

SPOTLIGHT ON...

PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT WITH RESEARCH

The Public Engagement with Research unit (known to many as PERu) and Public Policy|Southampton have joined Research and Innovation Services (RIS).

This brings the teams together under the RIS umbrella, enabling better planning and results when it comes to boosting the impact of our research.

Here, we put the spotlight on PERu to find out how they can support your research. For more about Public Policy|Southampton refer back to our Winter 2019 edition.

Public Engagement with Research Development Fund

PERu's annual funding call – opening in July – supports researchers to develop and run research engagement activities with the potential for maximising two-way interaction with a targeted audience. That could be trialling an innovative approach, or adapting an existing method to a new setting or context.

All proposals should aim to capture the learning and development of participating researchers, as well as the impact on those they are engaging with. Importantly, once projects have run, teams are able to share their work and experiences with the University community at PERu's annual Showcase. The projects are also featured in a bank of case studies which everyone can access online.

The next Development Funding Call will open in July 2020, for projects to run from November 2020 to July 2021. More detail about the fund are at southampton.ac.uk/per/support/funding.page.

The Public Engagement with Research unit is a team that, as a researcher, you probably want to know. They work with all disciplines and are extremely well connected across the University – in fact, we think the Exams Office might be one of the very few teams across the entire University that PERu doesn't connect with.

Explaining the crux of public engagement, Steve Dorney, Director of PERu, said: “We are interested in dialogue between researchers and the public, in particular what comes back to the researcher from the public interaction. The most important aspect of good public engagement is to maximise mutual benefit.”



He added: “Almost all research funders have an expectation that if you are applying for their funding you will do some form of public engagement, so we are encouraging people to think about public engagement as something you don't just tack onto the end of your research. The most engaged researchers are those who are thinking about collaboration and engagement right from the start.”

The words ‘public engagement’ inevitably conjure up images of public speaking or of organising and taking part in big public events, but there are actually many different ways of engaging – as diverse as the people and groups that researchers may want to engage with.





“Public engagement, at one end, can be an opportunity for natural extroverts,” said Steve. “But at the other end there are countless examples of excellent public engagement from behind a desk or computer screen with no face-to-face aspect.”

The most important consideration is to identify your purpose(s) for engaging, as this will define how you should engage and who with. PERu supports researchers in coming up with the most effective engagement for their own research context and objectives.

“We do have some platforms already there and people can take part if they wish, such as the annual Human Worlds Festival, the Southampton Science and Engineering Festival, and our Public Engagement community hubs,” elaborated Steve.

The Public Engagement Hubs galvanise around themes, currently Health and Wellbeing, Nature and Biodiversity, and Future Cities. They enable connection and interaction between members of the University and the wider community around a common interest. Through the hubs, new partnerships, ideas, activities and projects are generated.

Human Worlds Festival

The University’s humanities festival, Human Worlds, takes place each November at venues in the city’s Cultural Quarter. It’s an ideal engagement opportunity for researchers working in the humanities and increasingly extending to a broad range of disciplines and interdisciplinary research.

Human Worlds 2020 will, as usual, coincide with the Arts and Humanities Research

Council’s Being Human Festival (12–22 November) but exact dates have not yet been set. For a flavour of last year’s events, and for this year’s details in due course, go to southampton.ac.uk/per/university/humsfest.page.

It’s not too early to start planning an event or activity. Silvia Lanati, PERu’s Operations Lead, will be happy to discuss ideas via festival@soton.ac.uk.

Alongside practical support and guidance, PERu contributes at a strategic level via membership of the Engaged University Steering Group, chaired by Professor Mark Spearing, Vice President (Research and Enterprise). The group oversees and connects the various strands of engagement activity within the University, providing strategic direction and connectivity to senior leadership.

PERu will also be leading on key aspects of the first Knowledge Exchange Framework return later this year.

1 The Bringing Research to Life roadshow at the New Forest Show 2019

2 The Southampton Science and Engineering Festival (SOTSEF) 2019

3 Chinese Calligraphy for Wellbeing at Human Worlds 2019