

Imperial College
London

STRATEGIC PLAN 2017—2020

Public engagement with research

INTRODUCTION

Public engagement with research (PER) is more important than ever, as the value of these activities to research and the public is being recognised and evidenced.

At Imperial, we define engagement with research as the wide range of ways of engaging specific members of the public with the design, conduct and dissemination of our scientific, engineering, medical and business research. It almost always involves researchers directly, as well as members of the public.

Research funders and policy makers are increasingly prioritising engagement with research and the Research Excellence Framework (REF) is key mechanism for this.

As momentum for engagement continues to grow, this Strategic Plan sets out how Imperial can unlock the potential benefits of high-quality PER initiatives for our research, researchers and public participants.

It establishes Imperial's aims, objectives and underpinning principles for public engagement with research, in order to encourage consistent high-quality practice across the Institution whilst enabling individual ingenuity and creativity.

The plan will be of interest to Imperial's research community; our network of engagement practitioners, and other enablers of staff and student engagement across the College; as well as external stakeholders such as research and education governing bodies and funders. •

Imperial President,
Professor Alice Gast
October 2017

“We need to share our passion and love of science, discovery, problem-solving and understanding with society in new ways to reach people we have not connected with before. Together we are powerful.”

THE IMPERIAL CONTEXT & AIMS

Societal engagement is a core part of Imperial’s mission ‘to achieve enduring excellence in research and education in science, engineering, medicine and business for the benefit of society.’

A key theme in Imperial’s strategy is to ‘share the wonder and importance of what we do’ in a way that ‘arouses curiosity, awakens a love of discovery and broadens the understanding of an increasingly complex world.’

The Public Engagement with Research Strategic Plan forms part of Imperial’s Societal Engagement Framework and Action Plan, which were crafted to deliver this element of the College strategy and mission, and are led by the Academic Partnerships Division.

At Imperial, we consider societal engagement as having four key elements, of which Engagement with research is one:

Schools outreach

Engagement with research

Local community engagement

Patient engagement

Societal Engagement is part of our wider external engagement agendas, such as media, policy and industry. The REF places societal engagement as a key component of research impact, alongside other forms of impact, such as economic, cultural, legal and environmental.

We will seek to collaborate with other Imperial teams involved in external engagement to ensure we maximise our stakeholder engagement potential.

“...widening and deepening the notion of impact to include influence on public engagement, culture and teaching, as well as policy and applications more generally.” — The Stern Review of the REF, 2016

OUR AIMS

Our work on public engagement is guided by the following aims, agreed upon by Imperial’s Engagement with Research Steering Group:

- 1 / TO EMBED ENGAGEMENT WITH RESEARCH into our institutional philosophy, and into the research life cycle, so as to enrich our research and teaching, whilst increasing our relevance and benefit to wider society.
- 2 / TO FACILITATE AND DELIVER thoughtful, well-planned engagement initiatives that are rooted in Imperial’s research, to generate mutually beneficial and enlightening experiences for researchers and a range of participants involved. •

OUR PRINCIPLES

There is not one best model or channel to conduct high-quality engagement with research. At Imperial quality comes when engagement has been thoughtfully designed around the following principles, which were developed by the Engagement with Research Steering Group:

1 / We value the potential of a range of engagement activities, from lighter-touch experiences through to in-depth collaborations; choosing methods most suited to the audiences participating and the nature of the research in focus.

2 / We seek to develop a partnership approach to engagement, with the active involvement of participants, and avoid using terminology and activities that reinforce an ‘expert’ and ‘non-expert’ relationship.

3 / We recognise that people have different interests and learn in different ways, and so target engagement to these motivations in order to be relevant and of benefit.

4 / We seek to develop relationships that wouldn’t otherwise exist, connecting staff and students with each other and with the public, with the aim that all parties benefit from the experience.

5 / We enable engagement with curiosity driven, ‘blue-skies’ research with unknown benefits, as well as research that addresses the problems we know with obvious benefits to society.

6 / We encourage reflective practice and institutional sharing and learning to improve the quality of engagement College-wide.

7 / We highlight and celebrate the benefits of public engagement with research, as well as the benefits of Imperial’s research to the public.

8 / We are generous and sincere in the support of engagement with research, through visible and appropriate reward and recognition activities for both internal and external participants. •

“The Festival made me feel that Imperial College are committed and passionate to not only their research but also the world around them.”
— Imperial Festival Visitor, 2017

“[Societal Engagement has had] enormous impact. Interactions with individuals from other professional spheres, new ideas, new collaborations, new professional opportunities.” — Imperial Researcher, staff survey on Societal Engagement, 2017

THE PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT WITH RESEARCH SPECTRUM

Public engagement with research activities can be viewed on a spectrum that varies in terms of the degree of interaction and reciprocal learning between academics and the public audience.

All the engagement formats on the spectrum create important opportunities to inform and inspire the public. However, interactive and two-way engagement can create opportunities for collaboration and reciprocal learning which often have greater impact and increased benefits for researchers and public participants. In order to achieve our stated aims, Imperial will provide opportunities across the spectrum of reciprocal engagement.

The target audiences for public engagement with research are diverse, as our research spans many disciplines and has a range of potential public participants.

When we talk about the public in this context we mean **“individuals, groups, young people and their families, who do not currently have a formal relationship with a HEI through teaching, research or knowledge transfer, but who may have an interest in these activities or upon whom the research or its application could impact.”**

— RCUK

Whilst our public engagement with research programme as a whole aims to include a diverse and broad audience, individual activities need to identify and define specific target groups in order to be most effective. Those delivering engagement with research initiatives should seek to clarify the appropriate target audiences for any initiative in order that the resources and programmes are targeted to be of most benefit to public participants and academics. •

“I feel inspired by the scientific advances showcased at the event, and by the enthusiasm of present scientists. I also find international cross-border cooperation in science uplifting. It was a great and fun learning event for myself and my kids. All the scientists were very approachable and keen to share their work.”
— Imperial Fringe Visitor, October 2017

Increasing levels of interaction, idea-sharing and reciprocal learning →

Example formats	One-way communication	Interactive engagement	Two-way engagement
	Talks	Q&As	Co-created exhibitions, performance, films etc.
	Demonstrations	Hands-on exhibits	Debates
	Blogs	Games	Citizen science events
	Magazine articles	Focus groups	Co-produced research
	Films		Public forums around research objectives
	Interviews		

OUR OBJECTIVES

The College has delivered significant achievements in PER, including the major Imperial Festival and Fringe events and an array of department-based initiatives.

These achievements have been possible because of the unique Imperial community, which has:

- academics and students enthusiastic about engaging the public with research
- academics who are exploring the philosophy and theory of public engagement
- public engagement practitioners with expertise in delivery and training
- other professional services staff taking a supporting role in the enabling of engagement activities
- a diverse range of cultural and community partners

We are therefore embarking on this strategic plan from a position of strength. Our approach will facilitate collaborations and networks between these groups. It will enable skills development across a diverse range of staff and students leading to high quality engagement. It will aim to identify ‘pillars of practice’ and enable these activities to grow in impact. It will also seek to identify and nurture mutually beneficial partnerships with creative, community and other organisations with whom we have compatible objectives.

Our objectives for 2017 to 2020, identified following a period of institution-wide consultation as part of the Societal Engagement Framework, are as follows:

- 1 / Continue to develop Imperial’s concept for public engagement with research and integrate this into our core purpose, complementing related strategic objectives for research, teaching and other forms of external engagement.
- 2 / Build mutually beneficial connections between staff, students and the public, through more collaborative and participatory engagement with research activities.
- 3 / Nurture theory and practice for engagement with research and establish Imperial as a centre of excellence.
- 4 / Enhance and develop our institutional platforms for engagement with research and diversify the range of staff, students and public getting involved.
- 5 / Systematically monitor and evaluate our engagement with research activities and also evidence impact through original research in this area.
- 6 / To create an enabling culture and environment for engagement with research to take place across the institution by increasing the systematic support and infrastructure we provide.
- 7 / Ensure that staff and students have access to the training necessary to deliver excellence in engagement with research. •

PRIORITY ACTIONS 2017—2018

The following actions were identified as a priority by the Engagement with Research Steering Group in order to achieve the stated objectives, as part of the Societal Engagement Action Plan Development.

DELIVER the annual President’s Awards for Excellence in Societal Engagement to reward and promote high-quality engagement with research.

LAUNCH the internal Societal Engagement Seed Fund to initiate new activities or approaches to public engagement with research projects.

ESTABLISH the Societal Engagement Champions Network to facilitate collaboration, skills development and information sharing to all corners of the institution.

IDENTIFY and recommend new institutionally-supported, two-way engagement with research programmes and source funding to implement the programmes.

DEVELOP a new digital space to share resources and tool kits for delivering and evaluating engagement with research activities, and to support networking.

CREATE new skills development opportunities for staff and students in liaison with established learning and development providers at the College.

DEVISE new engagement with research programming in White City, drawing on the potential of the new Invention Rooms, the interdisciplinary campus and diverse local community.

SUPPORT the evaluation of engagement with research and our ability to demonstrate its impact, including the recruitment of an Engagement Coordinator (Evaluation and Impact) — now in post. •

“RCUK is working with other funders of research to create a culture where public engagement is regarded as an important and essential activity by the research community.” — RCUK

“We expect all our major research groups to inform, consult and collaborate with the wider public over the lifetime of their research projects.” — Wellcome Trust

EVALUATION

The following key success measures have been identified to measure our performance against our objectives.

INTERNALLY FOCUSED

- 1 / The number and diversity of staff and/or students involved in delivering engagement with research activities, and impacts on their work/research and attitudes towards engagement.
- 2 / Participating numbers of staff and/or students in skills development, digital communications and networking opportunities around engagement with research; and their satisfaction levels with their experience.
- 3 / The level of funding achieved for engagement with research (e.g. embedded in research grants and specific grant income).
- 4 / New formal structures established to support engagement with research within the institution and the impact on how supported or rewarded staff and students feel as a result.
- 4 / The numbers of public engagement activities that are embedded within the research life cycle and the quality of these activities. For example, the number and quality of the public engagement activities submitted as part of the next REF process in comparison with the 2014 submissions.

“It is an amazing opportunity to develop skills, my portfolio and above all, have fun” — Undergraduate student participating in the Imperial Festival 2017

EXTERNALLY FOCUSED

Those delivering specific engagement projects should see to measure their success in meeting their specific project objectives. For example:

- 1 / The number of participants taking part in engagement with research activities; who they are [e.g. age, gender, socio economic background, family group, school children, postcode, level of previous education], and how often they participate.
- 2 / Whether the intended benefits and outputs to all parties involved in the engagement achieved were achieved. e.g. Feedback from participants as to their satisfaction, enjoyment and what they ‘learned’. •

“Public engagement enhances research so that it contributes positively to society and results in greater relevance, accountability and transparency.”
— RCUK Public Engagement Strategy

Professor Maggie Dallman, Associate Provost (Academic Partnerships), is the appointed senior academic champion with a remit to deliver our strategic ambitions for Societal Engagement.

In this role, Professor Dallman reports directly to the Provost and chairs the Societal Engagement Group, which oversees the delivery of the objectives and actions within the Societal Engagement Framework.

The Societal Engagement Group is made up of representatives who oversee the work-streams that form Imperial’s Societal Engagement agenda, including Public Engagement with Research, as well as representatives of relevant College departments and the Imperial College Union. The Public Engagement with Research work-stream is led by Vicky Brightman, Public Engagement Lead for the College. This role is Chair of the Public Engagement with Research Steering Group, which has accountability for the crafting and implementation of the objectives, principles and priority actions described in this plan.

The Public Engagement Lead coordinates the Engagement Practitioners Network of staff based across departments with a remit for public engagement; and the Societal Engagement Champions Network, a wide network of academic and professional services representatives from each Department, created for information sharing and consultation across Imperial. •

“[Societal Engagement has] forced me to take a step back, think about my work from a different perspective, raised new questions, highlighted key points of my research that I was aware of but had not realised were that important previously.” — Imperial Researcher, Staff Survey on Societal Engagement 2017

RCUK

“Public engagement can provide substantial benefits to the researchers involved in engaging the public, as well as improve the quality of research and its impact, by widening research horizons.”

Thank you for reading. We look forward to working with you into the future.

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