

Lucian Hudson: Hello. I'm Lucian Hudson, Director of Communications. Welcome to Spotlight. Today I am joined by Richard Holliman, Senior Lecturer in the Faculty of Science. We'll be looking today at public engagement with research. So Richard, you are the Open University's first champion of public engagement with research. Why did the OU choose to introduce this role?

Richard Holliman: I think it's down to two things really, one of which is the wider research landscape which is changing and relevance for research is becoming ever more mainstreamed. So this idea that public engagement could contribute to a wider research impact agenda, which has been with us now in terms of research grant applications for about four years, is crucial. So how do we do this more effectively is the bigger picture and that links into the RCUK Concordat for Engaging the Public with Research, which has been with us now for three or four years. Also, programmes like the RCUK funding for the Beacons for Public Engagement programme. That led to a second tranche of funding which was called the Public Engagement Research Catalysts.

I've been researching in this area for about 15 years and was lucky enough to be asked by the university to coordinate our application to that call for funding - and we were successful. Within that call for funding there was always an expectation that there would be a leadership role and that leadership role we decided to call University Champion for Public Engagement research. So I applied for the post and here I am now leading the project.

Lucian Hudson: What makes for effective public engagement research? Can you just talk me through what specifically is involved?

Richard Holliman: It's a very good question because there are so many different activities that can count under public engagement. So we try and distil it down and say, "Okay, what makes excellent public engagement?" For me it's about process. It's about thinking about how we engage meaningfully with different publics. So the publics we engage with are very diverse at the Open University.

So we all have publics as researchers that we work with reasonably consistently. The issue is, "How do we work with them over time to build partnerships?" If we build partnerships then we build meaningful relationships and through that we can start to gather the evidence which demonstrates real quality in engagement. But it's about that meaningful engagement. It has to be a partnership which means as researchers we have to start to let control of our agendas a little bit, to actually let other people have some say in what we do and to shape the research. When it works really well - it's not easy - but when it works really well you actually generate meaningful research that works for the publics that we work with.

Lucian Hudson: **Can you give any examples of where it works really well and I'm thinking particularly picking up on your terms quality of engagements and meaningful engagements.**

Richard Holliman: Well quality means different things to different people is one thing to say straight away. In terms of, if you think of some of the work that's going on in health and social care, for example, where we would describe that as kind of upstream and downstream engagement. So you say, "Okay, you have a group of researchers who are working in a particular area in health and social care". They have carers who are affected by the research, they have patients who are affected by the research, they have practitioners who will be affected by the research. You have three publics there and those three publics can all be affected by the research in different ways. They may not all like the way that you do the research or indeed all the outcomes in research, but if you do the process meaningfully then people can understand how you come to the conclusions you have.

That kind of engaged process I think is where quality really lies. It has to be in that kind of meaningful partnership.

Lucian Hudson: **You are half way through, or almost half way through, the programme. What do you think you have achieved to date?**

Richard Holliman: The interesting thing is, I mean we've worked, at the moment... We're an action research project. So part of what we're trying to is to introduce interventions, to change practice. And the other thing we're trying to do is introduce research programmes which allow us to assess how those interventions have worked and then to improve them as we go forwards. So it's an iterative cycle. So in terms of some of the interventions we're trying to introduce. We've worked with the National Coordinating Centre for Public Engagement to connect with their Manifesto for Public Engagement. That's all about that kind of top-level strategy. "Why do we do this? Why do we value this agenda?" At the Open University our social justice mission, and our core mission around being open to people, places, methods and ideas, connects really very closely to ideals of public engagement.

So there's a really practical intervention there about saying, "Okay, what's our mission? What do we value about this? How does that influence our strategy going forwards?" We are coming towards the end of the REF. We're moving into a post-REF world and that post-REF world will lead us towards a REF, another REF probably in five or six years. We don't know that for certain, but we can be pretty confident that is going to happen.

So we need to have the strategies in place now to say, "Okay, in four or five years where will our researchers be?" So there's a kind of really practical intervention there.

In terms of some of the research work we've done, we're really interested particularly in the ways we engage in digital spaces. How

do we use digital tools and technologies to inform our work, to engage with different publics? So if you think of the kind of citizen science agenda or as I prefer to call it, open online research, because we do it in other areas other than just science, there's a whole set of research questions you can ask about. How do you develop a population or a public who might want to engage in this way and then how do you sustain them over time? So there's a really practical and a set of research questions around those issues and we can look at existing projects to look at how we've done that in the past to inform our strategies going forwards.

Lucian Hudson: **What do you hope to achieve by March 2015 when you're funding for this runs out?**

Richard Holliman: I think a lot of it's around mainstreaming this agenda across the Open University. So in some cases it's about raising awareness in areas where perhaps it is not seen as essential to what people do. Part of it is about celebrating people who already do this work very well. So there are kind of two aspects to that agenda. So that's around the kind of mainstreaming it and embedding it within our standard academic practices. So there's very practical things about raising awareness of academic workload management around this kind of area to say actually people should be given time to do it effectively. So that's a resource issue.

At the end of that it's about saying, "How would we recognise excellence at an individual level?" So we're connecting in with the promotion criteria and seeing if there are ways that we can extend those promotion criteria to celebrate excellence is a really key part of what we're trying to do as well. So that's around the mainstream agenda and that connects into also the quality agenda I think which is the other aspect of how we move forwards towards the end of the project.

So there are simple things we can do. We are developing a rewards scheme for public engagement with research so we can celebrate excellentness in this kind of area. We've connected in with the Research Career and Development team to develop a learning programme to ensure that we allow people to have support mechanisms and to develop professional development skills in this kind of area. The other one is to say, "Okay, are there small amounts of money we can provide to help develop this kind of agenda?" So we are developing a call for seed funding to allow people to put in applications for smallish amounts of money to develop their own public engagement agenda within Central Academic Units across the OU.

Lucian Hudson: **I think as Director of Communications I can help in two ways at least. One, we have a Strategic Communications Programme that's meant to combine resources in marketing and communications and put those resources on a more strategic footing. I think it will be worth exploring with you what we could do to raise visibility of your work, particularly within the context of Communicating Academic Excellence. I think that's**

down to particular academics and increasing their visibility but also working with the university as a whole to make sure that public engagement is seen to be even more integral to a lot of our academic work.

The second way I think we can help is through Charter Day. Every year we need to take stock as a community what we've achieved and where we're going. So maybe there's an angle there we need to explore.

What do you see as the future of public engagement with research beyond March 2015?

Richard Holliman:

I think it is a slightly harder question to answer obviously because we're looking beyond two years ahead but it is a part of that mainstream agenda. I think research impact is certainly here to stay. So it's about how we start to position the Open University in a really strategic place about how we make sure that this work is embedded and celebrated going forwards. That's partly as I say about ensuring that our strategy is in place in a long-term way, but it's also about ensuring that we have all the support mechanisms to create the conditions where public engagement research can flourish.

I've worked with a lot of researchers across the university and that's been a real joy of saying to specific researchers, "How did this agenda really connect with your research specifically?" I've yet to find a researcher who couldn't connect public engagement with research in a meaningful way with what they do. Other types of research impact can be a bit tricky sometimes. Not everybody can claim commercial impact. Not everybody can claim practice impact but I've yet to find somebody who doesn't have a public in some shape or form that really cares about what they do. And that's the crucial thing. Because once you have a public who cares about your research, everything can flow from there. It's just about creating the partnership there and valuing their expertise and valuing their contributions to your research.

Once you have got that virtuous circle going, it's pretty straightforward to be honest.

Lucian Hudson:

One final question, I'm interested in the relationship between research, public engagement and public policy. Now in 2002 I was a senior civil servant and I was co-architect of a government policy to reach a decision on the implementation of GM, the commercialisation of genetically modified organisms. We did something I thought quite innovative at the time which was to have a public debate on what GM means and its implications; taking into account obviously the health impact of GM, but also the cost benefits of GM. I thought working on that and seeing how the public debate worked, particularly at arm's length on government, albeit funded by government. It was interesting to see how the public themselves could reach certain conclusions about a very contentious issue through being better informed, through research informing debate.

What's your view of the relationship between public engagement, research and public policy?

Richard Holliman:

It's a cracking example. As a researcher I've looked at these kind of issues and GM Nation?, as that exercise was called, is one of the highpoints where people look at how public engagement, public policy are linked very closely. For some researchers this is crucial. This is actually pretty much all the public engagement agenda for them. They really care about how people are involved in decision making.

If you look at the way that that came about, obviously it was partly in response to some concerns with previous issues, and particularly BSE and variant CJD, where there were real concerns about the connection or lack of connection between publics and policy. So GM Nation? if you like is a response to that, and is often seen as I said as a high-point. If you move on from there, you start to look at things like nanotechnology or the Nano sciences. So that's where - one of the criticisms of GM Nation? was maybe it came a little bit too late in the process. Everybody was entrenched, if you like. You were either for or against it, or you weren't that bothered. There wasn't that much ground to cross if you like in the middle. Whereas nanotechnology was seen as an opportunity to say, "Okay, let's try and have that conversation a little bit further upstream".

The way I think that connects in with the public engagement agenda is saying; if you think I came into this initially looking at Dolly the sheep, which is going back a long time now, cloning, but that was seen as there wasn't enough consultation, it was too late in the process and people were saying, "Crikey we've got cloning. It's upon us now. It's too late, we haven't got an opinion. We didn't have an opinion early enough". Whereas if you move that further upstream you can say to people, "Okay, what would you value about this agenda? What are the types of research questions do you think are valuable?"

If you apply that in different contexts, so Alzheimer's research is one of the one's which I've come across in the literature where you say to people, "Okay I'm going to develop a research grant proposal collaboratively. So who are the people who will be affected by my research?" So in Alzheimer's research it tends to be patients, carers? So you can say to them, "What are the types of things which you are really being challenged by now, in your everyday life dealing with somebody who is suffering from Alzheimer's?"

There are some nice examples where research proposals have been developed collaboratively and the researchers have said, "Actually we haven't got this research question exactly right now. What we can do is we can tweak it, we can have a little peer review community, essentially, which is professionals working in that area, or carers working in that area, and you develop a proposal, which right at the start is meaningful to the people who will be affected by the research".

So it's a slightly different example from the policy debate but you understand the principle. It's about saying, "Okay, if we do this far enough upstream, and then we continue that conversation downstream, then we won't be bitten badly by these kind of

problems further downstream". So that's, it's about when the process starts I think is the crucial thing.

Lucian Hudson: **So a virtuous circle? You get the public engagement but you also, if you manage it properly, get better quality policy making.**

Richard Holliman: Yes.

Lucian Hudson: **And that in turn gives better outcomes which we all can enjoy, whether we're experts or just ordinary citizens.**

Richard Holliman: Yes. And you are likely to be affected by the outcomes. Whether you buy stuff on the shelf, which is GM free, or has GM products in it; you care about that. People will care about that. So although you might be indirectly involved in the decision making through the public engagement activity, the results will affect you in a lot of ways. So I think that's why people care about this.

Lucian Hudson: **Richard, fascinating and thanks very much.**

Richard Holliman: Thank you.

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