

Knowledge Exchange Programme

**Science Communication
and Public Engagement in
the UK and the
Netherlands**

21 March 2023

Introduction

On 21 March 2023, over 25 leading science communicators from the Netherlands convened in the Residence of the British Ambassador in The Hague. The participants were welcomed into the ornately decorated drawing room, with carved wooden bannisters and venerable paintings. The meeting kicked off with an informal networking lunch to allow the participants to get to know each other before starting the session. The participants were science communicators from organisations and universities across the Netherlands and the UK. The British Council and the British Embassy organised this meeting to spark conversation between science communicators to enable knowledge transfers between practitioners in both countries. The meeting had a particular focus on how to create equitable collaboration with communities. This report is a summary of the discussion between the participants and highlights some of the best practice examples from institutes in the UK and the Netherlands as well as some of the common challenges and possible solutions.

Keynote speakers

Dr Deborah McNeill, Director, Glasgow Science Festival

Meta Knol, Director, Leiden European City of Science 2022

Moderator

Cassandra Hugill, Head of Public Engagement and Equity, Diversity and Inclusion, UCL

Report writer

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Keynote Speeches

Participants were welcomed to the Residence during a short opening address by Lucy Ferguson, Deputy Ambassador at the British Embassy. Cassandra Hugill then introduced the speakers, practitioners who have been working on public engagement in science in the UK and the Netherlands gave keynote speeches to the participants about their work.

Deborah McNeill, Director of Glasgow Science Festival

The first speaker was Deborah McNeill, the Director of the Glasgow Science Festival (GSF). She talked about how important it is to engage underserved communities in science and her experience on the ground in Glasgow, organising the GSF. She elucidated her interest in using public engagement in science as a method of tackling societal inequalities. The method by which she achieved success with the GSF, with a limited budget, was extraordinary. Her main focus was to reduce the barriers to engagement for those attending, and to involve members of the hyperlocal communities in the organisation and execution of the festival. She stressed the importance of building lasting partnerships and connecting stakeholders in the process. Although the GSF is only for 11 days in the summer, she expressed the importance of conducting the festival consistently, year after year and having continued impacts on the communities during the rest of the year. McNeill shared examples of how she worked with local communities in various parts of Glasgow on issues that are of relevance to the communities. These local initiatives were held in familiar environments and organised with local people. This approach enabled her to build relationships with different communities on Glasgow throughout the year all linked to the annual science festival. Thus, engaging the public in a lasting way, instilling a love for science in generations of children and increasing trust in the scientific process for the wider community.

Meta Knol, Director of Leiden European City

The second speaker, Meta Knol, Director of Leiden European city of science for 2022, spoke about science communication and public engagement in the Dutch context. She presented her efforts of public engagement in European, national and hyper local contexts. Knol described the type of effect she wanted to have on communities by beginning with a figure expressing the need for thick engagement with communities to have impactful outcomes. Thick engagement, as Knol explained, is more informed, intense and in-depth. In addition to engaging in a whole year's worth of small-scaled public engagement events in the neighbourhoods of Leiden, Knol discussed other aspects of the European City of Science 2022 programme, such as the EuroScience Open Forum (ESOF), and two science and innovation contests for youth: EUCYS (14-21 yrs), and Eu TalentOn (21-35 yrs). She expressed the importance of initiatives such as these from data collected from surveys and other metrics. Interestingly, the impact of these initiatives went further than their intended goals and had unforeseen community engagement, where citizens were inspired to take it upon themselves to contribute to the movement. Knol included researchers and scientist volunteers from universities in each event, and gave them relative autonomy to organise their own events. The only guidelines she expressed to the scientists were that they could not give lectures and could not host events at the university. This stimulated more interactive sessions that would be more accessible to a larger public.

Discussion

After the keynote presentations by Meta Knol and Dr Deborah McNeill, the group was divided into 5 subgroups and asked to discuss a topic within the framework of science communication. Each topic contributed to different aspects of public engagement, and the participants could share their own experience with it, allowing for knowledge transfer between stakeholders. Many of the groups were mixed with those who work within the field in the Netherlands and those that work in the UK. This allowed for an exchange of practical experience, and set up a platform to learn from each other, while still discussing their shared or respective challenges. Once these discussions took place, each group shared what they talked about in the plenary session.

Centre for Science Communication and Public Engagement in the Netherlands

Many of the Dutch participants brought up the issue that a national centre for science communication in the Netherlands currently does not exist. This issue permeated most topics of discussion and was found in comparison to the UK which has such a centre. The establishment of a national centre for science communication in the Netherlands will help with setting a standard for science communication and can reduce incongruous efforts in science communication with minimal lateral communication between universities. The conversations and efforts can be concerted and more efficient, allowing a platform to share experiences, successes and failures within the field.

Effective Evaluation Practices

The first topic discussed was Effective Evaluation Practices of public engagement. The group outlined that impact evaluation is about how the practitioner uses public engagement, and what it seeks to achieve. The context that public engagement is conducted within can differ throughout the field, but it is important to evaluate quality over quantity. It is important that public engagement is used as a tool for learning and inspiration, and the participants expressed that this learning works both ways. Researchers and practitioners learn from the public as well as the other way around. They stated that this learning should be embodied, where the public engagement is a manner of connecting communities together, and forming partnerships within society. Finally, as many funding agencies and other institutional bodies ask for evaluation, the participants agreed that much of these evaluations should be conducted by those who request them. This would standardise the evaluation, and be more efficient for the researchers.

Mobilising researchers

The second topic discussed was about how to mobilise researchers to engage with the public and communicate their science to a wider audience. A major theme revealed through the discussion was that of barriers of entry that scientists may face when trying to engage. A large barrier to entry for Dutch scientists would be that of language, as English is the widely used language in scientific fields. Thus, engaging with a Dutch (or other) speaking community may be a challenge. One of the earliest questions raised by the group was about when are scientists actually essential for public engagement, and why not leave public science communication to science communicators. They expressed that scientists involved in these efforts add extra layers to communication with the public. Hence, these scientists would need the adequate training to do so, and this would be a large mobilising factor, as researchers would be more prepared and motivated to engage with the public if they know how to do so most effectively. In

addition, the participants mentioned that to have a greater impact, many of these public engagement efforts should be organised locally, with small groups. This would create a non-threatening environment for both the public and the scientists. It ties into an overarching theme of the discussion of focussing on quality rather than quantity. They expressed that the financial, cost per head analysis model is not always the most important thing in public engagement. However, an important consideration for this method is that each local context can be very different and hence must be engaged with differently. The participants stressed that it should not be a one size fits all approach.

Training and Recognition

The third topic explored was that of training and recognition. A major barrier to good public engagement by scientists is a lack of training. Hence the panellists/participants identified that active training of researchers, where researchers are encouraged to have continued, meaningful engagement with the public is necessary. Additionally, establishing a centre in the Netherlands would increase communication, and set standards between institutes. A centre would also allow for communication between countries to set up projects. Furthermore, setting up conferences and means to allow for proper dialogue is very important and can enable each context to benefit from each other and propel the field forward.

Sustaining Practice

The fourth topic was that of sustaining public engagement practice. It was noted that projects should be funded and should last for at least a year to allow for in depth, sustainable, 'thick' engagement. A major issue is the lack of funding and the resulting need to constantly jump from one project to another. The participants expressed that this 'field needs memory' to go further and have a larger impact with their projects. The need for a central body in the Netherlands was expressed, as many small groups are trying to 'reinvent the wheel', but a collaborative effort will go further. Another issue addressed is that these efforts command institutional support, however many of the funding agencies are focused in specialised areas of science, without looking at the cross connections between them, which is where science communication lies. Additionally, there must be a mindset shift, as science communication and public engagement must not be viewed as an extra to science, but an essential part of it. The participants then asserted that it should be funded by the first money stream in the Netherlands.

Senior Support

The fifth and final topic discussed was that of garnering senior support for public engagement. The group began by asking who the senior support would be from, and this could be from anyone from an immediate supervisor, to a head of a university to government officials. As there can be many different stakeholders involved when approaching those with seniority for support, the language and discourse used to persuade them must differ. For change on the daily basis it is important to address PI's (principal investigators), who supervise PhD students. For more structural change it is necessary to go higher up, to policy advisors, governments and institutional boards. To appeal to these levels of people it is necessary to show statistics and hence important to measure the impact of public engagement. The group asserted that it is essential to devise a means to measure impact that rewards quality over quantity. To garner support from seniors is essential for all the other topics discussed above as it allows for more funding, recognition and training to researchers which has been a core issue for mobilising

support. Finally, it is important to have a national institute or centre that can lobby for science communication and public engagement.

Other Discussion Points

In addition to the points above, the participants engaged in the discussion brought up some other interesting points throughout the allocated time. The first one is that many researchers view public engagement as a method to convey their own research to the public. However the science communicators at the meeting explained public engagement must be about instilling a love for science in the general public through creative interactions, rather than lectures about their individual research. Another interesting point discussed is that many funding agencies provide limited funds for projects and the PI or researcher must decide where to allocate funds throughout, and as a result very little is allocated to science communication and public engagement. The participants discussed that an idea to boost science communication could be that funding agencies allocate a specific fraction of the grant to public engagement.