful space.” (Participant 4)

“It was an enjoyable combination of passive listening, active listening, participation story exchange” (Participant 1)

## Sessions

Questionnaire respondents were asked to evaluate how useful they found the different sessions of the CFA programme. Given the small number of respondents, responses for the three Cultures of Care sessions are aggregated. While the majority of respondents rated all sessions as very or extremely useful, the introductory sessions around the case studies (56%) and above all the forum theatre sessions (87%) were most likely to be found extremely useful.

### How useful did you find the CFA24 sessions? -

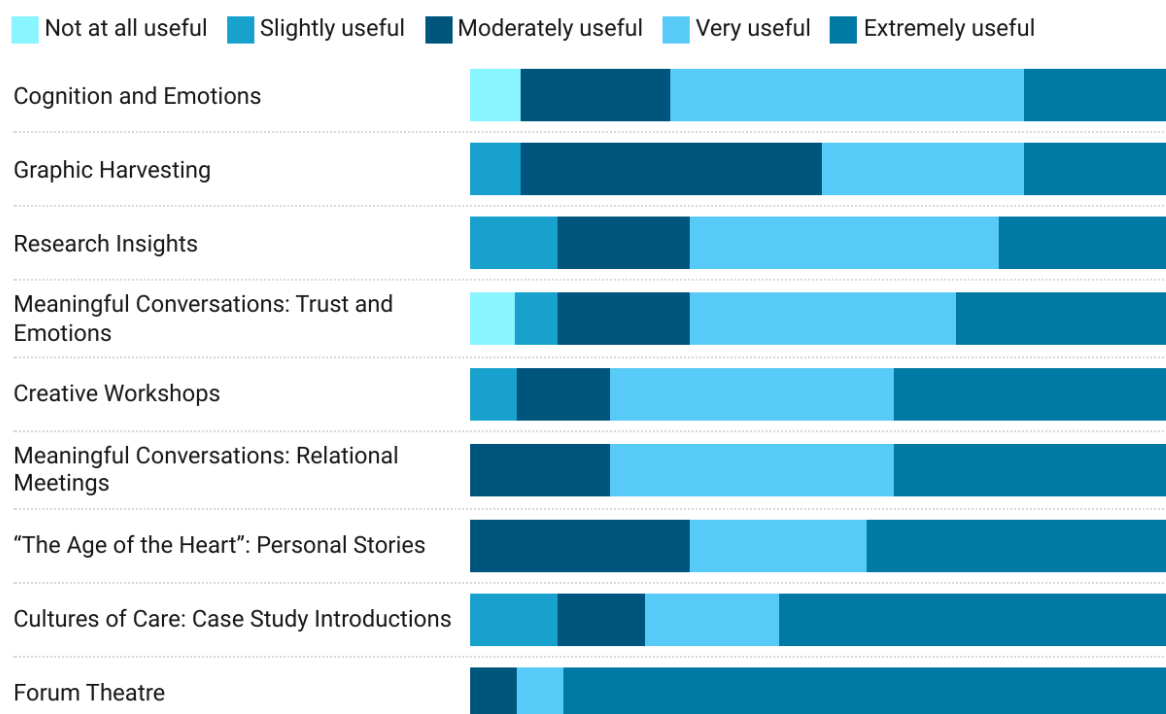


Figure 5: Usefulness of CFA sessions

In open text responses, questionnaire respondents described enjoying the majority of sessions. As one put it:

“I think the sessions complemented each other in terms of content and type of activity, so in overview everything worked very well together!”

Open text comments highlighted positive experiences throughout the programme, including both its more practical and theoretical elements. Some described immediate impact - for example one comment mentioned incorporating the TinyBooks approach (one of the creative workshop choices) into their ongoing doctoral research project. While the research insights session was highlighted by some as particularly useful, other participants suggested that more time, depth and breadth were needed for this discussion:

“1-2 more presentations of interdisciplinary research would have been great (to show the diverse field of research about emotions)”

“I would have preferred a deeper dive into the research insights. I felt it was too superficial.”

“I wish we had had more time for the research insights”

Another point for reflection in future programmes also relates to the ability to choose between the creative workshops, with some questionnaire respondents and interviewees expressing a degree of frustration at being unable to participate in their preferred workshop:

“I was kind of disappointed, because I wanted to book myself in one workshop, but it was full. I wanted [to do] the tiny books, I really wanted to explore that, and I didn't have a chance to participate in it.” (Participant 3)

Reflecting the questionnaire responses, a number of interviewees also highlighted both the creative harvesting and the forum theatre sessions as particular highlights of CFA24:

“The theatre group ... was great. I really liked it. Just to adjust all the performance that they did to virtual content - you know, it's very different to go to a theatre and watch the whole body and the whole performance in person and connect with them, so they just adapted everything, just to a small screen. And it really worked very well. They were very expressive with their faces and the stories - I really liked that” (Participant 3)

## A focus on emotions

The focus of CFA24 was on the role of emotions in engagement. In the evaluation, we aimed to explore how this choice of topic appealed to potential participants, how they found the focus on emotions during the Academy, and what, if any, impact working online had on the ability to address the topic. This was primarily explored through the six qualitative interviews.

In interviews, participants described how the focus of the Academy captured something that they felt was missing from other conversations around engagement, or was something they felt they needed to deepen in their engagement practice.

“Emotions may be the one thing that you can never leave out of any interaction, and yet we dance around it. We never engage with it. So it's very important. We should have dealt with this a long time ago.” (Participant 1)

“it's really the direction my engagement practices have been going and I felt really lacking because I work a lot with kids or teenagers and over the past years I've had some very hard questions that I did not know how to answer because I was scared of scaring the kids”. (Participant 6)

“Even if in the back of your head you are thinking about the fact that it's a high emotion field that you're working in or something like that .... [it's] not something that you necessarily have in the forefront of your mind [but] actually the emotion is a pretty key player in a lot of engagement” (Participant 2)

“In our public engagement activity, we deal very much with the cognitive level and not enough with emotion” (Participant 4)

The sessions on cognition and emotion on Day 1 and the forum theatre on day 3 were mentioned by participants as being particularly helpful in thinking about emotions in engagement:

The process model that was talked about of the emotional states and that whole idea of the order of you feeling the thing before you actually understand what you're feeling, and definitely before it expresses on your face and things is not something I'd ever really been familiar with and was just really helpful in thinking about engagement around contentious topics, as was the role-playing session (Participant 5)

However, one interviewee felt that there had not been enough focus on how to move into practice, through providing “a toolbox” (Participant 1).

In other interviews, participants’ feedback suggested that the Academy work on emotions had contributed to their career development:

“I feel more open and more interested in exploring emotions in public, in public engagement activities like the science cafes that we have every month. ... So this academy really gave me some bibliography and some reflections to think more about emotions, the role of emotions in science, communication and the environment and science ... I'm trying to look in the future for opportunities to keep working on emotions and explore emotions” (Participant 3)

“Throughout the years, since I come from a very scientific background, I always thought, you know ... OK, just put the science out there and that's how it'll work. People will understand, because the truth overcomes everything. And that was my very naive view. And now just bringing in emotions and the humane aspect and using, for example, art as an equaliser, or really talking about emotions as an equaliser in a space where you have this societal hierarchy between science and the

ivory tower. I think it's really pushing my engagement practice for sure”

(Participant 6)

In some cases this was directly leading to changes in their engagement practice. As this participant and others continued, they had already made changes in their engagement approach, for example around climate science

“... to give more space for emotions that the children can sit with. And it's not just me saying like, this is happening and we have to do something and we're trying. I'm going to try and flip it this year and have the kids talk about it.” (Participant 6)

Others similarly described how the Academy had helped them better appreciate the emotions in play in their engagement work, or explore alternative ways of building connections.

Participants also reflected on the responsibilities that came with thinking about emotions in engagement. As one described:

“I think bringing that kind of emotion into the forefront of people's minds, you are responsible for that - you are responsible for making people feel a certain way when you are doing that engagement because you are the one who has gone ‘we're going to talk about this. Don't you want to talk about this?’ So you're responsible for that already and I think taking the time to stop and pause and think about how these people are feeling and what they might need, that is is a responsible way to deal with it, I think that's the first step.” (Participant 2)

Participants highlighted moments during the Academy which they felt encouraged them to connect emotionally. Particularly notable were the personal stories in the “From the Heart” session on day 1, the artistic work and the creative workshop on engagement around death



through poetry on Day 2. As one described, this got to the heart of the “interesting and then challenging” questions around emotion in engagement:

“I was in the part of the workshop about death, talking in emotion in death, and it was really, really very interesting and what I liked very much was that it was referring to me as a person and to me as a professional. I never thought about talking about that in my work ... we try to avoid some topics. We are not able to manage emotion and we try to manage emotion at a not so deep level. The idea of putting poetry and putting everything together, it was really, really interesting and then challenging” (Participant 4)

## The online setting

Interview participants generally felt the online setting worked well, and contrasted with their previous experience of online events:

During the pandemic we had three years doing a lot of activities online, and most of them are kind of difficult, boring, and the Academy, it was like five hours per day, something like that, no. And I felt very dynamic, very engaged and very interested. So I really like the way you put it all together during these three days, because I didn't feel bored or that it was heavy or didn't want to connect to the sessions. (Participant 3)

They appreciated the organisation that went into the Academy, and the impact of this on the experience of participation:

“What I do appreciate is that it was extremely well organised ... it was very well structured. So you felt guided, which is important because the thing with an online experience for me is that if you attend something like this in person, you go and sit

there and you're physically restrained from doing anything else or being anywhere else. In an online environment lots of people are tempted to answer emails, check your phone or do something else because you're in an online environment, you're closed in your home. So if it's well structured, your attention is kept for the whole time.” (Participant 1)

Other interviews drew attention to the specific group of people that attended, which created an interactive environment despite the number of people attending. As one interviewee described:

“I was a bit surprised at the beginning ... when there were over 50 participants. And I was. I was just thinking, oh, how is this gonna work? Actually? But it ended up working very well.” (Participant 6)

One repeated theme in the interviews was that this reflected not only the organisation of CFA24, but also the community that participated.

“Maybe a it's a community that attended it - maybe they're more open, participate more. But it was quite nice.” (Participant 1)

“I think that if you are that kind of person who is not comfortable in this virtual space, you don't apply for the Academy. So I think you have to want to try, and that's it. And I know every speaker and every person from the other side of the screen was very nice, very happy, very warm so it creates a lot of positive attitude.” (Participant 3)

Another described how this sense of community built over the course of the Academy:

“I think I grew quite attached to the rest of the cohort and a sense grew of this is a good space, this is a nice atmosphere that we're building, and there was a sense of

camaraderie and that that kind of built throughout the three days ... It felt like everyone brought a lot of joy and willingness. And when everyone around you is bringing joy and willingness, it's easy to bring joy and willingness yourself.”

(Participant 3)

## Online tools

Respondents were generally familiar with the main online tools used in the delivery of the CFA. 85% had previously used Google Drive and Zoom and 80% had used Miro. In contrast, fewer than half of participants had previously used Slack (45%) or Padlet (40%), two other tools widely used in engagement activities but not in this CFA.

Of the tools used, Zoom was regarded most positively (Figure 6) - with 80% of respondents stating that it was very or extremely useful. However, difficulty accessing the digital tools was mentioned as a challenge by 25% of respondents, with one other respondent encountering technical difficulties with accessing Zoom.

### How useful did you find the online tools used during CFA?

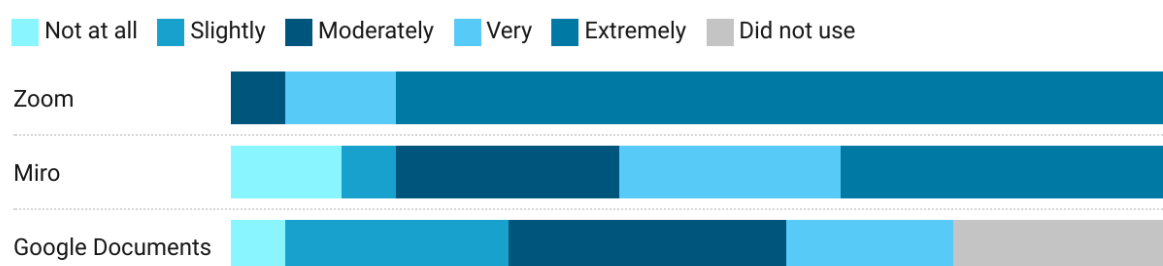


Figure 6: Usefulness of CFA online tools

Open text comments related to the online tools generally mentioned the use of the range of Zoom and Miro functions positively. However, some comments focussed particularly on the use of Miro and the chat function in Zoom because of their impact on the ability of participants to interact and to focus:

I personally don't like Miro or similar tools - it feels impersonal and creates a distance which could be bridge by simply talking about it. (Open text comment)

The fact that we had the zoom, the chat, and the Miro often open at the same time, made the sessions very busy - one had to be really disciplined not to get distracted. (Open text comment)

The only challenge was the distraction of the chat notifications - it would have been helpful know beforehand that there is a setting where the chat is shown on the right side of the window, so that it can be read without having to open it. (Open text comment)

The challenge of multiple modes of engagement was also raised in interviews, in which respondents commented:

“I'm maybe a bit old fashioned but for me listening, taking notes and thinking about if I have a question is the maximum I can do. If I have also to put something in the chat and work on it with looking at something different, For me it's a bit too much.” (Participant 4)

“I'm not a particular fan of Miro or any similar stuff, because for me, if you're online, it asks you to focus on two separate screens ... I'd rather keep the focus. I'd rather look you in the eye and keep the focus there, and I've found that it is the same with chats.” (Participant 1)

That said, other participants highlighted the interaction through Miro as one of their highlights of the Academy - and as another interviewee put it, the existence of multiple channels provided different ways of engaging:

“I don't think I'd have been able to take in all of those things at the same time throughout, but it was nice having the choice of how I wanted to interact in any given moment.” (Participant 2)

Overall, feedback suggests a positive experience of the online setting. However, for future Academies, it suggests a continuing need both to consider the balance between different modes of engagement in the online context, and how expectations around their use is communicated to participants.

### Enabling access

Positive feedback on the online setting emphasised its ability to extend access. As one questionnaire response put it, a positive feature of the online setting was:

“[The] Ability to attend this course where visa, travel, resources would otherwise prevent me from doing so. [It gave] Access to expertise and contact with well established scholars which would otherwise not have been possible.”

Similarly, in the interviews, participants described how the online setting lowered barriers to access, despite acknowledged limitations:

“Obviously, I always prefer events in person. Yeah, ... but this academy, it really went well, and I understand that these sessions, or this academy, is once per year, and it's going to be virtual, and that's fine. I mean, it is very good and it's very cheap. Otherwise, I would have to get money to go travel to your country or Germany or wherever in the world, and maybe you don't have the money to sponsor so many people from other countries to go together in person. So in this case, I feel very nice to have the opportunity to gather together virtually. And it's fine. I know it has some limitations, but it's very, very nice to work in this dynamic.” (Participant 3)

As other interviewees continued, expanded access – both geographical and in terms of career stage – meant that although there were downsides of the online context,

“I think the pros do outweigh them because we had such an international group of people, which I think would have been pretty impossible to achieve otherwise and such a range of people from different areas who don't necessarily have the funds to make an international trip as well. So both international and also just varied with different levels of [experience]. Yeah, I think both of those things we would have lost out on if it was in person.” (Participant 2)

“I think that the positive side of [being] online in such things is also the variety of experience you can have. The variety of people is much wider, I think when it's online because they come from different cultural contexts” (Participant 4)

## Limits on interaction

The downside of the online space, mentioned by a number of interviewees, was the impact on interaction. This was reflected in the questionnaire responses above, where the ability to grow one's network was the least valuable outcome of CFA24. The limits the digital space placed on relating to others was the most commonly selected challenge associated with participation, by 40% of respondents.

The lack of opportunity for networking was felt by interviewees to be a consequence of the online space. As one interviewee described, the top-down control of interactions and scheduling required for an online course limits the possibility of low-effort side encounters, like meeting for coffee:

“Even though I had some friends participating in the academy, I didn't have the chance to talk person to person... [and] I really wanted to talk to a woman from, I don't remember ... but I have read her work in papers, and I was surprised, like, oh,

she's here, great. And I didn't have the chance to work [with her]. So it's that thing where ... you have the freedom to go and say hello to this friend or say hello to [others]. If you're in virtual environments, are everything is controlled by you [CFA team]" (Participant 3)

Another participant similarly emphasised the control that an online setting exerts on interaction, describing how:

The barrier to talk about other potentially relevant topics that can be super interesting is higher on Zoom and less in person because it's those like, oh, so what do you do during the coffee break? I think that can lead to really beautiful discussions that I didn't really have here in the workshop. (Participant 6)

Other interviewees also pointed to the value of breaks in in-person conferences for networking:

"I think networking ... is easier if you're literally just standing next to people and you can wander through the room and learn more about the others. People think it's harder to network online than it is in person." (Participant 2)

"I mean, you're losing that networking of the coffee session side of things. Just getting to know the other people. It then makes it a little bit more didactic that you've got the presenters giving the information and things." (Participant 5)

They suggested further ways of incorporating such time for connecting with others into the days, for example through

"[having] the option of ever either having a break or maybe creating like mini coffee breakout rooms that we can have our break with the people from the session to continue some discussions or also just talk about things that are maybe not related

to the workshop and have those small spaces that are free choice so that if I want to talk with this extra person, I don't need to send them an email after the workshop to have an extra meeting with them and maybe I can just exchange during a break” (Participant 6)

The possibility of future connections was also picked up in the questionnaire, with comments suggesting that the CFA might do more to facilitate a network of collaboration:

“It would be good if collaboration and networking between participants were promoted more. A good idea would be to share a directory or propose specific projects/initiatives in the group. For example, I had to talk with another colleague who was also participating in a radio program. I would very much like to keep in touch with her.” (Open text response)

“People attending this programme have such interesting projects, perhaps find ways for them to showcase these project better so that we can better connect with similar projects or people with related interest” (Open text response)

## Possibilities for interaction

While the online space may have limited some possibilities for interaction, interviewees did describe other ways in which it worked to enable this:

“We had breakout rooms where we were just two or three people and one-on-one conversations between people. We actually learned why they are there and what they do and suddenly that aha moment pops up that oh, we've got something in common. ... That is of tremendous value for me. And I always thought that that's only possible in an in person conversation or a conference where you have tea that you can have those types of conversations, and this is actually possible in an online environment, which is extremely valuable.” (Participant 1; emphasis added)



Some respondents also emphasised that the 1:1 sessions built into the programme provided the opportunity for networking and new contacts:

“Overall, great workshop! To my surprise the one-on-one interactions proved to be the most useful and inspiring. More of those will add tremendous value to the whole experience - this also leads to active networking and connection making with the aim to delve into future collaborations.” (Open text response)

Despite the limitations, for some participants, the Academy did provide the chance for future networking. As Participant 6 continued, despite the limitations of the coffee breaks:

“After the workshop, I connected with three other people and we have Zooms and we still have some Zooms with some of them and potential collaborations and stuff like that.” (Participant 6)

## Controlling interaction

It is also important to note that the limits on networking and informal interaction were not universally considered a negative, particularly over the course of a three day event. For example, one interviewee described how they valued:

“the ability to just take your camera off and take a break like you can still be listening, but you don't have to be actively smiling and engaging with people”  
(Participant 2)

Another described how the online format allowed them to participate in ways that might have been more challenging for in-person events.

I wasn't sure how something that this would run in that online format, but I found it really good and it removed some of the issues that I've had with in-person engagement. I'm probably neurodivergent .. so although I really like them in person,

[events] of this kind can be really overwhelming. And especially post COVID. So having that more where I'm in my own space and was able to take breaks and that there were those breaks built into the programme and things I thought was really helpful. Just having that time for reflection without having it be a full on.

(Participant 5)

## Making the online space work

Questions of control reflect the work that online settings require from participants to establish and maintain their own learning environments. Interviewees were asked to reflect on what worked for them about how the Academy was organised, but also what they do to make online settings work for them, recognising that a three day online Academy represents both a commitment and a challenge for participants. In both questionnaire responses and interviews, respondents described how they appreciated that the structure of the Academy, the breaks and the mix of online formats enabled them to participate fully:

Despite being online, the training was very engaging and interactive. Different modalities were used, which helped keep attention high throughout the day. Proper breaks also helped. (Open text response)

They also described a range of personal strategies that support participation, including being distraction free and finding the right space, and taking breaks:

“Like all day on, something like that, I want to be in my own space where I can go and make coffee, and have a break from things ... So it's that management of space, so that I've got a quiet space and that I've got somewhere that I can focus on online learning” (Participant 5)

“Whenever I'm in that kind of space where it is lower stimulus, I always find doing something with my hands to be really helpful. So for a lot of the first sessions

during CFA, I was, I was doing embroidery, I was just sat there while I was listening.” (Participant 2)

“I just try to stand up, walk around and drink some tea.” (Participant 6)

## Discussion

Overall, the evaluation of CFA24 was exceptionally positive, particularly in relation to the quality of facilitation, the opportunity for meaningful reflection, and the possibility for emotional exploration that it enabled. Key findings related to participants' experiences, the value of focusing on emotions in engagement, and the effectiveness of an online setting for such a programme.

Participants joined CFA24 primarily to learn new skills and connect with others in similar roles. The majority felt that their objectives were achieved and the three-day structure provided opportunities for passive learning and active participation, allowing attendees to engage with the content and each other.

The focus on emotions was highly valued, with participants recognising that emotions are often an underexplored but crucial element of public engagement. The Academy helped participants to practice and develop skills like empathy, active listening, and storytelling. Many found the emphasis on emotions transformative in their understanding of engagement practices and in how they planned to incorporate emotional awareness into their future work.

The online nature of CFA24 worked effectively for most participants, especially in terms of accessibility. The virtual environment allowed the Academy to convene a geographically and professionally diverse group, which would have been difficult to achieve with an in-person event. The evaluation highlighted challenges around networking and the lack of informal interactions that typically occur in physical spaces. Participants appreciated structured opportunities for small group discussions but noted the absence of spontaneous, casual connections. This is something that could be addressed in future iterations but may also require considering whether the onus for such interactions in an online setting may lie more with participants to develop these connections. This would build on the active ways in which participants make the online learning environment work for them. It is also important to recognise that the structured nature of the online setting

also allowed participants to manage their participation levels, providing valuable personal control, especially for those who find in-person events overwhelming.

The CFA24 experience demonstrates that online programs can be highly effective when they are well-facilitated and thoughtfully structured. The focus on emotions proved valuable for participants, suggesting it could be an area for continued emphasis. However, the Academy might also take better advantage of its geographical reach, thinking about how the challenges this creates in terms of networking and casual interaction might also be opportunities for both formal and informal learning.

# Acknowledgements

Thank you to all those who participated in and contributed to the CFA24 evaluation, particularly those who gave up time for interviews.

The CFA24 programme team was Jana Wendler, Lucinda Spokes, Marina Joubert, Richard Milne, Victoria Shennan, Catherine Galloway and Jack Monaghan

The evaluation was conducted by Richard Milne, [rm23@sanger.ac.uk](mailto:rm23@sanger.ac.uk) under funding from Wellcome via Wellcome Connecting Science and the Kavli Foundation via the Kavli Centre for Ethics, Science, and the Public.

January 2025

