

Evaluation of The University of Manchester Public Engagement Champions Network (PECN)

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The feedback, interviews and this report were assimilated, conducted and collated by Dr Ceri Peacock, Public Engagement Professional.

Executive Summary

This written report summarises the evaluation of the Public Engagement Champions Network (PECN), run by The University of Manchester between 2018 and 2020.

The Public Engagement Champions Network is an initiative established to empower and develop staff and research students to help shape and deliver the University's vision and strategic priorities for public engagement. The data used to compile this report includes the feedback gathered from both cohort 1 and 2 during the last session of each programme, action plans linked to Public Engagement Strategy completed during the course of the programme, individual Champions' stories, collated via online interview (3 people) or questionnaire (1 person) in February 2023 (see Appendix I). An interview was also conducted with the Public Engagement Manager for The University of Manchester.

Key messages:

- Participants felt supported, inspired and connected to people and ideas outside of their own public engagement work.
- The modular format, with sessions having a different focus, worked well. The recommended format for future cohorts is to run 6x sessions across a calendar year, a mix of in-person and online.
- Peer-peer shared practice and learning was a valuable part of the PECN.
- The optional extras of funding and coaching were both well received however the coaching model may need to be adapted to cater for a larger take-up for future cohorts.
- The recommended numbers of participants per cohort are 10-24 in line with other University cohort-based training initiatives.
- The University should further consider the resourcing requirements to support the administration and delivery of PECN.

Overall retention across the two cohorts was 82%. In terms of legacy, of the four participants interviewed as a follow-up evaluation in February 2023, all four are very active in public engagement, and two of the four have jobs in public engagement roles where previously they didn't. The Public Engagement Manager is still in touch with many of the Champions and meets regularly with four individuals to share learning and ideas. The Academic Lead for Public Engagement cited that:

I learnt from the PE Champions and found their stories hugely inspiring. I feel we now have a community that we can work with. I know about things in the University I may not have

been aware of and can share those stories too. I also felt I too had to keep enhancing my practice so have felt compelled to do more training myself and take on new challenges, including taking part in The Story Collider.

The report shows unequivocally the value of the PECN to the participants, to those already working in public engagement roles across The University of Manchester and in supporting future public engagement leaders.

What is the Public Engagement Champions Network?

The Public Engagement Champions Network is an initiative established to empower and develop staff (academic and professional services) and research students to help shape and deliver the University's vision and strategic priorities for public engagement (see Appendix 2).

It is made up of people who are passionate about their own engagement and committed to promoting, facilitating and fostering the high-quality public engagement practice of others within their local areas. The champions represent the diversity across the academic disciplines and professional services within the University of Manchester.

The PECN was established to help build a deeper community of practice at The University of Manchester. There were people working hard with public engagement and doing some excellent work, but this was not always recognised, celebrated or particularly strategic.

There were lots of things that may account for this - perhaps because they were not considering how their work aligned to university goals or to their own research, teaching or personal practice. For some people, they lacked networks and allies to maximise reach and impact. We wanted to support, mentor and coach people from diverse backgrounds at any level in the University to come together, enhance their public engagement skills, consider strategy and where their work could fit in the bigger picture.

Professor Sheena Cruickshank, Academic Lead for Public Engagement with Research.

Cohort numbers and dates

The Public Engagement Champions Network was established in September 2018, and the first cohort attended three in-person sessions (December 2018, April 2019, September 2019). The second cohort were recruited in September 2019 and attended two in-person sessions (January and March 2020) and four online sessions (May, July, September, November 2020) following UK Government guidance at the time to reduce the spread of COVID-19.

The first cohort received 27 applications, of which 10 places were awarded. 9 of the champions completed the programme.

The second cohort received 23 applications, of which 13 places were awarded. 10 of the champions completed the programme. Reasons for not completing the programme include change of job, maternity leave and end of contract.

Designing the Public Engagement Champions Network programme

The overarching aims of the PECN was to connect people to something bigger than their own public engagement work and the University's strategy, to support individuals to develop as a leader in their own area and to contribute to and shape the delivery of the University's public engagement framework.

"The PE Champions network gave me an identity as a Public Engagement Practitioner. I used it on all my CVs, biographies online and it validated all the work I had been doing. I realised that public engagement was a field I could work in."

The network was established as part of the University's Action Plan following NCCPE's Gold Watermark recognition in 2018. The design of the PECN programme was carefully considered and drew on the collective skills and experiences of those leading public engagement at the time. Academic Lead for Public Engagement with Research, Professor Sheena Cruickshank, drew on her own experience as an [AAAS Leshner Fellow](#). Social Responsibility Manager, Suzanne Spicer, brought a wealth of experience in cultural, social and community engagement to the discussion, and Public Engagement Manager, Dee-Ann Johnson drew on her learning and development and executive coaching background. The experiences of researchers and public engagement professionals who had attended similar training and support schemes, including [NCCPE's Engage Academy](#), were also included in the design of the champions network programme. It is worth emphasising that the PECN was specifically aimed at individuals who were future leaders or aspiring to leadership roles. The programme reflected that, and included various methodologies to support learning including action planning, peer-peer coaching, evaluation techniques and use of the [NCCPE's EDGE tool](#) (see Appendix 3 for themes of workshops).

"Certain techniques and methodologies that I learned during the PE Champions Scheme I use in my job now - logic grids, action planning, EDGE tool and evaluation methodologies."

When designing the programme, careful consideration went into the name of the initiative and whether participants thought the name reflected its purpose. Overall, people thought it did, but that perhaps the name wasn't particularly distinctive from other University champions schemes. Participants also commented that there can be a misconception that public engagement is linked to research only and commented as such. One suggestion was to add a subtitle to include what the PECN offered (e.g. coaching, networking, strategy development) to aid understanding and clarity. People felt having an official title helped with recognition and credibility.

"At the time, I was working across lots of different projects and disciplines, and I was exploring public engagement without thinking that it'd be where I ended up. At the time, I had no formal role of PE at the University, so it was a way to pull the ends together, connect the dots and call myself a Public Engagement Champion."

The first cohort ran from December 2018 to September 2019, taking in the academic year, and consisted of three half-day workshops. This format was evaluated and, following feedback from participants, the format was changed to run from January 2020 (based on the calendar year) as six quarter-day workshops. The reasons for this were that academics with teaching commitments found January to be extremely busy, and difficult therefore to commit much time to public

engagement. Additionally, with teaching load reduced over summer, people opted to do a lot of their public engagement activity from June until September and wanted the PE Champions programme to reflect that. The shorter but more frequent workshops allowed people to connect to fellow champions more often, maintaining both momentum and a sense of community.

The caveat here is that, after two in-person workshops in January 2020 and March 2020, the remaining four sessions moved online following UK Government guidance at the time to reduce the spread of COVID-19. It is therefore not possible to compare the first and second cohort format directly. However, in the evaluation carried out at the end of each cohort, participants were asked what they thought worked well about the programme. People cited sharing their practice and challenges, being connected with others across the university who they wouldn't otherwise have worked with as well as being involved in the strategic aspect as highlights of the programme.

"The PE Champions scheme helped me to take a step back and see the bigger picture of PE but also to think more long term in the context of my own practice."

"It was really great to learn from everyone! Lots of inspiring and creative ideas."

When asked for three words to describe their experience of the PECN, participants responded with:

- (Cohort 1) Horizon-expanding, motivating, interesting, thought-provoking, enjoyable, grounding, affirming, encouraging, stretching, energising, supportive, recognised, collaborative, insightful, space, new, new way to describe myself, new interactions.
- (Cohort 2) Support, reflection, inspiration, foundational, informative, challenging, eye-opening, resourceful and enjoyable.

The collective experiences of the participants reflect the aims of the PECN: to empower and develop participants' in their public engagement work and to connect them to the University's strategy and others working across public engagement at The University of Manchester.

What worked well?

At the end of the programme, the participants were asked what they thought worked well. The most common responses reflected how useful people found the diversity of the group, sharing ideas and being connected with others across the University with whom they wouldn't usually work. One person said it helped them *"get out of my bubble"*, whilst another commented they had broken *"out of my silo and across the faculty"*. When designing the format of the PECN, academics, early career researchers and professional services staff across all faculties were included. This made the most of the diversity across The University of Manchester and enabled participants to meet people outside of their usual networks.

Another highlight of the programme was that participants valued working alongside their cohort and the facilitators on the public engagement strategy:

"Sharing stories and activities with other people who were doing public engagement was really useful. I also valued the insight into the development of the University's Social Responsibility strategy, the thought process behind it and how public engagement fitted in. I had a much better understanding of what the University valued in terms of public

engagement, and in turn I really started to consider what I value. I found that session very useful."

"For me, people sharing their stories provided a discussion point and a way to connect. It was great to hear what other people were doing and have the chance to share my own story. At the time, my role was very isolated within the faculty, so the PE Champions scheme provided a network for discussion. The other thing that really stuck with me was when we reviewed the draft [public engagement] strategy. It was great to see how this aligned to the bigger picture of what the University valued, and the fact that we all had a chance to express our opinions made me feel really valued. I felt empowered that my voice was part of it."

Participants were also asked if anything had changed for them in terms of their own public engagement practice. They commented that they now thought more strategically and that the programme had given them the confidence to do less but focus on outputs with more impact.

"I have definitely changed the way I work in terms of public engagement. I think about the potential benefits to both the audience and those delivering the activity, as well as the value and the impact of what we do. It made me reconsider why I was doing a lot of the activities, and question whether we really needed to support things that were already well supported."

"Since being part of the PE Champions scheme, I feel that I use my expertise differently. Beforehand, I was very much someone who delivered public engagement activities. I am now involved in the development of strategies for both environmental sustainability and social responsibility within the Faculty, and aligning to that of the University. My role as a practitioner has changed - I do much less delivery and am much more a driver of change."

It is also noteworthy that the champions network sessions allowed people the time they needed away from their main role at the University to focus on their public engagement work.

"Meeting in the group gave me time to reflect on my own practice. It reminded me that doing PE fulfils my core values and is one of the reasons that I work in Higher Education. But the sessions also allowed me time to reflect on a strategic action plan so that my activity can be focused and sustainable."

What could be improved?

As discussed previously, the format of the programme was changed from 3 x sessions across an academic year to 6 x sessions across a calendar year following feedback from cohort one.

There were a number of other suggestions for additions and improvements to the programme and acknowledging the diversity of the people within each cohort, some of these suggestions are contradictory: Some participants wanted longer sessions, others wanted shorter sessions. Some valued the change to online format (partway through cohort 2) as it made it more accessible, others felt that the connections they made in-person were not possible online and that the sessions were weaker for that. Some people would have liked follow-up opportunities, including a network to keep in touch (e.g. Slack or similar) and coffee mornings, but others felt they had enough to do already without the additional commitment.

Part of the offer to become a Public Engagement Champion was a small amount of funding for each participant to use as they saw fit. The uptake of this offer was not taken up by all participants, with reasons including that they “struggle to spend the money (they) already have” and that it was “not clear how to redeem (the funds)”. Others saw it as more administration than they already struggled to do. Of those who did use the funds on offer, it was spent on travel and accommodation for a science communication masterclass, as a registration fee for a workshop and to buy some resources for public engagement activities.

Most participants agreed that more external speakers would be a welcome addition to the programme, a sentiment that was shared by the Public Engagement Manager when reflecting on what could be changed for future cohorts. When possible, there were several opportunities offered specifically to the Public Engagement Champions to take part in private network sessions following external speakers’ workshops, including one linked to International Women’s Day and a workshop on Equality, Diversity and Inclusion.

Part of the programme also offered coaching as an optional support and development offering. Coaching provided an opportunity for champions to focus on their action plans, but this was not a prescriptive requirement and coaching was completely confidential and at the topics discussed were at the discretion of the participant and the coach. Those who took up this offer found it extremely useful.

“Sessions provided a chance to focus on PE Champions role away from everyday work.”

“Fantastic opportunity - never had the chance to do this before and I really didn’t know what it meant. Coach was fantastic in getting me to think through my work and aspirations. Gave me great confidence in developing my practice and my role.”

“One on one support was completely tailored to my needs. Really helpful and supportive.”

“The coaching I found to be particularly helpful...”

Challenges

From first inception, to designing the workshops and then running the PECN with two cohorts, it is a significant time commitment for the Public Engagement Manager in particular. For each cohort, there was a significant amount of administration associated with organising each session, including arranging topics, resources and other speakers. Additionally, the Public Engagement Manager either co-facilitated or supported others facilitating each session.

There was an extra offering of coaching for each participant. This was specifically framed as an optional CPD opportunity. Less than a third each cohort took up the coaching offer. For those who decided to take up some coaching, it was suggested that the coaches met with the PE Champions for 3 x 60-minute sessions over the course of the PECN programme. For those who took up the coaching offer, all found it beneficial. However, there is also a significant time commitment in organising this element of the PECN, most of which lands with the Public Engagement Manager.

In terms of numbers of participants for each cohort, the Public Engagement Manager made the point that it is always worth considering what is manageable. Between 10 and 24 individuals is a

feasible number, allowing for some drop-out, and to sufficient diversity and interaction for peer-peer learning – this is also in line with other University cohort based training opportunities. Too many individuals can make a scheme like this financially or logistically untenable, particularly when offering one-to-one coaching for example.

It would be prudent not to add a note regarding the logistical challenges presented during the 2020 lockdowns and the impact this had on the Public Engagement Champions Scheme.

Moving from face-to-face workshops to online changed the nature of the sessions and how people interacted with the facilitators and each other. Additionally, during the lockdowns, people had different personal responsibilities to address, including illnesses, change in job situations and caring responsibilities. During this time, all face-to-face public engagement activity stopped, as people moved to an online format and moving all teaching to online deliver became an institutional priority for many. It has taken a long time for momentum to build again, with one PE Champion commenting, “there was a definite lull in activity during the pandemic, but we are back!”

The Public Engagement Manager also noted the changing landscape of public engagement both across The University of Manchester but also across the UK more widely. With a new emphasis on place-based and civic engagement, and with public engagement being one piece of a much broader knowledge exchange agenda, perhaps it is also time to broaden the definition of ‘public engagement’ and support for practitioners to reflect this wider agenda.

Recommendations

Taking together the feedback from both cohorts, the reflective interviews with four champions (carried out in February 2023), and the discussion with the Public Engagement Manager, there are several recommendations for The University of Manchester to take forward.

In terms of format, the change from 3 x sessions across an academic year to 6x sessions across a calendar year proved successful and would be recommended as the format for any similar future schemes. Noteworthy is the change in format from face-to-face to online. This was due to the UK government restrictions at the time. The Public Engagement Manager highlighted that, following the restrictions being lifted, the University is now very much an organisation that supports the hybrid working model, with staff working some days from home each week. It is recommended that any future training and support schemes and programmes should reflect the hybrid model, with some face-to-face and some online sessions. One PE Champion commented specifically:

“I would very much advocate for at least some in-person sessions, particularly as a kick-off to a series of workshops. Then moving to a mixed model (some in person, some online) to get maximum engagement. Always easier to talk to someone online if you have already met face-to-face. Plus, you cannot replace those impromptu chats over coffee / lunch that really help build connections and community.”

The modular format, with different sessions having a different focus, largely worked well. With participants at different stages of their public engagement journeys, different sessions resonated better with certain individuals, but the variety meant there was something for everyone. Crucially, the focus on selecting participants who were aspiring leaders in public engagement meant that the peer-peer learning and sharing was seen as very useful.

“The diversity of the group meant there was lots to learn from others, which I found really helpful. The sessions were broken down into manageable parts, so things like developing a strategy became much less intimidating and provided useful frameworks on which we could build. I felt that it was really valuable to be surrounded by people who boost each other up, and it was great to get to know who’s who in public engagement across an institution as large as The University of Manchester.”

The significant time commitment of the Public Engagement Manager is a consideration when running the PECN again for future cohorts. Whilst there will be the necessary administration to attend to, the PECN programme, format, workshops and content are already established and therefore the workload and time commitment is reduced for future cohorts. By working with other Public Engagement Professionals across The University of Manchester and beyond, Cultural Institutions, PECN Alumni and others, the facilitation and delivery of the workshops could be shared and therefore help to reduce the workload for one individual.

The optional extras, including funding and coaching, were largely well-received, though notably participants were glad that it was optional as they didn’t feel forced to use something they didn’t feel like they needed. The University of Manchester’s Coaching Network and the Faculty Researcher Developers helped to support the coaching offering, something that would be recommended for any future cohorts to make the coaching aspect of the PECN more feasible. Notably, most participants in each cohort of the PECN said they would be happy to support future cohorts in some capacity (e.g. mentoring), but there has not been chance to realise this opportunity yet. Another possibility is to move from individual one-to-one coaching to building Action Learning Sets into the offer. This model is used in leadership and management programmes run by Learning and Organisational Development at The University of Manchester and as part of the NCCPE’s Engage Academy.

In conclusion, the provision of a Public Engagement Champions Network proved invaluable to participants, supporting individuals, empowering them in their own practice, helping them work more strategically and providing the opportunity to connect to others across the University.

“If this [public engagement] is an important goal for your Institution, you need Champions at the heart to make it work. Successful PE is driven by motivated creative people, who motivate others to join them. You need a community to gain momentum and demonstrate benefit.”

Appendix I

Public Engagement Champion Stories

Many thanks for agreeing to be part of this evaluation conversation.

The aim here is to try and capture some personal stories of those who have been part of the PE Champions Scheme in Manchester between 2018 and 2020.

Easy one to start with:

What year were you part of the PE Champions scheme? 2018/19 or 2020.

It's been a while. The world has changed immeasurably.

Are you still active in public engagement?

If yes, in what way? Is it part of your 'job', or do you do it in addition to your 'job'?

In what way, if any, has your PE work changed since you attended the PE Champions Scheme? (Note: by no means do I wish to imply or assume that this is related to the PE Champions scheme, given the turbulence of the past few years. I just want to gauge if your work has changed in the past 3 years or so, and perhaps if you can identify how and why?)

What, if anything, stands out when you reflect back on the PE Champions Scheme?

Is there anything you heard / saw / learned that you have carried with you? (Perhaps a technique, a mindset, a new perspective...)

Are you in touch with any other PE Champions still?

Having experienced the PE Champions Scheme first hand, what recommendations would you have for other institutions / organisations looking to run something similar?

Many thanks for your time and wisdom.

Appendix 2

Extract: UoM Public Engagement Strategy 2017 – 2020

- Priority 1: Achieving high quality: To continually improve the quality of our public engagement activities.
- Priority 2: Creating a more supportive environment: To enhance and develop existing structures, resources and training to support staff and students to engage the public in their research and work.
- Priority 3: Improving co-ordination: To improve how public engagement is co-ordinated across the University to maximise opportunities and effectiveness, communication, create new research and teaching opportunities and raise our profile.
- Priority 4: Diversifying audiences: To work to understand audience needs and diversify the range of public audiences we engage with locally, nationally and internationally to reflect those groups identified as a priority by the University.
- Priority 5: Evidencing impact: To ensure we build an evidence base of how our public engagement is making a difference and having an impact.

Appendix 3

Indicative Themes for the PECN Sessions

Session 1:

- Orientation and networking
- Our public engagement journeys
- What does public engagement at UoM mean: strategy; leadership; practice
- You and your public engagement practice - introducing EDGE Tool, SWOT analysis
- Exploring Continuous Professional Development (CPD) needs
- Reflection and action planning

Session 2:

- Exploring UoM public engagement strategic priorities and your practice
- Engaging Insights – extend networks across UoM and beyond, gain new perspective, and share practice beyond your disciplines
- Reflection and action planning

Session 3 - 5

- Champions shared practice updates
- Engaging Insights – meeting with public engagement leaders and practitioners including: Meeting with public engagement leaders and practitioners including UoM President and Vice Chancellor; VP for Social Responsibility; Director of Social Responsibility; Cancer Research UK; Manchester Museum; Creative Manchester, Wellcome Trust Centre for Cell Matrix Research, Faculty Social Responsibility Managers, Great Science Share; Public Engagement Champions from cohort 1 sharing practice with cohort 2.
- Reflection and action planning

Session 6:

- Champions shared practice updates
- Review of action plans – what has changed in your practice and next steps
- Review of PE Champions Network