

Inclusive Leadership for Public Engagement with Research

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Introduction

Inclusive Leadership for Public Engagement with Research, was a 12-week leadership training course for researchers committed to public engagement with environmental science research.

The course was delivered between February and May 2024, and consisted of five two-hour workshops, ongoing support from specialist mentors who brought a range of experience in strategic leadership of public engagement with research, and participants also worked on a live project or personal goal throughout the course.

The workshops covered the following topics:

- Inclusivity in Public Engagement practice
- Inclusive leadership for public engagement with research
- Creating an inclusive public engagement with research culture

The remaining two workshops opened and closed the programme, the first setting the tone and overview, while the closing session was a chance to reflect on what the participants had done in developing their own inclusive leadership practice, and where they would go next.

All of the participants who responded to the evaluation survey stated that the course had helped them become a more inclusive leader of public engagement.

Evaluation of Inclusive Leadership for Public Engagement identified the following features contributed to the effectiveness of the programme:

- Careful development of the cohort through the recruitment process.
- The disciplinary consistency due to it only being eligible to researchers within NERC's remit.
- The combination of content, discussion, and mentoring.
- Formative evaluation allowed the materials to be responsive to participants' needs.
- Practical application of ideas in the workplace during the programme.
- Participants were invested in developing a more inclusive research culture.
- Leading by example in running the programme in an inclusive way (eg circulating slides in advance, encouraging people to be their whole selves in the space).
- Helping participants develop their own ideas of their own leadership practices and recognizing that leadership is an ongoing practice.
- Excellent mentors.
- Excellent guest speakers.

Inclusive Leadership for Public Engagement with Research was developed and delivered by Dr Helen Featherstone (Head of Public Engagement, University of Bath), David Owen (Director, Gurukula Ltd) and Dominic Galliano (public engagement consultant). Mentors (Charlotte Thorley and Furaha Asani) and guest speakers (Tomi Akingbade and Professor Rick Holliman) were key people involved in delivery of the programme.

Inclusive Leadership for Public Engagement with Research was funded through the NERC Advanced Training Short Courses call – NE/Y003748/1.

The programme

Developing the programme

The programme built on our collective decades of experience in creating effective learning environments for academics, and in particular the work we did as part of the URKI-funded [ChallengeCPD@Bath](#) programme.

Key ideas that we used to inform the development of the programme:

- Having a combination of workshops, a personal learning goal for each participant, and mentoring to provide space for deep, applied conversations with an expert.
- The workshops were kept largely as spaces for the delivery of core content that could be applied after the workshops and with the support of the mentor.
- Leading by example: making the programme as inclusive as possible from the initial recruitment to the final evaluation.
- Asking the participants why they wanted to be on the programme and what they wanted to get from it. We used this to tailor the workshop content and to match the participants to their mentor.
- Keeping the contact time minimal (14 hours over the course of the programme). In our ChallengeCPD@Bath project a key idea that emerged was about ensuring that the time invested in a training initiative will save time in the long run.
- We framed being an inclusive leader as an ongoing process (rather than it being something you can become after a training course) meaning that the ideas introduced in the programme could be applied in an ongoing way outside of the programme.
- Making the recruitment process proportionate to the time investment of participating on the programme.
- Delivering the programme online to increase accessibility as we know that an in-person commitment would prevent some people from applying as the travel and recovery time would significantly extend the time commitment, spending time away from home wouldn't be possible, or health conditions may prevent in-person attendance.

Recruitment

A blog post was written to [summarise the programme](#) and a webpage was written to give details of [how to apply to the programme](#).

The programme was advertised through a range of channels including direct marketing to professional bodies, learned societies, personal contacts, and relevant JISC Mail lists alongside NERC themselves.

We held informal drop-in sessions for prospective applicants so they could find out more about the programme and make an informed decision about whether to apply. The application process was relatively light touch but was proportionate to the scale of the programme.

One-to-one discussions were held with each participant to understand more about their context and help them refine their learning goal. This was done to allow us to shape the cohort, match content to the participants' needs, and identify an appropriate mentor.

The workshops

There were five workshops overall, all of which were held online. The first workshop opened the programme with time to get to know each other, provide an introduction to what to expect, and to co-develop ways of working to ensure that all participants were able to contribute to the workshops and sessions in ways that worked for them; whilst the fifth one was a chance to wrap up, consolidate learning, and anticipate next steps. The workshops combined theory and content provision with whole, and small, group discussions. Some of the workshops included a guest speaker. A short feedback form was circulated after each session which allowed us to adapt to participant needs in real time.

The workshops covered the following topics:

- Inclusivity in Public Engagement practice – exploring diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) in the context of public engagement with research. Developing strategies and practical methods to embed DEI in your practice. This session included material about inclusive partnership working and explored two skills: active listening and reflective practice.
- Inclusive leadership for public engagement with research – this session explored different models of leadership and influence. Three skills were explored: communication, collaboration, and decision-making.
- Creating an inclusive public engagement with research culture – this session outlined what research culture is and how to self-assess it using a range of maturity models. Content covered concepts related to identify and welfare and wellbeing. Practical discussions about how to lead by example in making everyday work situations more inclusive.

Mentoring

Each participant was allocated a mentor who they met with approximately four times over the course of the programme. The mentors' roles included helping the participant apply the workshop content to their own settings and supporting their personal learning goal. Mentors were all experienced in inclusive leadership for public engagement with research and so could share their experiences and make connections into relevant networks.

The learning goal

Each participant outlined a learning goal to work on over the duration of the programme. This was something practical that they could deliver within the timescale of the course. It was intended to be something the participants were working on anyway so that it didn't become an additional task to do between the workshops.

Participant overview

The ILPER programme supported 20 participants (we had 31 people apply). The successful participants included two PhD researchers and five early career researchers. Participants came from a variety of research and teaching organisations with an even split of research intensive and teaching intensive universities, alongside non-departmental public bodies.

Participants on the programme came from a broad range of NERC research areas including:

- Geosciences
- Marine Sciences
- Geography and Environmental Sciences
- Nature Connectedness
- Medical and health interface
- Rural Economy, Environment and Society
- Climate and climate change
- Agroecology

A requirement of the funding was to report on the diversity of participants. We did not consider acceptable to ask people to tick boxes to describe themselves so asked applicants to self-describe how (if applicable) they were from under-represented communities within outreach and public engagement leadership sector (e.g. disabled, D/deaf and neurodiverse people, LGBTQI+ etc.). People described a range of characteristics (some of which are protected characteristics under the Equality Act) including having a working class background, their cultural heritage, having a migrant background, having a disability, being LGBTQI+, being neurodiverse, being a religious minority, and returning from maternity leave. Many participants described their intersectional status.

This data told us that nearly all participants on the programme were from minoritised communities. This reinforced our commitment to creating safe, inclusive spaces and approaches on the programme as well as allowing us to tailor our overall approach, content, and activities really carefully to their needs.

Outcomes for participants

Alongside our own reflective practice and the embedded formative evaluation throughout the programme, we conducted a summative evaluation by using a survey which was circulated to all participants. The survey used a combination of closed and open questions. Three participants also provided case studies of their learning experiences and outcomes. 11 participants completed the form.

We had 86% attendance over the duration of the programme.

All respondents stated that the programme had helped them become a more inclusive leader for public engagement with research (eight strongly agreed, three agreed with the statement “the programme had helped them become a more inclusive leader for public engagement with research”)

“I've learned a huge amount about myself and my values through this process, and grown in confidence for what I can offer and the space I uniquely occupy”.

When asked about what they were taking away from the programme, participants listed the following which reflects (and extends) their initial ambitions for participation:

- Tools, resources and frameworks
- Increased confidence
- Understanding of how to build networks and work with others
- How to build more inclusive engagement practices
- How to bring about culture change
- How to facilitate online sessions and create an inclusive atmosphere
- A sense of community and purpose

“From working with my mentor, I am also more confident in my approach and my instincts, and am working to internalise that it is not on me alone to change the world, and success is not binary but a spectrum of change”

“(I gained a...) bolder and more confident approach to my science public engagement and my role as an advocate for inclusive practises in all aspects of the research cycle”.

“I am taking away theories, clearer understanding and pathways in how I can implement inclusive engagement within communities but also within an academic structure. It has given me the power to continue the push within a supportive network and framework”.

“The main thing is that I'm no longer scared of 'getting it wrong', but accept that it's a lifelong learning process to work in this space. It's helped me realise the power of critical thinking, planning, and doing with purpose and an open approach. Learning from others, reflecting regularly and adapting with new information while keeping the core purpose in mind. The mentoring has been hugely powerful for me too - I originally viewed this as a complementary adjunct to the programme, but have come to view it as a central aspect of developing in this space”.

Commented [BC1]: I found the order of this section criteria. I understand leading with the bold statement (this should also go in exec summary at the start). Suggest presenting chronologically

why they signed up
learning goals
What they took away

Commented [BC2R1]: I think this section could use some visualisation of the data. I find it hard to get a sense of patterns in this narrative form.

Commented [HF3R1]: I'm not sure the numbers are helpful in any form (visualisations or narrative) tbh. Every time it's “all respondents agreed or strongly agreed” - how helpful is it to know the proportion of agree / strongly agree.

On their progress towards their goal, respondents said that the programme helped them stay motivated and work towards their goal, in some cases it also helped them review their original plans. Seven of eleven respondents completed or made progress towards their goal. Participants outlined their learning goals at the outset:

- Develop a funding proposal
- Set up and host a network meeting
- Embed engagement in the undergraduate curriculum
- Develop a stakeholder engagement strategy
- Influence senior management team towards more inclusive engagement practices
- Broaden the audiences I engage with, and bring EDI, in an active way when working on public engagement activities.
- Improve the research culture within a department.

When asked about their confidence in applying what they learned from the programme every participant agreed (2) or strongly agreed (9) with the statement “I feel confident in applying what I learned from the programme”.

“This programme transformed my thinking around the potential for becoming a more impactful, inclusive, educated and intrepid researcher. I'm now more confident and clear on my values interacting in unknown spaces, and ambitious to embed diversity, equity and inclusion in my ongoing research and engagement work. I'd particularly recommend this programme for people who may be interested but unsure about how they fit into this space and what change they can effect”.

“The training programme has influenced the emphasis of the strategy towards community engagement (as opposed to previous focus on professional / industry stakeholders) and the need to apply an inclusive lens on all aspects of our engagement”.

The roles of workshop leaders and mentors

All respondents agreed that the workshop facilitators were knowledgeable (10 strongly agree, 1 agree)

“All the workshop leaders were INCREDIBLE in making us all feel like 'a family' learning together. Especially from the little side / intro chats about unrelated to the workshop that makes us seen as a whole person, rather than just a participant on a course. The emails before each workshop session were also useful to set the tone and help us give our best selves to the workshop when the time comes”.

The quote above reflects the effectiveness of the commitment to inclusive practice that was embedded throughout the programme.

All of the respondents agreed (2) or strongly agreed (9) with the following statements about their mentor:

- I felt my mentor had the right level of experience to support me in my role
- My mentor was knowledgeable
- My mentor was available and responsive
- My mentor helped me look at how I might solve problems in a different way
- My mentor offered access to networks and relevant expertise
- The mentoring developed my knowledge and skills in inclusive leadership of PER

“(The mentoring was...) hugely relevant to and important for personalising practice and theory from the course”.

“[Mentor 1] was so lovely, such a warm, kind and welcoming soul. I would totally recommend them to anyone and would like to say a big thank you for assisting me in my journey”.

“The mentoring I've had through this programme has been eye-opening and has shown me what great mentoring can look like. I've learned huge amounts about myself, and grown in terms of critical self-reflection and constructively overcoming challenges. I felt that we developed a strong connection quickly, and [mentor 2] was able to prompt and probe reflections within a comfortable, friendly environment that felt like a chat with a friend but which always led to insights and breakthroughs - so often our discussions led to self-reflections that 'I haven't thought about it that way before' or 'I'd never realised that about myself”

“[Mentor 3] was very kind and understanding, it helps having an experienced mentor who knows academia's ins and outs like they do. [Mentor 3] always listened and provided great advice – even when my thought process was a bit random”.

“I cannot overstate the impact of the mentoring aspect, which was so supportive and encouraging, and really helped me feel able to keep trying to push inclusive practices”.

When asked about the time investment of the programme, all respondents agreed (3) or strongly agreed (8) that the programme was worth the time they invested in it.

“The breadth and depth of learning was incredible given the relatively low time commitment. I came into this without a huge amount of extra time or mental bandwidth to dedicate to this and still have found it a highly productive and rich learning process.”

Why the programme was successful

- Careful development of the cohort through the recruitment process.
- The disciplinary consistency due to it only being eligible to researchers within NERC's remit.
- The combination of content, discussion, and mentoring.
- Formative evaluation allowed the materials to be responsive to participants' needs.
- Practical application of ideas in the workplace during the programme.
- Participants were invested in developing a more inclusive research culture.
- Leading by example in running the programme in an inclusive way (eg circulating slides in advance, encouraging people to be their whole selves in the space).
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- Excellent mentors.
- Excellent guest speakers.

Drawing on the evaluation feedback, and our own reflections as mentors and facilitators we have identified the following areas for potential development:

- Consider incorporating a face to face event into the programme. Participants suggested that this could give the cohort an opportunity to bond and network in a different way.
- Consider ways to build a community of practice around the programme. Participants have suggested a 'check in' six months later, or some form of group with continued networking activities, so the cohort could continue to support each other in creating more inclusive public engagement with research environments.
- Consider if the programme should be developed and targeted at more white male scientists, since this demographic currently is more likely to hold a senior position. One participant suggested the course should be mandatory for any funded researchers.
- Where people are working in breakout groups give the option to apply the theory of the workshop to their practical project.

Summary

The Inclusive Leadership for Public Engagement with Research programme was a very successful initiative. Participants on the programme developed skills and confidence in developing their own inclusive leadership approach. Participants made progress on their learning goals, and felt they could apply their learning after the programme ended. The outcomes for the participants were significant in particular considering their relatively low investment of time.

The combination of workshops, mentoring, and a personal learning goal was effective. The development of the cohort, embedded inclusive practices, and high quality workshop leaders, speakers, and mentors were essential to the success of the programme.

Appendix 1 Case studies

Dr Jess Rickenback is a lecturer in physical geography at the University of Edinburgh. She is a biogeographer, whose research focuses on plants in tropical savannahs, looking at the processes that impact their diversity and distribution.

The course gave me the confidence to achieve something I'd long wanted to do: set up a network of researchers working on tropical East Asian savannahs. I wanted to be able to leverage the privilege I have, as a UK researcher – with the extra time, energy and resources that gives me – to create a network in an equitable manner, that would amplify marginalised voices from the Global South.

Setting up the network raised a lot of ethical and practical questions which the course helped me to reflect upon, thinking about how to navigate the differences in power and research cultures in a way that wouldn't cause harm.

Being able to discuss all this with my mentor was incredibly helpful – they were phenomenal! They acted as a sense check and gave me the self-belief to make it all happen. Through talking with them I was able to see that there was no perfect way, but so long as I was thinking things through, then it was okay to trust my gut instinct. She also helped me to overcome the fear of getting things wrong which can lead to inaction.

I was awarded a collaboration grant from the Royal Society of Edinburgh to cover travel costs for members of the network to come to the University for a week-long workshop. That funding wouldn't have happened without the training. The week will involve a writing workshop, to put together a skeleton funding bid, ideas for a joint paper and for a themed session at a conference. We're also going to hold a public symposium, for knowledge sharing and public engagement. Though in the spirit of equitable partnership and co-creation, some of these plans may change! The training has helped me see how, as the instigator of the network, I might hold the outline, the shell, but what it is filled with can and will change. Equitable collaborations take many forms. The key thing is to be aware and not introduce harmful interactions.

I'm also just about to get my first PhD student and I wouldn't have had the confidence to do that so early in my career without the intellectual and ideological framework that I gained through the training. It helped me to reflect on research culture and has already influenced how I've supervised my master's and undergraduate students. A PhD student is a far closer relationship: I hope that – if they are willing – we will be able to talk openly about these things. As I don't yet have a lab group, I've thought how to enable my student to be part of other groups, to gain insights and support from as many relevant and knowledgeable directions as possible. My aim is to create an atmosphere that supports intellectual curiosity and doesn't come down hard on mistakes. The course gave me the self-belief to think through the kind of environment and research culture I want to create – but most importantly to understand that this is a legitimate thing to spend time on.

One of the key things that attracted me to the training was that it was a longer course, not a one-off session, to give you time to engage with the subject at a deeper level and have real time for reflection. The fact it was supported by NERC also gave it important legitimacy – another marker that this is a subject worthy of time and reflection.

I also valued being part of a cohort, which meant I wasn't thinking about these things in isolation, but was able to develop and progress as part of a group, and build that energy together.

The course leaders were open to critique, which I really appreciated. When I raised any questions, I felt heard and supported. This not only helped me to learn – but also showed me how to lead and I try to emulate their openness and responsiveness in my own practice.

Dr Emma Bush is an ecosystem scientist at the Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh. Her research focuses on how nature-based solutions, particularly trees and plants, can help people address the challenges of urban living, including adaptation to climate change.

I set myself a personal goal within the training to develop a stakeholder engagement plan for our five-year Plants with Purpose programme. The training gave me more confidence to develop the plan, to feel that I had the knowledge and experience to put it together.

Through the training, I was also able to prioritise the plan, and as a result, we created it much sooner than would otherwise have been possible. That's brought tangible benefits: it's ensured that we're well prepared and able to take advantage of more opportunities.

Working on the plan was just one of the ways I was able to directly implement what I was learning in my work. I was newly in a leadership position, and the training helped me to consider the kind of leadership I wanted to provide.

The course was also instrumental in my involvement in a successful grant application. I was asked to put together a work package on stakeholder engagement for a bid to the Horizon programme – and was able to draw on what I learned on the training to do that. Thanks to the grant award, we've been able to recruit a new stakeholder engagement manager.

The course brought lots of concepts together in one place: inclusivity, leadership and public engagement. This was the perfect combination for me and it came at just the right time.

I'd just got funding for Plants with Purpose, which aims to improve and encourage the adoption of nature-based solutions in the urban environment. This was my first time as a budget holder, recruiting staff and students and building a research group, for a programme where public engagement was crucial. The course gave me the space to reflect on all these responsibilities in a new light. It helped me to see how I could make changes and put ideas into practice in the way I engage and the way I lead.

One change I've made is to rename my area of research as 'developing nature and community-based solutions to urban challenges' – to show the focus on people as well as nature – and that's been accepted without issue.

Another change is the variety of engagement that we're now well prepared for, thanks to the materials we've developed as part of our stakeholder engagement plan: we're able to do TV, radio, offer tours, host school groups and run events. And all at a much earlier stage of the research than would otherwise have been the case.

I found the training inspiring and invigorating. I looked forward to each session and the discussions were always vibrant and interesting – I was never bored!

Dr Bana Shriky is a post-doctoral researcher at the University of Bradford, working in the field of process engineering.

I was attracted to the training as a means of developing my leadership potential, to strengthen my applications for funding and fellowships. I've had informal leadership roles in the past – mentoring students or leading work teams – but never any formal training.

The inclusivity aspect of the training was particularly important to me. I'm passionate about building an inclusive research environment and culture. I also want to engage with external stakeholders in an inclusive way. I'm already thinking about how to get involved with initiatives at the University to support an inclusive research culture – particularly as we approach the next REF.

I found the training excellent. The delivery of the sessions was great and the team's energy and passion for the subject really came across, even though we weren't in the same room.

My mentor was fantastic. I used my time with them to reflect on what I'd learned during the training sessions. She also helped to build my confidence and deal with my 'impostor syndrome', which is a common issue in academia, particularly for women and those from ethnic minorities.

It was productive to have people from different disciplines involved in the group as it led to very insightful discussions in the breakout sessions. As an engineer, I was a bit of an outlier for NERC training, but my field is very multidisciplinary, crossing over with the natural sciences, and I was really pleased to be included.

Simply being on the course opened my eyes to new perspectives and provided learning opportunities. There was one instance where we had to move a discussion on when someone became very upset by the topic. That was the first time I've been in that situation in academia, where often things are just brushed under the carpet. We later came back as a group to look at what had happened and how such issues are best handled. It helped me to see how important it is to understand where people are coming from and respect boundaries.

The course has helped me in many ways.

I've adapted my funding applications based on the training. In my latest application, I've included a patient engagement group alongside my industry advisory panel. It's critical to get the views of patients when it comes to new medical formulations. Otherwise, the risk is that patients find something difficult to use – and the result is they don't take the medicine. The course also helped me be mindful of the language we use when trying to engage with communities where there may not be a lot of trust around research. And how important it is to build that trust to enable constructive engagement.

Although I've not yet been successful in my funding applications, the training has also helped me deal better with rejection. One discussion during the training which really resonated with me was how it can take some researchers, such as those from LGBT or ethnic minorities, longer to reapply for funding following an unsuccessful application, because they may not have the same support systems around them. I try to ensure I'm not held back in this way.

The training has had a positive impact on all my interactions with my colleagues and my students. I'm now able to critically assess how people around me conduct themselves as

leaders, whether they choose a more managerial style or act as mentors, supporting their team. I know that, when I have the opportunity to take on a leadership role, my choice will be the latter.