

PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT: A STUDENT PERSPECTIVE

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Explore what public engagement is and why it matters to me as an undergraduate student at the university of Warwick.

WHAT IS PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT?

For a long time, I didn't know public engagement existed. I had experienced it many times by the time I reached university, but I never knew it had a name or was something people specifically set out to do. When I got to university, I found saw that my department are constantly putting on engagement events and activities for local schools and even the wider community, much like the summer schools and workshops I participated in (and that ultimately shaped who I am today) from when I was in secondary school.

I learnt very quickly at Uni how valuable the ability to engage others is. I'm going to try and explain it here in the hopes that other young people might want to get involved in any public engagement happening in their communities, universities, or companies.

First of all, we need to define 'public engagement' before we even can begin to understand it and see it happening around us. According to the National Co-ordinating Centre for Public Engagement (NCCPE), the term can be explained as: (<https://www.publicengagement.ac.uk/about-engagement/what-public-engagement>):

"Public engagement describes the myriad of ways (1) in which the activity and benefits of higher education and research can be shared (2) with the public. Engagement is by definition a two-way process, involving interaction and listening, with the goal of generating mutual benefit. (3)"

This definition highlights three important things about the nature of public engagement:

1. There is not just one way of doing public engagement.
2. The primary function of public engagement is to share something with the public.
3. The aim of public engagement is to create a mutual benefit for the public and the organisers of the engagement.

From just this definition alone its hard for anyone to imagine what public engagement might look like. It's clear that it comes in various forms and can be described by many different terms. For example, if you haven't heard the term public engagement, you may have heard the words 'outreach' or 'widening participation' to describe events that are being put on by universities and organisations.

AN EXAMPLE OF PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT

I've found that the best way to understand public engagement is to see it in action. In the case of the organisers of [SMASHFestUK](https://smashfestuk.com), public engagement is **sharing** the world of Science and Engineering with underrepresented groups of young people. And they achieve this by organising completely free annual festivals in Deptford, South London, centred on preventing the end of the world! (with sneaky science).

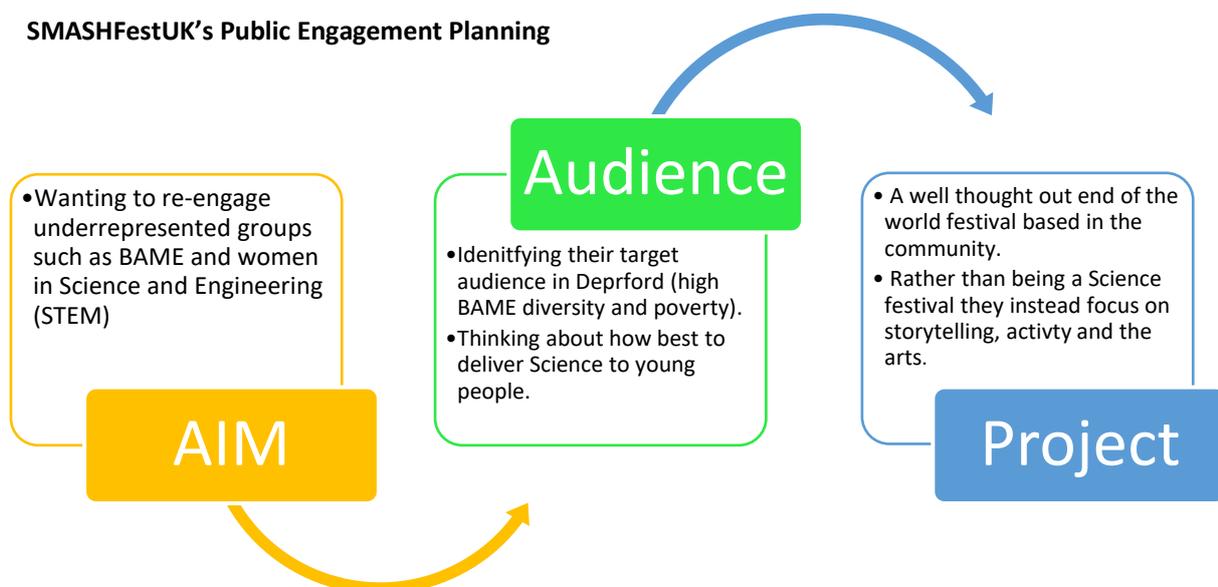
In 2018, the theme of their festival was 'FLOOD' and it included sandpits, games, virtual reality, performances and much more... The masterminds behind the project call the festival "science by stealth" and teach the participants through interactive sessions that don't feel like learning. There's an interview with NCCPE interview available on YouTube if you'd like to find out more about the project and it's achievements (See <https://youtu.be/4haWzkjBNU8>).



Photo by Wyn Griffiths (2018) showing promotional material for SMASHFestUK 2018: FLOOD at the Deptford Lounge Venue.

While it is great that universities and researchers want to share their knowledge with the public, it is important that they think about how they are going to accomplish this. For me, SMASHFestUK perfectly demonstrates that for public engagement to work it must be interesting for the 'public' if you want to fulfil the aims of your project.

SMASHFestUK's Public Engagement Planning



By bringing the festival directly to the young people of Deptford, SMASHFestUK ensured that their target audience would be able to interact with science without any barriers such as having to travel out of their local area or pay an entrance fee to get into events.

I feel that considering factors like such as the socioeconomic above is incredibly important if you want to create meaningful and beneficial public engagement activities. If the groups of people that you're trying to reach with your activities can't participate because of money or location. The what's the point of holding a **public** engagement event?

You can't achieve any of the primary aims that made you want to undertake the project in the first place. More importantly, the communities that you wanted to share, inspire, or even help wont benefit at all from your efforts if you don't consider their individual needs.

WHY DOES PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT MATTER TO ME?

I'm just a student not an organisation or university faculty so why should I care about public engagement? In short, public engagement played a key role in my journey to higher education and without it I probably wouldn't have gone to university. I want to share that experience with others...



Own photo (2017) showing myself taking a photo at the 'Micrarium' in the Grant Museum of Zoology, one of UCL's many museums as part of a summer school.

My first experience of public engagement was when I was 15. My secondary school had selected me for a free four-day summer school at the University of Kent. There, they shared with me lots of different subjects that I could study at degree level and even got to experience student lifestyle (like living in halls and making friends with a diverse group of people).

This is important because previously to this, I hadn't considered university at all. No one in my family had ever gone to university. But then I **really** enjoyed the summer school.

So from that point on, despite having no clue what I wanted to do with my life, I decided that I would try and do well in my GCSE's to get into a grammar school for sixth form and have a better

shot at going to university. I'm happy to say that I succeeded in that mission and made it into a Russell group university despite all odds and reservations I held about myself.

Hopefully from what I've said, you can gauge a crucial benefit of public engagement. It can alter perspectives. After being a recipient of the public engagement activities organised by the University of Kent, I realised there was people like me at university and that I could identify with it. It was no longer a place full of scarily smart people but a place for people to learn and grow and I felt comfortable wanting to be there. And so, I went to more university summer schools and then I applied to university. For lack of better words public engagement kickstarted my wonder for the world. *I mean just look at my happy little face in the photo.*

However, not everyone will get these experiences I had, not everyone will get that chance to open their eyes and see that their potential is unlimited because although public engagement is becoming a more

common activity for universities and organisations, its importance and consideration of what and who the engagement is for is often misplaced.

I want to be involved in public engagement and get others interested because I've personally experienced its potential to inspire young people. It helped me to overcome my own barriers and improved my self-confidence. I know that public engagement done right can work because I'm a result of it, I'd even go as far to say it can and does change the world.

Think about the young people participating in SMASHFest, they might grow up to study science and work on solutions for the climate crisis because they've immersed in what the world might look like after a devastating flood in a fun sandbox activity. For me, public engagement is about finding ways to open doors whether it's a video, lecture, or workshop if it opens a door to your audience. That's public engagement.

FIND OUT MORE ABOUT PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT

Here are some resources I think will be useful if you want to wrap your head around what public engagement is!

- The National Co-ordinating Centre for Public Engagement's website, <https://www.publicengagement.ac.uk/>
(easy to digest snippets and case studies about public engagement and a great starting point)
- Dolan E.L. (2008) *Education Outreach and Public Engagement. Mentoring in Academia and Industry*, vol 1. Springer: New York
(A more complicated but detailed book on the who's, why's, what's, and how's of public engagement. Useful if you want to get a deeper understanding of engagement but not necessary)
- Leckie, M (2015) 'Making public engagement engaging' <https://youtu.be/l92bqJNklao>
(A quick 10 minute Ted Talk about using digital technology to engage young people)