

HERIOT-WATT ENGAGE

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

Heriot-Watt Engage is the initiative to support, stimulate and promote public engagement with research at the University. Stemming from the RCUK & Wellcome Funded Beacons for Public Engagement, HW Engage was set-up in 2013, and has a core team to support academics at all levels and research students in engaging the public in their research in a meaningful and open manner.

EMBEDDING ENGAGEMENT SUPPORT

To ensure high-quality, sustainable and evaluated engagement, the HW Engage team support academics and research staff in a number of ways, addressing Principle 3 of the Concordat.

TRAINING

Training opportunities are available to PDRAs and academics through a number of avenues; as part of the Beltane Network training programme, through workshops run by the Centre for Academic Leadership and Development, and through other training providers.

Furthermore, training workshops are aligned with public-facing events led by the University, and in response to requests from the university community. Hands-on training plays a key role in the upskilling of researchers – where researchers are supported by the HW Engage team to develop activities focused on their research and then use these activities at a public event. A highly successful event for HWU in 2018 was the Edinburgh International Science Festival Family Fun day, which took place on the University campus and attracted >5000 local community members. Feedback from the public was incredibly positive, with 60% of the audience not having attended a science festival before, and 90% likely or very likely to return.



‘The demonstrations and interactive talks with scientists were very appealing to the children.’

FUNDING AND PRIZES

The HW Engage team support academics and researchers in the development of research grant and prize applications, with a particular focus on their pathways to impact. Support mechanisms include 1-1 guidance, partnership building and evaluation frameworks. In 2016-18, 7 researchers submitted bespoke public engagement and outreach grants, in addition to funding sourced through pathways to impact.

REWARD AND RECOGNITION

In 2017, the University was awarded an RCUK/UKRI Grant for the ‘Strategic Support to Expedite the Embedding of Public Engagement with Research (SEE-PER)’. This two-year award is enabling the HW Engage team to work closely with senior management and academics and researchers at all levels of seniority to

better support PER activities. One area of the project has included focus groups with early career researchers, identifying the best mechanisms to support, reward and recognise PER, with identified mechanisms to be put in place through the next University strategy.

One example of staff recognition for their PER efforts is the HWU Principal’s Public Engagement Awards, which has been awarded annually for 7 years. The prize recognises either an individual or team’s ability to reach new audiences not already engaged with research, demonstrating a lasting impact on the public. To date (September 2018), the award has provided £24,000 prize funding for further public engagement activities.

One of our research units established a PDRA-led Public Engagement Society (Twitter @PopScience) with funding of £1000 per annum. This proved highly successful with researchers designing and delivering their own PER activities nationally and internationally. This provides not only new PER efforts but also important science communication transferrable skills for the researchers. We are looking at how to roll this out over the entire university.

YEAR OF ROBOTICS

Beginning in 2017, the University started a themed approach to engagement, with the ‘Heriot-Watt Year of Robotics’. Throughout the year, a packed calendar of events spanning schools, the public, academia, industry collaborators, funders and policy makers enabled academics and researchers to share their research, breaking down the barriers between future technology and those who will use it.

More than 1,800 school children and 13,000 members of the public became engaged in this effort, which involved >160 members of staff and students from across the University schools. The initiative was recognised by multiple external awards, with the Heist Award Panel stating *‘Heriot-Watt University have triumphed with this shining example of world-class UK research. This initiative is a masterclass in showcasing research and making it relevant to a number of audiences and was an out and out winner with the judges’*



YEAR OF THE SEA

Following on from the success of Year of Robotics, 2018 was designated Year of the Sea, with a focus on blue economy and marine sustainability. Events included an “Engineering the Future’ week with schools, where PDRAs and PhD students worked with undergraduates to solve research problems set by primary school children. Although only part way through, a success of the year to date is the awarding of the British Science Festival Awards Lecture, the ‘Charles Lyell Award’ to a HWU Early Career Researcher, nominated by University Deputy Principal.

EXPLORATHON

Heriot-Watt is a partner in the the EU Researchers Night project 'Explorathon', funded by the European Commission, and awarded to Scotland since 2014. Events take place the last weekend of September each year in >300 cities across Europe, with the aim of boosting **public awareness of the positive role of research in society**, especially among **young people**. At Heriot-Watt, the HW Engage team coordinate events within and outwith the city, offering training, mentorship and activity development opportunities for academics, with a particular focus on PDRAs and PhD students.

In 2017, over 3500 members of the public engaged with our research, with 60 researchers (~80% Early-career) taking part in the events and activities. Evaluation and gamification training were undertaken by those involved, upskilling those researchers for future engagement activities.