Public Engagement Medium-term Priorities

Public Engagement Advisory Group, College of Science and Engineering

Context

This Medium-term Priorities paper is a practical response to the Public Engagement Strategy, endorsed by the College Strategy and Management Committee (CSMC) in October 2015, which emphasised the civic responsibility, impact, and reputation aims of our Public Engagement. Following this endorsement, the Public Engagement Advisory Group (PEAG) was established to build upon the extensive expertise within the College and in recognition of the recent and significant development of the Public Engagement landscape. The content of this paper defines a set of collaborative priorities produced by PEAG and will form the basis for returning to CSMC.

Executive Summary

Whereas previously Public Engagement was considered as a one-way communicative device where a homogeneous public were solely told about scientific advances, today it is a diverse collection of approaches, including mechanisms where non-University groups contribute at all stages of the research process.

Following an exploration of the current state of Public Engagement within the College, to realise improvements to our Engagement processes, the following priorities have been identified:

1. Enable high-quality Engagement through support and training
2. Improve the recognition of staff and students involved in Public Engagement
3. Engagement with diverse communities and stakeholders
4. Public Engagement, Impact and the REF2021
5. A College-wide Public Engagement network

These five priorities align with three core strategic aims – civic responsibility, impact, and reputation – and provide a focus for the Public Engagement Advisory Group in producing outcomes and outputs that will greatly enhance the Public Engagement activity undertaken throughout the College of Science and Engineering.

Vision

Through our Public Engagement, the College of Science and Engineering will:

a) inspire our society by showcasing our work; and
b) collaborate with communities in order to inform our world-class research and engage in meaningful dialogue.
Introduction

Over recent years Public Engagement is an area that has developed enormously. Whereas in the past it was solely concerned with outreach and the one-way communication of topics to a ‘general public’, it is now an incredibly diverse collection of approaches. It still includes the vital activity of disseminating information, but also comprises opportunities for different communities and stakeholders to engage in dialogue with, and contribute directly to, the research process.

Within the College of Science and Engineering, we continue to successfully undertake a range of Public Engagement activity within this changing landscape. Amongst our seven academic Schools, and the EPCC, we have built up an extraordinary level of knowledge and expertise in the practice of Public Engagement.

Upon this foundation, the College Strategy and Management Committee approved a new Public Engagement strategy in October 2015 that confirmed our strategic aims, which are presented here in no particular order:

a) Civic – meeting our responsibilities for Engagement as required by RCUK, other funders, and the Concordat for Public Engagement;
b) Impact – involving Engagement in the achievement and demonstration of impact from research;
c) Reputation – highlighting the value of the College, the University and our science to local communities, policymakers, stakeholders, and more widely.

The key element of the October 2015 paper was the approval of a new Public Engagement Advisory Group (PEAG): a collaborative entity comprised of colleagues leading Engagement practice across the College. Working together, the PEAG has responded to the original strategy document by adding the detail to the broad priorities that were originally articulated. This response recognises the greater prominence of our Public Engagement work, its significant contribution to the impact our research can make, and the growing importance of Public Engagement to the Research Excellence Framework.

Reflecting the College’s leading research status, our aims are ambitious and achieving them will enhance the experiences of all involved, in particular – and most importantly – those with whom we engage.

**Definition of Public Engagement within the College of Science and Engineering**

Public Engagement describes the myriad of ways in which the research and the activities of the University can be shared with the public. Engagement is by definition a two-way process, involving interaction and listening, with the goal of generating mutual benefit.
Our Priorities

1. Enable high-quality Engagement through support and training

Led by the Public Engagement Advisory Group, we will encourage, develop and support high-quality Public Engagement projects involving our staff and students, which befit a world-class University. This support will be achieved in collaboration with appropriate partners, such as the Beltane Public Engagement Network and the Institute for Academic Development, in order to build a strong, sustainable support programme.

To achieve this priority, we will:

- discuss training objectives with the Beltane Public Engagement Network with a view to securing a formalised and regular programme of workshops;
- assess the training needs not covered by Beltane and develop our own complementary workshops and online materials for College staff/students where this is not otherwise available; and
- support and encourage staff/students to evaluate and reflect on their Engagement in order to develop more meaningful Engagement processes.

2. Improve the recognition of staff and students involved in Public Engagement

The College of Science and Engineering will ensure that all staff – academic, research, technical and support – and students – undergraduate and postgraduate – understand the crucial importance of Public Engagement, and will recognise and reward those who actively participate in Public Engagement projects. By encouraging this philosophy from the very beginning of our students’ studies, an Engagement ethos in all staff and students will be embedded and the prominence of Public Engagement will be enhanced.

To achieve this priority, we will:

- ensure all Schools/Groups in the College include consideration of Public Engagement in Annual Reviews and promotion criteria;
- widely promote the Head of College’s annual ‘Outreach Award’ and rename this to be the ‘Public Engagement Award’; and
- establish a new annual event to celebrate our Public Engagement achievements.

3. Engagement with diverse communities and stakeholders

We will seek and encourage Engagement with a wide variety of communities. Our Engagement incorporates interactions with many sectors of society based on the priorities of our spectrum of projects, including (but not solely): children and young people, teachers throughout Scotland, policymakers at all levels, and partner organisations with specific needs wherever they may be.
To achieve this priority, we will:

- extend the number of local and national partners with which we collaborate in order to reach new communities, especially focusing on engaging those with ‘low science capital’;
- prioritise schools that engage with the University less frequently (based on the University’s planned mapping of visited schools), as well as those in the LEAPS group 1 categorisation as assessed by Widening Participation;
- develop a new event for local teachers to improve awareness of the current workshops available to support the curriculum, as well as for us to understand where further support for schools is required; and
- take advantage of opportunities to assist policymakers, for example, through the Ask Academia process.

4. Public Engagement, Impact and the REF2021

It is important to recognise that Public Engagement is one element in achieving impact. To ensure that Public Engagement becomes a stronger element of our Impact Case Studies, we will develop and implement guidelines and practices appropriate for REF2021. This guidance will enable members of the College to confidently undertake Public Engagement projects that satisfy the requirements of the Research Excellence Framework.

To achieve this priority, we will:

- develop and implement feedback and reporting guidelines for Public Engagement that align with REF2021;
- enhance dialogue between the Public Engagement Advisory Group, the College Impact Champions and the Business Development Executives;
- use advice and plans from the College Impact Champions and Business Development Executives to develop Public Engagement contributions that provide more support for the College’s prospective Impact Case Studies; and
- adapt and adopt evaluation resources developed by the National Co-ordinating Centre for Public Engagement.
5. A College-wide Public Engagement network

We will improve the Public Engagement network within the College by building on the opportunities presented by our newly established Public Engagement Advisory Group. The network will enable new contributions to recurrent Engagement activity (e.g. Doors Open Day at the King’s Buildings; Family Event programme at the Edinburgh International Science Festival), as well as sharing knowledges, experiences, and resources more easily throughout the College.

We will also foster interdisciplinary Public Engagement projects amongst the different Schools within our College, as well as with colleagues in the Colleges of Medicine and Veterinary Medicine (CMVM) and Arts, Humanities and Social Science (CAHSS) as appropriate. Our network will also align with suitable national and international organisations focused on Public Engagement. Through these steps, we recognise that science and engineering disciplines are not insulated from the rest of society, and wider collaboration can lead to new opportunities for Engagement, as well as for our research.

To achieve this priority, we will:

- build a College-wide Public Engagement community through a regular newsletter, mailing list, website, blogs, and resource-sharing;
- redevelop the College’s Public Engagement webpages to provide supportive resources;
- widely promote new and recurrent Public Engagement opportunities amongst staff and students to diversify participation;
- provide a repository of best practice, knowledge and resources for Public Engagement; and
- develop College exemplars of our interdisciplinary Engagement – from citizen science with children through to lecture series for the local community.

Students: Under- and postgraduates engage in a variety of ways. This example is from the SCI-FUN Roadshow, a mobile science centre, and its involvement in the Midlothian Science Festival.

In-person Engagement: Visitors of all ages are engaged by Pepper during the Edinburgh International Science Festival and discover more about the Edinburgh Centre for Robotics through discussions with researchers.