THE ENGAGED UNIVERSITY

Public engagement at Bristol includes all the ways in which University staff and students interact with members of the public, encompassing talks, debates, festivals, performances, widening participation, research with, and driven by, communities, volunteering, lifelong learning, action research and engaged learning. The Centre for Public Engagement works alongside colleagues throughout the University to support, reward and celebrate engagement activity. Here we cover some of the vast array of such activity that took place in 2008/09, to the mutual benefit of the public and the University.

The University’s priorities in this area are to:

- support and promote dialogue between staff/students and the public;
- play a leading role in setting the national agenda on public engagement in higher education;
- respond positively to community needs;
- play a positive role in the affairs of the city, region and nation;
- nurture relationships with alumni and other friends of the University;
- behave responsibly as an institution.

Involving the public
The University is committed to sharing its teaching expertise and research findings with members of the public. One of the ways it does this is through organising or promoting an extensive programme of free public events. In 2008/09, these included:

- a series of lectures to celebrate the University’s centenary, featuring renowned speakers such as Jonathan Kestelman on innovation, Leonard Susskind on Darwin and the cosmic landscape and Will Hutton on the shifting global economy;
- a major exhibition of photographs of life in China at the Grant Bradley Gallery in Bedminster. The five-week Picturing China 1870-1970 exhibition was accompanied by a series of evening talks about China policy and present and future directions, with a schools outreach programme to primary and secondary schools involving more than 500 local children and a Chinese New Year celebration in conjunction with the City Museum;
- a series of ‘citizen science’ activities co-ordinated by researchers in the School of Biological Sciences (during National Science and Engineering Week and at the Festival of Nature) that involved hundreds of schoolchildren in the task of identifying and recording invasive moths and their pest-controlling parasites, bringing the issue of biodiversity alive for thousands of people;
- Brain Awareness Week, hosted by Bristol ChemLabS, one of the University’s two Centres for Excellence in Teaching and Learning, which oversees this area of the University’s work, has organised a series of forums to encourage national organisations to play a part in setting the institution’s engagement strategy. Three key areas in which the city of Bristol excels – sustainability, creativity and ideas, and connectivity and digital media – have been identified as potential areas for further engagement work. In May 2008, the Engaged University Forum on Sustainability brought together representatives from the University (research staff, support staff and students) and from external organisations, including Bristol City Council and the Green Capital Momentum Group, Sustrans, Arnolfini, Bristol Zoo, Wildscreen and the University of the West of England, to identify areas where the University might add value to current work in the sustainability arena. Outcomes included proposals to develop multi-partner research bids, training for undergraduate and postgraduate students in sustainability-related skills and shared visions of Bristol as an eco-city.

Leading role for CPE
The University’s Centre for Public Engagement (CPE) went from strength to strength in 2008/09, co-ordinating efforts to ensure that engagement is embedded in the University’s culture. As well as organising engagement events in partnership with others, it gave presentations to departments and faculties throughout the year, and to Court and Council, outlining the ways in which it can support academics in sharing their work with wider audiences. It also organised the University’s first Engage 2009 conference, providing an opportunity for staff and postgraduates to hear from national figures in public engagement, share experiences and ideas, and find out about the range of public engagement activity at the University. Another new initiative, aimed at helping staff to capture and articulate the value of their public engagement activities, was the creation of a public engagement stories website (www.bristol.ac.uk/publicengagementstories).

Engaged University Forums
The Engaged University Steering Group, which oversees this area of the University’s work, has organised a series of forums to encourage national organisations to play a part in setting the institution’s engagement strategy. Three key areas in which the city of Bristol excels – sustainability, creativity and ideas, and connectivity and digital media – have been identified as potential areas for further engagement work. In May 2008, the Engaged University Forum on Sustainability brought together representatives from the University (research staff, support staff and students) and from external organisations, including Bristol City Council and the Green Capital Momentum Group, Sustrans, Arnolfini, Bristol Zoo, Wildscreen and the University of the West of England, to identify areas where the University might add value to current work in the sustainability arena. Outcomes included proposals to develop multi-partner research bids, training for undergraduate and postgraduate students in sustainability-related skills and shared visions of Bristol as an eco-city.

Setting the national agenda
The University continues to play an active part in the activities of the National Co-ordinating Centre for Public Engagement (NCCPE). The Centre, which is funded by the Higher Education Funding Council for England, Research Councils UK and the Welcome Trust, is working to embed public engagement across the higher education sector. Its steering group is chaired by the Vice-Chancellor. The University’s own Centre for Public Engagement represents Bristol on the NCCPE project group, which provides valuable opportunities to share learning, propose joint work and co-ordinate with counterparts at the University of the West of England. Joint work during 2008/09 focused on training for public engagement and on the research impact agenda, which asks academics to articulate the economic and societal impacts of their work. This learning will be shared across UK higher education with a view to securing the culture change sought by funding bodies.

Kathy Sykes, Professor of Sciences and Society, was awarded an OBE in the Queen’s Birthday Honours and has contributed to national strategies on science engagement by advising funders, government, learned institutions and others. She also co-authored a report on the use of dialogue and public consultation in shaping government policy.

Responding to community needs
The University continues to encourage members of staff to take part in volunteering activities in Bristol communities by awarding an extra day’s annual leave for the purpose. Students, too, have always made a huge investment in the well-being of the local area through volunteering and more details of their activities can be found on p15.

Bristol ChemLabS, one of the University’s two Centres for Excellence in Teaching and Learning, won a prestigious Big Tick award in Business in the Community’s Awards for Excellence 2009. It was judged to be the best in the UK in the category of educational programme, and is also the first awarded to an educational programme in the chemical sciences.

REVIEW OF THE YEAR 2008/09
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