

Facilitating public engagement



Dr Frances Laughton

Director of Teaching
and Resources

Department of Physics





Why do you facilitate public engagement?

I believe public engagement is something that is beneficial for everyone in the University to be part of, and as part of my role as Director of Teaching and Resources I enable my students to do engagement projects.

How I help others to engage

I set up a final year project unit for undergraduates in the Department of Physics called 'Communicating Physics Projects'. Students who choose this option undertake public engagement activities inspired by current research in the Department.

It is a year-long unit. First the students find themselves a research mentor – someone in the Department whose research they are going to focus on – then they have to understand the research and work in small teams to devise some engagement activities around it. For one of the activities we give them a venue, the Bath Taps into Science Festival, and for the other they come up with a venue by themselves.

They also write articles about the research, one aimed at a final year student like themselves, and the other at an interested member of the public, as if it were for *The Conversation*, an online source of news and views from the academic and research community. This assesses their understanding of the research, and their ability to communicate it to different audiences.



How public engagement benefits my students

The unit teaches students really good transferable skills, like critical thinking, problem solving, communication skills, team working and independent learning. I also like our graduates to leave having seen a bit more of the dual role of research and teaching in the University. And for the students who want to continue into academia it's really important that we tell them from the beginning about the importance of public engagement with research.

How public engagement has benefited my department

I think it's good for the academic staff mentors to get the students involved in their research. The students often develop engagement activities in a way that wouldn't occur to the staff, because they are at a different age and stage. So I think it can give the staff a fresh perspective on their research.

For our researchers, who know their fields inside out, helping a student to understand their research gives them good practice at explaining it in a more accessible way, which is a skill they can then use for their own public engagement work.

