

How do I build a career in public engagement?

What a public engagement practitioner does and how to become one

This guide will describe what a public engagement practitioner's role usually entails and describes some routes to becoming one. It will also explore where you might find opportunities and make contacts and will provide insight into other roles that overlap with public engagement.

1 | What does a public engagement practitioner in a research institution do?

A public engagement practitioner (PEP) is normally hired by universities, research institutes and other scientific organisations to facilitate, lead or deliver their public engagement strategy. Job remits and titles will vary – these kinds of roles might be called an engagement coordinator, assistant, officer or manager. In healthcare or in medical research departments, the word ‘involvement’ is often used (e.g. Patient Involvement Manager).

Many of these roles focus on embedding a culture of engagement within the institution. They are trying to encourage fellow staff and students to engage the public with what they do and provide support across the institution for engagement. Some of the ways they do this are:

Programming – PEPs may be responsible for planning and delivering public engagement projects. Events and activities might be specialised to certain areas, such as patient and public involvement, widening participation (engaging with schools), working specifically with local communities or more general public engagement with the wider community around a specific scientific area of research.

Support – PEPs may support staff and students to deliver their own projects. This might involve offering them formal training, informal 1-to-1 advice or linking them to resources and other people they can work with.

Capacity building – PEPs might be focused on increasing the capacity of the organisation to deliver public engagement. This kind of role can be responsible for administering grants, supporting external funding applications, establishing public engagement networks and rewarding or recognising public engagement work.

Impact – One measure of the quality of research is the impact it has on society. Engaging with society is a key pathway to impact. Therefore, alongside PEPs, Impact Engagement Officers support researchers to have impact through public engagement – by advising on engagement activities and how to evidence their effects. They will also play a key role in preparing impact case studies to be submitted to the Research Excellence Framework (REF) which assesses research quality.

Strategy – While all PEPs will be expected to support the strategy of the organisation, some may be responsible for working with organisation leaders to design a strategy for engagement.

Note: Public Engagement Practitioners can sit within a variety of teams depending on the institution. They might be within an academic department alongside researchers and directly working with a specific research area. Alternatively, engagement professionals might work within a range of professional services departments, including outreach, communications, community engagement, patient involvement and research management. And this is just within universities – there are a huge range of engagement roles outside of higher education – see section 4 below. The diversity in roles and perspectives is one of the things that can make engagement such a rich career.

2 | How do I become a public engagement practitioner?

There are numerous routes into a PEP role.

Qualifications:

Though not limited to degree-holders, PEP roles are generally considered graduate roles. Currently, there are a few postgraduate degrees that specialise in public engagement and there are many that cover science communication. Either degree will help you prepare for a PEP role.

If a role is based within a specific department or research group, having a degree or background in that particular subject may be beneficial but not always essential. You don't need a degree in computing, for example, to design and deliver a great engagement activity about computing! You'll always have experts involved in some way to ensure accuracy and sometimes, having less knowledge can help ensure the activity is understandable to a lay audience.

Besides degrees, there are lots of shorter training programmes which may offer certificates of completion. For example:

- Engagement Masterclasses for staff at Imperial
- Imperial's Engagement Academy for staff
- If you are a student at Imperial, you may be eligible to take the Public Engagement Horizons module

Experience:

Even without specific qualifications, it is possible to acquire a PEP role if you can demonstrate sufficient relevant experience. There are three main ways to build your experience before stepping into an official role:

- **Volunteer** – There are plenty of opportunities to volunteer both at external events and at Imperial within our existing programmes. This is a good way to get a taste of what public engagement is like while at the same time gaining skills and experiences. Volunteer opportunities often begin at a minimum time commitment of a couple of hours. You can volunteer as part of an engagement activity or event, but also as a departmental representative for Engagement, for example as part of our Societal Engagement Champions Network.
- **Intern** – Some organisations or even large individual projects will offer internships in public engagement. This is a great way to build your professional experience over a longer period.
- **Do it yourself** – You can always plan and deliver your own public engagement project, particularly if you can apply for funding. This will look impressive on a CV as you will have been responsible for the entire project. If you decide to do this, don't forget to access our resources to help you plan and fund it, as well as keeping in touch with the societal engagement team who can give you more tailored advice to ensure your project is a success.

Skills and Attributes Map

See our map of skills and attributes relevant to engagement practice. Use this to help inform your own development and seek training opportunities or experience.

<https://www.imperial.ac.uk/be-inspired/societal-engagement/training/engagement-skills-and-attributes-map/>



3 | Where can I find opportunities and contacts?

Entering the public engagement world can be confusing at first, particularly if you don't know where to find work and who to speak to. Some of the links below will help you find opportunities either for work, training or new contacts:

Jobs.ac.uk – Many public engagement jobs are listed on this website. Try to use different keywords such as 'public engagement', 'outreach', 'communication', 'patient involvement', as well as specific formats such as 'festival' and 'museum'.

PSCI-COM – The PSCI-COM mailing list is a space for PEPs and other science communicators to connect with each other. Often jobs will be advertised here as well as other opportunities.

BIG – The British Interactive Group is a network that not only allows science communicators to discuss best practice and share resources but also offers training opportunities to its members.

NCCPE – The National Coordinating Centre for Public Engagement is a good place to find guidance on public engagement, training opportunities and to a lesser degree, job adverts.

Imperial – Last but certainly not least, don't forget to explore our societal engagement website where you can find our training opportunities, as well as numerous public engagement programmes you can volunteer for and support you can access.

4 | What other roles are there?

Public engagement is a broad and expanding field, so there are a number of different roles available that overlap with what PEPs do. While it would be impossible to provide an exhaustive list, we have outlined some of them below:

Museums – Museums have a number of roles that involve engaging the public with science. Such roles could include exhibitions and interpretation officers who develop exhibitions, outreach officers who deliver interactive activities externally, and learning teams who run activities and events within the museum alongside the exhibitions.

Science centres – While science centres are quite similar to museums, they often provide more interactive 'hands-on' exhibits, as well as having live events such as science shows and workshops. Therefore, science centres may hire education officers to design

and implement these activities, as well as science explainers, which are usually slightly more junior roles and are focused mainly on interacting with the public within the exhibition space.

Festivals – As festivals are large public engagement projects, they often employ permanent staff. A festival officer or assistant will usually be responsible for a zone and will help recruit exhibitors and speakers, plan the logistics and provide the required resources for their zone. A festival manager will focus on the general coordination of the entire event.

Communications – Research organisations will employ communications staff to help disseminate both internally and externally as well as liaise with the press. Some of these roles will involve developing internal newsletters, managing social media accounts, writing press releases and working with the media.

Further resources – Let us know of others!

Below is a helpful glossary of science communication terms:

<https://www.big.uk.com/glossary>

Who are public engagement professionals and what do they do?

<https://www.publicengagement.ac.uk/support-engagement/engagement-professionals/role-public-engagement-professional>