Public Engagement

‘Public engagement describes the myriad of ways in which the activity and benefits of higher education and research can be shared with the public. Engagement involves interaction and listening, with the goal of generating mutual benefit.’

National Coordinating Centre for Public Engagement (NCCPE)
https://www.publicengagement.ac.uk/

Public engagement is not just telling people or educating them about your research; it is about engaging in a two way conversation. It involves sharing your knowledge and listening to, and learning from, others. The process can inspire, inform and challenge assumptions. It takes account of the experience of both parties and builds public involvement with the research process. Public engagement ultimately increases debate throughout our population and can provide evidence for the social benefit of research.

Taking part in public engagement gives researchers the opportunity to experience the immediacy and impact of live face-to-face communication. Media dissemination of research crosses over with public engagement but is generally more of a ‘broadcast’ than an interactive activity.

Impact

‘For the purposes of the REF, impact is defined as an effect on, change or benefit to the economy, society, culture, public policy or services, health, the environment or quality of life, beyond academia’

The Research Excellence Framework (REF) is the new system for assessing the quality of research in UK higher education institutions.
HEFCE - http://www.hefce.ac.uk/rsrch/
REF 2014 - http://www.ref.ac.uk/

- Some public engagement activity may be useful for Impact case studies for REF.
- Problems include the need to link impact to a specific piece of research: much public engagement activity is very general.
- Needs good evidence of reach and significance:
  - how your research contributes to economic or social development
  - how will it increase understanding and engagement with culture and/or science
  - how your research will improve quality of life
  - need to show that your research has the potential to make a difference, even on a small scale, the new insights people will gain
  - the current or emerging debates that your research contributes to
  - keep good records of public engagement and show how you will undertake evaluation.

- Participating in the Cambridge Festivals may be useful in the Impact template that the Head of Department or equivalent has to write for each Unit, as well as the potential for public engagement to feature in specific impact case studies. Funders also like to see engagement outside Cambridge at other Festivals and events and with specific target audiences.

REF is retrospective but Pathways to Impact statements are prospective. If you are applying for grants, include costs additional to research costs (free money) to develop and run public engagement activities.

The Public Engagement team can provide advice and support. Please get in touch early in the application process!

www.cam.ac.uk/public-engagement
Tips and hints, thoughts and ideas!

Your audience

- Who are the audience you are engaging with? Are they one group or many? If your audience is mixed (age/experience etc.) you may need to have differentiated activities and information.
- Consider the key messages you would like all visitors to hear and ensure all the people on your stand are aware and confident in delivering these messages. Practice getting these messages into conversations.
- Be respectful of your audience. They may have no formal scientific qualification, they may have a Nobel Prize but they are all there for the same reason – because they are interested in finding out more about your research.

Visitor experience

- It is important that everyone who attends your event has a positive experience, whether they are the first person or the last person to leave.
- Acknowledge people when they enter your event space – smile, say hello.
- Your materials (stand/leaflet) should have just enough (written/image) information on it to enable people to get an idea of what you do without having to directly ask this and to stimulate a two-way conversation. Make sure you include the name of the organisation/department you represent.
- Consider having branded t-shirts to immediately identify yourself as part of the event.
- Ask visitors “Can I tell you about our work/research/science?” This allows people to find out what you do without having to ask you questions at the start.
- Consider asking visitors preliminary questions – these can help you gauge levels of knowledge – can help you use appropriate clear language and prevent you being patronising. For example, “What experience do you have?” “What do you know about x?”
- Think of ways to engage a few people at the same time. If you see people listening into conversations, say hello and welcome them into the group.
- Engaging in-depth 1:1 conversations will exclude other visitors, as will activities that only engage one person at a time.

- Develop ways of closing a conversation – giving a leaflet; directing people to other exhibition stands; including others in the conversation; thanking the person for their interest and leaving a pause - may all be useful techniques.
- Have a number of objects that people can hold and explore. Some people may find maintaining eye contact tricky and having something to hold and look at can help people be more comfortable about asking questions.

Difficult questions

- The vast majority of people ask questions simply because they want to know the answer. Listen carefully and answer their question directly and honestly.
- Questions may also provide useful clues to people’s broader interests and concerns so again, listen carefully before you answer.
- Questions from children may actually be questions from the adults accompanying them so ensure you provide a clear answer using appropriate language for all in the group. Ask if you can explain anything in more detail or if anyone has any other questions or comments.
- If someone asks you a question you don’t know the answer to – do not make something up! Be honest, say it’s outside your area of expertise and direct the question to a colleague if appropriate. Don’t just say “I don’t know” and leave it at that. This closes the conversation and can reduce your credibility.
- Occasionally, working something out together from first principles is a good way of exploring questions.
- Remember your research subject may have a very personal impact on some visitors, so be mindful of the subject of your research and the language you use when you talk to people.
- If you research area is controversial, discuss likely questions with colleagues in advance of the event and develop answers that can be backed up with evidence.
- Use ‘feel, felt, and found’ to answer difficult questions. So: “I can see you feel strongly about this, I know others have felt similarly AND research has found”... (not BUT).
- Be confident in what you think, but be respectful of other’s opinions. Stay calm, do not become emotional, confrontational or critical of others views. Explain your own understanding of the subject, and the reasons behind your conclusions.
Your experience

- If you have the chance to visit the venue before your event, do so! This will enable you to see the space and facilities available.
- Talk to the venue staff both about the space itself and whether specific groups use the venue, this can help gauge the potential areas of interest for an audience.
- Find out whether you will have access to power, water, a lift (and if so, whether it is large enough to get your equipment into), tables, poster boards, etc. Do not make assumptions that these will be available – check and bring everything you will need.
- Find out how many people are likely to attend so you have appropriate quantities of resources to cover the entire event (as well as a few extras too). As well as your equipment, bring a box of useful things! Pens, gaffer tape, string, bluetac, post-it notes, scissors, Velcro tabs for poster boards, paper, information about your activity/department etc. If you are likely to engage with a family audience, consider making special stickers for children to collect or small fact sheets to take away.
- Make sure you have plenty of people volunteering on your stand – you will get very tired and visitor experience will suffer.
- Remember to take breaks, drink plenty of water and eat. It is very easy to forget to do this!
- And wear comfortable shoes!

- You are not there to talk to your colleagues. People staffing an exhibition stand chatting together are very off-putting to visitors.
- Remember you are a public representative for the organisation you work for and (hopefully!) care about. The experience people have at these public events can either change their views of an organisation or can re-enforce them, both positively and negatively.
- Collect feedback from visitors to evaluate your activity so you have evidence what works well and what less so and can adapt and improve it for the future. This can be numbers of people, dwell time, types of questions asked, ages of visitors etc.
- Also evaluate your own experience – what went well, what less so, new ideas both for public engagement but also for your own research.
- Keep a good record of all the public engagement you do, the numbers of people you have engaged with, the feedback you receive, your own thoughts and how it relates to your own research. These records are particularly important when it comes to Research Excellence Framework (REF) reporting.
- Very importantly, enjoy yourselves!