

15 minutes to develop your research career

Podcast Transcript

Episode 1: Public engagement in research

Elaine: Hi, this is the [Taylor & Francis](#) and [Vitae](#) podcast on developing your research career. My name is Elaine from Taylor & Francis and I'm here today with...

Katie: Hi, I'm Katie from Vitae.

Elaine: And in this episode, Katie and I are going to be looking at the role of public engagement in research. What is it?

Paul Spencer: How to tell the story of your research in a way that engages and hooks people in.

Elaine: Why is it important?

Dave Finger: It is important to tell the public what you're doing with that money.

Elaine: And why as a researcher, should you be thinking about it?

Kirsty Ross: Researchers should do public engagement because it's fun.

Elaine: We're here at Vitae's International Researcher Development Conference and are going to be talking to a number of people about public engagement in research. Why it's important to them and their organization, and also give you some ideas to apply to your own research. So settle in for the next 15 minutes as we explore the role of public engagement in research.

Dave Finger: I'm Dave Finger from the [University of Sheffield](#) department of chemistry, and I'm also the co-chair of [UKRSA](#). First and foremost, all researchers are supported usually by grants that come from taxpayer money. So it is important to tell the public what you're doing with that money. I think it's important to get people to know that the university is part of the community. It's important to break down those barriers. I think the skills that are necessary are extemporaneous speech. You have to have a bit of showmanship. Some people that can do that and still remain accurate to the science, that's an incredible skills.

Helen Blanchett: My name is Helen Blanchett and I'm Subject Specialist for Scholarly Communications and I work for [Jisc](#). My particular area of work involves scholarly communications, but particularly at the moment it's open access. But I have heard tales of researchers saying that, I know that you researchers are interested in my research, so I don't need to make my publications available open access.

I think that's quite a narrow view. So I think that the more widely that you can make your research available, the better. It's being able to understand your audience, understand the message, tailor

that message appropriately to your audience, trying to find something memorable that they can relate to in terms of their own experiences.

Katherine Humphreys: My name's Katherine Humphreys, and I'm from your [Euraxess UK](#). So from this, I think we've really seen just how key it is for researchers to be digital more than ever now. And I think social media really gives us that platform in order to do this. We see a lot on the Euraxess UK Twitter account. Researchers are always talking to us. They're always engaging with us.

Paul Spencer: My name's Paul Spencer, I'm the Research Development Manager at the [University of the West of England](#) in Bristol. I think when it comes to the communication of your research, the biggest stumbling block most researchers have is how do I make it accessible without dumbing down? How to tell the story of your research in a way that engages and hooks people in without having to get too technical without having to get to kind of explaining it. And the advice I give to all researchers is the more that you can talk about your research in different contexts, the easier it will be to focus on telling a story.

Carla Doolan: I'm Carla Doolan from the [University of Kent](#). I think it's important for researchers, especially postgraduate researchers to do public engagement events. It gets their profile up. It gets them known in their field, helps with potential progression for their research career and also for if they want to go into an academic career. Using nonspecialists language, I think is really important because it helps with interdisciplinarity as well. So you don't want to assume that everybody knows all the terms within your relevant field.

Kirsty Ross: My name's Kirsty Ross, [University of Strathclyde](#). Researchers should do public engagement because it's fun. It advances your career. You get very different perspectives on what you're doing and the importance to the people that you're doing it for, which is usually your end users, your stakeholders and members of the public, people who are paying your salary. I think researchers should have training in how to actually go out and do it. I also don't think that everyone should be forced to. Some people are suited to doing public engagement. Other people don't want to go anywhere near it. They just want to do research and there should be space on the spectrum for all of those approaches.

Katie: Okay. So lots of interesting thoughts there from the conference delegates, and now I'm here with Lucy Robinson, who's the Citizen Science Program Manager at the [Natural History Museum](#). And we're going to explore some of those areas in more detail. So Lucy, thank you very much for taking the time to talk to us about public engagement. Could you start by telling us a little bit about your role at the Natural History Museum and how it relates to public engagement?

Lucy Robinson: Citizen Science is involving members of the public in science research, where they can make an active contribution either by gathering data, analyzing data, gathering samples, posing research questions, that kind of thing. So it's really where public engagement interfaces with science research. It's a particular type of public engagement, but it's also a method of doing research. And the thing with Citizen Science is that a project has to have both sides for it to be a Citizen Science project and for it to tick all those boxes.

Katie: Why do you think that it's important for early career researchers to start to engage the public in their research?

Lucy Robinson: Well, I think it's important for all researchers to engage the public with their research. It's not just something that's particular to early career researchers, but it's something that's much higher up the agenda now. Organizations are much more aware that this is an important part of being a researcher in the way that perhaps it wasn't in the past. And there's a lot more tools around now for researchers to use, to reach the public. The internet in particular and blogs and social media has just opened up a whole new raft of ways that you can reach the public. Just weren't around when other researchers perhaps were going through their training. So it's good for early career researchers to understand how they can maximize those routes, to get the word out about whatever their passion is, whatever they're spending three years or more studying.

Katie: And what do you think the wider benefits are of public engagement? For example, how might it translate into impact for the researcher's organization?

Lucy Robinson: There are lots of different benefits in it. It partly depends on the type of organization where the researcher is based. There are obviously immediate benefits that the public hear about research. They find out what scientists do. There's a lot of cultural benefits in terms of who scientists are and who researchers are in lots of different contexts of age, gender, ethnicity, all sorts of different aspects there where people can see just what researchers look like and what they do and they have normal lives outside of their job. Another benefit of public engagement is that people can actually understand why are scientists doing this. For some disciplines like medical research, there's an obvious connection, but for other things, why is someone going out and studying deep sea sponges? What on earth has that got to do with daily life? It's a way of explaining why all these researchers are doing what they do and why it's relevant to society.

Katie: So for those researchers who are thinking about getting involved and thinking about taking their very first steps out in front of the public, what advice would you give to them?

Lucy Robinson: There's a perception of us and them, of we need to engage them, the public, with our research. And I think just thinking through that mindset of us and them, that we're all the public as well. When we go and walk down the street, we're a member of the public. And so recognizing that the public is not one big, amorphous mass is useful, that it's just one person explaining to another person why their research is interesting.

Katie: And for researchers who are already sort of starting on that public engagement journey, what kind of skills and experiences and support do you think that they should focus on to improve in their public engagement?

Lucy Robinson: With a lot of ways you reach the public like social media and the press. You only have a very short window of someone's attention span. So really working on your elevator pitch or three minute thesis as we're hearing later today. What is your inner snapshot? Why do you go to work? What is the purpose of your research? So you can explain to someone in normal language, what you do. So test it out with family and friends who don't work in your discipline and see if they

understand what you do.

A very practical tip is to join the science communication [Jisc](#) mail list. It's just an email listing that loads of different science communication events or meetups of people who work in science communication and discussions around issues with science communication, sign up to that and get lots of ideas from people who are already working in this kind of area.

Katie: Now we're at the three minute thesis [Vitae](#) final 2016. Three-minute thesis is a competition founded by the [University of Queensland](#) where researchers have to deliver their PhD research within three minutes or less. If they go a second over, they're disqualified, and they have to make it suitable for a nonspecialist audience to understand and engage with their research. And we're going to talk to some of our finalists and judges about their experiences and their advice for you as researchers.

Jonathan Lambert: Currently treatment is available in the form of enzyme replacement, but this has got severe disadvantages.

Clare Viney: My name is Clare Viney and in three weeks time, I will become the CEO of [CRAC](#). I will be a fair judge. I will be the lay judge as well. Never professed to be a professional scientist or an expert scientist or researcher but what I am is general public. So, can you communicate at the right level, give me the right information in the right amount of time?

Maddie Long: By the time I finished this three minute talk, someone in the UK will have a stroke and someone else will develop dementia, but I have some good news.

Julie Becker: Hi, I'm Julie Becker. I'm one of the judges of the competition for the three minute thesis. I was surprised by the different style you can get in spite of the fact that the rules are very strict, they only have three minutes, one slide, no props and still you get six, very different presentations from six, very different personalities. And I was surprised that their personalities were able to express themselves so much.

Katie Groves: We are all experts when it comes to visually analyzing the human body. And this is because most of us see and interact with bodies every day to the point where the people who are the closest to us all become recognizable by their unique size...

Leon Heward-Mills: I'm Leon Heward-Mills, Publishing Director at Taylor and Francis. I think, think who your audience is. Be concise. Don't over-deliver, but don't under deliver. It's really clear to know what the message is that you're trying to put forward and stick to that and to know when to stop.

Nazira Albargothy: Allow me to take you on a journey of a disease that erases your entire memory. In the world there are 46 million...

Brooke Storer-Church: This is Brooke Storer-Church. I am from the higher education funding council of England. And I was one of the judges on the 3MT panel. Everyone was really engaging.

Everyone had great stage presence. Everyone tried to make eye contact and find something funny and get some humor. And so this year in particular, I found it was quite difficult.

Speaker 19: The one person who left us feeling that both the research was relayed in a way that we can understand, and it was engaging and we wanted to know more. And the person who is the winner tonight is Nazira.

Nazira Albargothy: So, I'm Nazira Albargothy and I'm from the [University of Southampton](#). I've just won the three minute thesis competition. It's definitely boosted my confidence. I feel much more comfortable in talking about my research to a lay audience and a more specialized audience. There was a lot of practice involved. I had to go through my supervisor, some of my mentors and a lot of other friends and colleagues who supported me through this, kind of notified me about what I should and shouldn't say, what was suitable, what kind of key words I should not use and use, especially when you're speaking to people that are not in your field. That you have to be quite careful about what terminology you use.

Maddie Long: My name is Maddie long. I'm from Washington DC originally, and I'm a student at the [University of Edinburgh](#) and I've just won the people's choice award. And I'm elated. The experience really makes me appreciate the importance of science communication and public engagement and how much we need to incorporate this into the research we do and how it should be a priority.

Elaine: If you were to give one piece of advice to anyone considering getting involved in public engagement activities around their research, what is it that you'd say to them?

Maddie Long: So I think at first it may seem super scary and it might be a little scary at first, but once you get used to it, I think you really realize how important this type of activity is. And I think another thing that's really important is to try and be yourself when you're presenting the research. There's no right or wrong way of telling people about what you're doing and sort of having this interactive conversation with other people. You just sort of want to have the sharing experience.

Nazira Albargothy: If you think too much about it, you won't do it. It's very stressful, but it's extremely rewarding. And once you have done it, you would be really glad that you've done.

Elaine: So it's the end of the day at the [Vitae](#) international researcher development conference and we've spoken to loads of people about public engagement in research. And what's come across really strongly is that there's huge public interest in research. And it's also getting higher up the agenda within the research community as well. But most crucially that getting involved and being part of doing public engagement can be really exciting. And as one of the interviewee said, fun as well. But what also came across strongly was that researchers need to be clear on the why. So why you're doing your research and why it's important? And then being able to talk about it in a relatable way. So be confident about going out and practicing. So talk about your research with your family, with your friends. Talking about it within those kinds of groups can help you to then when you step out onto that wider stage as well. So what came across strongly for you, Katie?

Katie: Yeah. I think the idea of having a conversation with the public, that it's not just a one way thing, that there's the opportunity to enrich your research through doing public engagement is a way to build a community around your research. And one of the commenters said, it's about getting the next generation excited in your research area so that new ideas are flowing into the field.

Elaine: And I think it's also about finding what suits you individually as well. So it's not just about standing up and speaking in front of a big room of people, but I think people also talked about digital tools and kind of taking advantage of that. So whether that's social media or it's blogs, it doesn't always have to be that face-to-face as well as other opportunities out there. And it's seeking those out and taking advantage of those as well.

Katie: And I thought another strong theme there was around the idea that it is difficult. It is challenging and not everybody will be good at it, straight away. It takes practice and it takes support. But there is support available for example, from your institution, Vitae have a lot of resources on the website that you can go and have a look at. The publishers are really keen to get on board and support this. So there are plenty of ways that you can get advice and support.

Elaine: Thanks for listening today and hope you really enjoyed our podcast on public engagement and research and keep an eye out for the next one. It'll be coming soon.