

Viewpoint – Nancy Rothwell

From the National Co-ordinating Centre for Public Engagement

<http://www.publicengagement.ac.uk/what-public-engagement/nancy-rothwell>



Nancy Rothwell is Deputy President and Deputy Vice-Chancellor at The University of Manchester where she also holds a Medical Research Council Professorship. A long-standing advocate of public engagement in the higher education sector she is principal investigator of the Manchester Beacon for Public Engagement.

[The six beacons are university-based collaborative centres that are working to support, recognise, reward and build capacity for public engagement. The beacons are at the forefront of efforts to change the culture in universities, assisting staff and students to engage with the public. Their partners include further education colleges, museums, galleries, businesses, charities, TV and press, and public bodies.]

Blue Skies Ahead?

Universities are changing. They are increasingly diversifying the types of teaching and learning they provide and the students they enrol. The change has been driven largely by external pressures: from funders, from government and from the many "customers" of universities, which include the students, their families and future employers, the users and benefactors of research and scholarship in universities and, not least, the taxpayer.

Now is hardly a time of economic plenty for universities, so investment of time and money in activities such as public engagement needs clear justification and some measurable outputs. The carrots and sticks wielded by the core funders of universities are powerful incentives. The forthcoming Research Excellence Framework is likely to place considerable weight on the wider "impact" of research. This has caused much concern in academe and fears that the UK will no longer maintain its position amongst the very best places in the world to undertake fundamental "blue skies" research. This would be a disaster, but it isn't necessarily the outcome. If, as many of us would argue, "blue skies" research has had great impact and benefit, then dissemination of its findings and clarity over that impact should be valued. Arguments over the details of measuring impact and the timescale that is needed (many decades in

some cases) will run on, but there is little disagreement that universities need to get better at explaining what they do, how and why, and why it should matter to the UK.

These arguments assume that public engagement is a rather defensive tactic to ensure that universities are valued and supported. But those with long experience of public engagement activities would argue that there are much wider benefits. **There is nothing like trying to discuss a complicated piece of research with non-experts to make you really grapple with its true meaning or see it in a different light as I, myself, have discovered engaging with patient groups. Sometimes the most relevant questions and answers come from the "lay" audience.**

There are also personal rewards and enjoyment in public engagement activity. This year's winner of the Society of Biology Young Science Communicator Award, Ceri Harrup, said that she was considering giving up plans for a career in research until she became involved in public engagement. The excitement and challenge of explaining her work (on mucous, so not the most engaging topic) to non-scientists made her realise the fascination of her research. The benefits of public engagement to a university, its staff and students and wider communities are numerous, and need to be recognised, rewarded and valued by those in leadership positions. We are discovering a huge appetite for engagement inside and outside our universities as part of the Beacons initiative and, whilst public engagement activities may be a modest part of the time of a busy academic or university student, it shouldn't have to be restricted to weekends and evenings and can be celebrated by those in the most senior positions throughout universities.