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Volunteer survey report

Engaging Crowds: citizen research and
cultural heritage data at scale

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Introduction

At the beginning of March 2022, we ran a survey to help us to understand more about the volunteers who have contributed to the three Engaging Crowds citizen research projects on the Zooniverse platform and to evaluate the indexing tool that was developed as part of the project.

The survey link was circulated via a Zooniverse email newsletter to all registered volunteers who had taken part in these projects

A total of 379 people took the survey, with 318 completing it and 61 partially completing it.

The survey was divided into three sections, which asked volunteers to share reflections on their previous experience of citizen research, on the new Zooniverse indexing tool designed as part of Engaging Crowds, and on the wider impact of citizen research on their lives. This report includes responses to each quantitative question and a summary of qualitative responses. Respondents consented to their responses being analysed and the survey's anonymised results published.

Summary

Responses to this survey provide extensive evidence that online cultural heritage citizen research has an overwhelmingly positive self-reported impact on participants. Respondents cited a range of benefits to participation in online cultural heritage citizen research projects. These were a mixture of altruistic benefits, such as helping with research, giving back, and increasing access to records, and benefits to the individual, including providing opportunities for learning and development, filling in time productively, and gaining a sense of community.






Feedback on the Zooniverse indexing tool was broadly positive. Many respondents reported that they liked being able to choose the subject set they worked on.

The survey also suggests that online cultural heritage citizen research encourages participants to engage in follow-up activities and extend their engagement into their personal networks and wider society, for example, by talking to others, encouraging others to contribute, and engaging with related projects.



Volunteers' previous experience

Answers






Which of the following citizen research projects are you contributing to or have you recently contributed to? Please tick all that apply.

Answer Choices			Response Percent	Response Total
1	HMS NHS: The Nautical Health Service		51.57%	164
2	Scarlets and Blues		25.47%	81
3	The RBGE Herbarium: Exploring Gesneriaceae, the African violet family		18.87%	60
4	Other Zooniverse projects (https://www.zooniverse.org/projects)		82.70%	263
5	None of the above		0.31%	1
			answered	318
			skipped	0







Before you participated in the above project(s), have you ever contributed to an online citizen research project which is focused on cultural heritage? This might be a project on the Zooniverse platform, or elsewhere.

Answer Choices			Response Percent	Response Total
1	Yes		61.20%	194
2	No		38.80%	123
			answered	317
			skipped	1







How many online cultural heritage citizen research projects have you previously contributed to?

Answer Choices			Response Percent	Response Total
1	1-5		47.45%	93
2	5-10		34.18%	67
3	10-25		7.65%	15
4	Over 25		8.67%	17
5	N/A		2.04%	4
			answered	196
			skipped	122






How many years have you been contributing to these projects?

Answer Choices			Response Percent	Response Total
1	Less than 6 months		1.53%	3
2	6 months to 1 year		3.57%	7
3	1-2 years		33.16%	65
4	2-5 years		36.73%	72
5	5-10 years		16.33%	32
6	Over 10 years		8.67%	17
			answered	196
			skipped	122

Which of the following words describe your view of contributing to online cultural heritage citizen research projects?

Answer Choices			Response Percent	Response Total
1	Contributing - I like to contribute to research/knowledge/culture		91.19%	290
2	Entertainment - I find completing the tasks fun		46.54%	148
3	Interest - I am fascinated by the projects I contribute to		81.76%	260
4	Support - I want to support the work of the institution running the project		45.60%	145
5	Distraction - it keeps my mind off things		20.75%	66
6	None of the above		0.00%	0
7	Other (please elaborate in a few words):		9.12%	29
Other summary:			answered	318
			skipped	0








How often do you or did you contribute to online cultural heritage citizen research projects?

Answer Choices			Response Percent	Response Total
1	Several times a day		6.60%	21
2	Once a day		11.32%	36
3	Once every 2 or 3 days		32.08%	102
4	Once a week		15.41%	49
5	Occasionally		32.08%	102




How often do you or did you contribute to online cultural heritage citizen research projects?

6	Rarely		2.52%	8
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When do you or did you contribute to online cultural heritage citizen research projects?

Answer Choices			Response Percent	Response Total
1	At a dedicated time during the day or week		3.77%	12
2	As a break between other tasks		10.38%	33
3	I like to contribute routinely when I can		21.07%	67
4	I only contribute when I have some spare time		20.13%	64
5	I would like to contribute more but other tasks get in the way		6.60%	21
6	Sometimes I don't contribute for a while, but then I pick it up again		36.48%	116
7	None of the above		1.57%	5
			answered	318

If you have posted in forums on online cultural heritage citizen research projects, (such as 'Talk' on Zooniverse), which of the below would describe the purpose of your contributions?

Answer Choices			Response Percent	Response Total
1	Discussing findings		28.98%	91
2	Socialising		2.55%	8
3	Suggesting improvements to the site		8.28%	26

If you have posted in forums on online cultural heritage citizen research projects, (such as 'Talk' on Zooniverse), which of the below would describe the purpose of your contributions?

4	To ask a question		42.04%	132
5	Other		2.87%	9
6	I have never posted in forums or 'Talk'		41.40%	130
			answered	314
			skipped	4

Key findings

- A lot of people who participated in the Engaging Crowds projects also had experience of working on other citizen research projects across several years.
- Over 50% of respondents participated in *HMS NHS*. As the first of the Engaging Crowds projects to launch, the largest, and the longest-running, this result was expected.
- A high percentage of respondents reported that their motivation for participation was a contribution to research (91%), and were interested in the subject matter of these projects (81%). Just under half were motivated by entertainment (46%) and supporting the organisations running the projects (45%). A fifth used crowdsourcing projects as a distraction (20%).
- A large portion of respondents (40%) had never used the Zooniverse Talk forum.

Indexing Tool

The three Engaging Crowds citizen research projects featured a new [indexing tool](#) developed as part of the project, which allowed volunteers to choose their own pathway through a project. The tool was developed iteratively by the Zooniverse team, with the first version being launched in *HMS NHS*, followed by more sophisticated versions for *Scarlets and Blues* and then *The RBGE Herbarium*.

Answers




Were you aware of the 'indexing tool' and its functionality (described above) while taking part in the project(s)?

Answer Choices			Response Percent	Response Total
1	Yes		55.66%	177
2	No		23.90%	76
3	I don't know what the indexing tool is		20.44%	65
			answered	318
			skipped	0




Did you enjoy the experience of using the indexing options provided?

Answer Choices			Response Percent	Response Total
1	Yes, I thought it was great and easy to use!		38.61%	117
2	Yes, but I found it a little difficult to use		15.84%	48
3	No, I didn't enjoy using it		4.95%	15
4	I'm not sure what the indexing tool is		40.59%	123
			answered	303
			skipped	15



Have you taken part in other Zooniverse projects that do not feature the indexing tool?

Answer Choices			Response Percent	Response Total
1	Yes		53.46%	170
2	No		8.81%	28
3	Unsure		37.74%	120
			answered	318
			skipped	0

Did using the indexing tools increase your interest in taking part in the project (HMS NHS, Scarlets & Blues or The RBGE Herbarium), compared to other Zooniverse projects not using these features?

Answer Choices			Response Percent	Response Total
1	Yes		18.32%	50
2	No		10.99%	30
3	It neither increased or decreased my interest		70.70%	193
			answered	273
			skipped	45



Did you like being able to choose the subject set you worked on?

Answer Choices			Response Percent	Response Total
1	Yes		93.59%	292
2	No		6.41%	20



Did you like being able to choose the subject set you worked on?

answered	312
skipped	6


Did you like being able to see the subject number you were working on within the subject set?

Answer Choices			Response Percent	Response Total
1	Yes		82.95%	253
2	No		17.05%	52
			answered	305
			skipped	13



Were you aware that you were being given pages in sequence (i.e. page 1 then page 2 then page 3 and so on)?

Answer Choices			Response Percent	Response Total
1	Yes		64.92%	198
2	No		35.08%	107
			answered	305
			skipped	13




If you participated in Scarlets & Blues or The RBGE Herbarium, did you like being able to choose the individual subject you worked on?

Answer Choices			Response Percent	Response Total
1	Yes		35.22%	106
2	No		4.98%	15




If you participated in Scarlets & Blues or The RBGE Herbarium, did you like being able to choose the individual subject you worked on?

				
3	N/A		59.80%	180
			answered	301
			skipped	17

If you participated in Scarlets & Blues or The RBGE Herbarium, did you like being able to see the index of individual subjects and sort/filter them?

Answer Choices			Response Percent	Response Total
1	Yes		27.76%	83
2	No		5.35%	16
3	N/A		66.89%	200
			answered	299
			skipped	19

If you participated in The RBGE Herbarium, did you like being able to use the next/previous subject buttons to explore the subject set?

Answer Choices			Response Percent	Response Total
1	Yes		19.19%	57
2	No		2.69%	8
3	N/A		78.11%	232
			answered	297
			skipped	21

Key findings and analysis

- 55% of respondents enjoyed the experience of using the indexing tool.
- 44% of respondents were unaware of the indexing tool.
- Of those who reported having used the indexing tool, 65% enjoyed the experience of using it and found it easy to use, 27% enjoyed using the tool but reported finding it a little difficult to use, and 8% said they had not enjoyed using the tool.
- Despite respondents reporting relatively high levels of enjoyment in relation to the indexing tool, the majority of people said using the indexing tool neither increased nor decreased their interest in the project.
- Respondents were overwhelmingly positive about having the ability to choose the subject set and to see the subject number they were working on.

Respondents' understanding and enjoyment of using the indexing tool may have been influenced by which project they encountered it in. *HMS NHS* featured an initial version of the tool with limited functionality and survey data suggests participants in this project were less likely to appreciate the new feature. 42% of the respondents who were unaware of the indexing tool itself were contributors to *HMS NHS*. 47% of those who were unaware that they were being presented pages in sequence were also contributors to *HMS NHS*.

51 respondents (17%) provided comments regarding their enjoyment of the experience of using the indexing options provided.

In contrast to the majority of respondents being positive about their engagement with the indexing tool (92%), a slight majority of the free-text comments were negative.

Positive comments about the indexing tool related to participants being able to work on pages consecutively, jump around based on their own preferences, view the percentage completed in a module or focus on their own contribution:

"Loved it [the indexing tool] - felt like I could see how I was progressing in the project. Gave me a sense of perspective. I have contributed to other projects where I get page after page after page and have no sense of where this all fits."

"This is a huge improvement. For example, getting used to one country, or one handwriting, or one type of plant/record is much more efficient."

"Great to have the choice, helps it feel more personal."

In particular, a number of respondents enjoyed being able to select a specific geographic region in *The RBGE Herbarium* project. Some respondents also commented that the indexing tool helped add to their confidence that they were classifying accurately, or that it heightened their sense of motivation and/or engagement with the project.

The majority of negative comments related to the tool not functioning as it should. Specific issues related to the 'Next' sequence repeating pages already completed by the participant, or being presented with pages already completed by others, and being difficult to navigate on a mobile or tablet screen. Two participants reported that the issues had been

resolved once they had been reported to Zooniverse. Some criticisms were of the Zooniverse system more widely, not of the indexing tool, including issues with the 'zoom' function.

A minority of respondents found that the tool was not easy to use initially, or not as user-friendly as other tools:

"The new indexing tool was a bit confusing but really loved it once I got used to it. Wish I had that capability when doing other Zooniverse projects."

Others were more critical, citing the tool as complicated or unclear, requiring more detailed instructions, and participants finding it difficult to make an informed choice when selecting records to work on. Others spoke of the boredom of indexing only one category as part of *HMS NHS*, or stated a preference for being presented with pages randomly. Two respondents felt that the indexing tool created more work for the user, and one respondent wrote:

"I didn't see much point to be honest. All the documents to be transcribed were similar so there was little point in choosing a particular pathway."

It is interesting to note that despite the high levels of respondents enjoying using the tool (92%), only 18% stated that it increased their interest in taking part in the three projects, with 71% stating it neither increased nor decreased their interest. Comments from respondents in the final category included:

"It didn't increase my interest specifically, because all the projects are interesting and I enjoy all of the ones to which I contribute, but it did increase my efficiency and enjoyment of the RBGE project."

"It did decrease best use of time as I hunted for where I had last worked. But it didn't lessen my interest nor my satisfaction from completing each task I worked on."

Indeed, many respondents found both advantages and disadvantages to using the tool:

"I feel like the indexing tool creates a little more work for me, but also heightens the feeling of engagement. If I feel like diving deeper into a project, it helps me do that. If I only have a little bit of time/focus/energy, I choose projects without the indexing tool."

"I liked the flexibility, but I can see on some projects that some of the more difficult parts might be left behind for a longer time if people are navigating away from those."

"There are times when I like being able to choose which sets to work on, such as when I already have an interest in a particular subset of the items in a project or when my expertise in the subject is limited, leading me to prefer to either pick my "difficulty level" or pick a particular task to complete. Much of the time, though, part of the fun of the project is seeing the items at random and not knowing what is going to come up next."

"It assisted me a bit, but I'm happy contributing to whatever is needed. I didn't really use it to choose something I was particularly interested in. I just chose whatever needed to be done."

"It has pros and cons. It is definitely useful to maintain interest where transcribing a document that falls across multiple subjects, and I can see the benefits for those contributors who have an interest in a particular aspect of a project. On the other hand, I somewhat miss the surprises that come up from a more randomised selection of subjects."










Despite a number of criticisms of the tool, the overwhelming majority of respondents (94%) enjoyed being able to choose the subject set they worked on and seeing the subject number within the subject set (83%). 65% of respondents were aware that they were being presented with pages sequentially. For those who participated specifically in either *Scarlets and Blues* or *The RBGE Herbarium*, 88% liked being able to choose the individual subject they worked on, and 84% appreciated being able to see the index of individual subjects and to sort/filter them. Of those participating in *The RBGE Herbarium*, 88% liked being able to use the 'next' and 'previous' subject buttons to explore the subject set.

The majority of respondents enjoyed using the indexing tool. Of those who did not, most either experienced technical difficulties or were unaware of the tools. While some respondents were ambivalent about the tool or able to find both positives and negatives to its use, many respondents found it helpful, efficient and easy to use, and enjoyed being able to select material to work with.

Impact of online citizen research

Answers

What do you find to be the benefits of contributing to online citizen research projects? Please tick all that apply.

Answer Choices			Response Percent	Response Total
1	Learnt/improved research skills		42.36%	133
2	Improved knowledge		78.66%	247
3	Increased my employability		5.10%	16
4	Sense of being part of a workplace		17.52%	55
5	Experience gained to allow me to take a related qualification		3.82%	12
6	Meeting new people/socialising		2.87%	9
7	Sense of being part of a community		42.99%	135
8	Learnt/improved transcription skills		51.91%	163
9	Other (please elaborate in a few words):		18.47%	58
			answered	314
			skipped	4




What appeals to you about contributing to online citizen research projects?

Answer Choices			Response Percent	Response Total
1	Working in the comfort of my home		78.53%	245
2	Building up my IT skills		9.94%	31
3	Suits my lifestyle		56.41%	176
4	A distraction during Covid-19 pandemic		34.62%	108
5	Other (please elaborate in a few sentences):		27.56%	86
			answered	312
			skipped	6







Have you ever done any of the following as a result of your contribution to citizen research? Please tick all that apply.

Answer Choices			Response Percent	Response Total
1	Looked into a subject further		65.12%	196
2	Visited a website		72.43%	218
3	Contributed to a project in person		4.98%	15
4	Visited a physical site		7.31%	22
5	Written a blog post		2.99%	9
6	Started a conversation on social media		7.31%	22
7	Talked to friends or family		78.74%	237





Have you ever done any of the following as a result of your contribution to citizen research? Please tick all that apply.

				
8	Contributed to a related project (for example, updated a Wikipedia article)		6.64%	20
9	Other (please elaborate in a few words):		5.65%	17
			answered	301
			skipped	17

Our projects focus on cultural heritage and relate to the history, customs, identity and values of past generations. Taken broadly, how important is cultural heritage to you?

Answer Choices			Response Percent	Response Total
1	Vital		22.40%	71
2	Very important		46.69%	148
3	Quite important		24.61%	78
4	Neutral		6.62%	21
5	Unimportant		1.26%	4
6	Don't know		0.32%	1
			answered	317
			skipped	1

Aside from your participation in online cultural heritage citizen research projects, do you volunteer elsewhere?

Answer Choices			Response Percent	Response Total
1	Yes - online		18.55%	59
2	Yes - in person		32.39%	103
3	Yes - both in person and online		20.13%	64
4	No		30.82%	98
			answered	318
			skipped	0

Key findings

- 79% of respondents identified improving knowledge as one of the key benefits of their participation in citizen research.
- Around 40% of people liked improving their research skills and being part of a community.
- Only a minority of respondents cited increased employability (5%), gaining experience to allow them to take a related qualification (4%), and meeting new people (4%) as benefits.
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- The ability to work from the comfort of home is appealing to the majority of respondents.
- The vast majority of respondents (95%) reported undertaking a number of follow-up actions as a result of their contribution to citizen research. Additional follow-up actions included working on another citizen research project, connecting with project team members via email, and encouraging others to contribute.
- Respondents to the survey valued cultural heritage highly, broadly defined as relating to the history, customs, identity and values of past generations. 93% of respondents stated that, to them, cultural heritage was either vital, very important, or quite important.
- In addition to their participation in online cultural heritage citizen research projects, approximately two thirds of respondents also volunteer elsewhere, with 19% volunteering online, 32% volunteering in person, and 20% volunteering both online and in person.

Further thoughts

Key findings

At the end of the survey, we asked respondents to let us know if they had anything further to say about how they engaged with online cultural heritage citizen research projects. 26 people provided responses which enriched our understanding of their relationship with citizen research.

Some respondents commented negatively about online cultural heritage citizen research generally (3):

"The interfaces are generally poor, requiring a lot more mouse movement than would be optimal."

"Most of the projects I have been involved do not provide any feedback."

"I just wish that transcription projects would build in a bit of variety from month to month because repeated transcription of the same format documents ... becomes tedious after doing meeting minutes only for several weeks."

Negative comments relating to the Engaging Crowds projects (2) were:

"Scarlets and Blues was the first project I've contributed to. I wasn't clear whether I was contributing to a pilot trial or a live project. I gave up after a while in case it was the former; I would have continued if I had known it was the latter."

"Can I comment that I find the HMS nautical project very boring because you only index one column at a time. Other projects I have undertaken you index the whole record thereby forming a picture of the individual's life, there is no such satisfaction in just indexing a column of names or even worse dates/numbers."

The majority of respondents commented positively on their wider experience of engaging with online cultural heritage citizen research or involvement with specific projects (13). Others commented positively on online cultural heritage citizen research generally (4), and on the three Engaging Crowds projects (3):

"so pleased that so many fascinating records are being made more widely available and accessible, especially in these days when the arts, humanities, history, and historic/cultural preservation seem to take such a backseat."

"I think it's a wonderful opportunity and I think more like-minded people in my age group (mid 50s) would be interested in participating if the opportunities were more widely known. I'm not sure how to best make the opportunities known though!"

"This has become such an important part of my life in retirement that I miss it during those times when my projects are offline for various reasons, and I welcome returning to them. When one of my projects ends, I feel a real sense of loss and immediately look for one to replace it."

"I used to volunteer in person but with COVID that is no longer possible so this is a nice way to help out while staying safe."