



In association with the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales, the Scottish Funding Council and the Wellcome Trust

Press release

Embargo: 00:01 Friday 9th November 2007

Bridging the gap between higher education and the public

Members of the public will soon be able to play a more interactive role in the important work of higher education institutions, thanks to a new £9.2M initiative - Beacons for Public Engagement.

Funded by the UK higher education funding councils and Research Councils UK (RCUK), and supported by the Wellcome Trust, it is the biggest initiative ever launched to support public engagement throughout the UK. It brings together a number of different funders with the common goal of achieving a more joined up and embedded approach to public engagement.

A total of six beacons are to be set up in Manchester, Newcastle, Norwich, London, Cardiff and Edinburgh. There will also be a UK-wide co-ordinating centre based in Bristol, which will work across the initiative to promote best practice and provide a single point of contact for the whole higher education sector.

The six Beacons - collaborative centres made up of a number of higher education institutions (HEIs) and partnership organisations - will be at the forefront of efforts to change the culture in universities, assisting staff and students to engage with the public. They involve networks of partners including further education colleges, museums, galleries, business, charities, TV and press, and public bodies.

Science and Innovation minister Ian Pearson said, "Public and societal engagement needs to become an integral part of researchers' university experience. Bringing scientists and the public together is doubly beneficial. It helps ensure scientific work is relevant to society and that the public have trust in science. I want to see a culture shift to recognise the importance of this activity within a research context.

"By increasing active public engagement with scientists and the issues we can help enthuse our young people to be the next generation of scientists, engineers and technologists.

"I very much welcome the Beacons for Public Engagement initiative and the pivotal role they will play in developing the skill-sets of researchers for the future."

Speaking on behalf of Research Councils UK, Professor Alan Thorpe, RCUK Champion for Science in Society and Chief Executive of the Natural Environment Research Council, said, 'Much of the work carried out by higher education institutions has a direct effect on people's lives, so it is important that they are able to access it

and have their say. The Beacons will do this by giving people the chance to get involved directly. They will also help redefine what it means to be a university in the 21st century, making public interactions and social considerations a core part of the role of any member of staff or student in any discipline.'

Professor David Eastwood, Chief Executive of the Higher Education Funding Council for England said, 'Universities have never been more outward looking, or more aware of the wider responsibilities to engage across a range of issues. This initiative is timely as it will reinforce this increasing openness by recognising, rewarding and supporting public engagement across all higher education activities and building capacity to do so in all subjects.'

'Listening to and involving the public is of fundamental importance to the work of higher education and society. By working in partnership with the research councils through RCUK and the other major funders we are providing a more co-ordinated approach enabling the higher education sector to build on the rich diversity of activities already being undertaken. We were delighted by the initial response to this initiative which involved 87 proposals being submitted from higher education institutions.'

Clare Matterson, Director of Medicine, Society and History at The Wellcome Trust, comments, 'The Wellcome Trust is delighted to fund the Beacons. We have long supported public engagement across higher education - and this initiative will provide leadership and culture change within institutions to recognise and support those individuals who already do - or those who want to - engage with public audiences about their work.'

Professor Kathy Sykes, Chair of Sciences and Society at the University of Bristol, on behalf of the National Co-ordinating Centre, said, 'The National Co-ordinating centre will provide leadership and will work with the Beacons, funders, policy-makers, and the whole HE sector to make engaging with the public a key part of what it is to be an academic. Our vision is to break down barriers and open up higher education to the public. HE will be more welcoming and accessible, and people in HE will find their research, teaching and learning enriched by contact with the outside world.'

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Notes to Editors

Each Beacon will receive £1.2M over four years

The National Co-ordinating Centre will receive £2M

The National Co-ordinating Centre is made up of the University of Bristol, University of the West of England and other partners

The National Co-ordinating Centre will build networks across the other Beacons and provide a single point of contact as well as an overview of their activities.

It will also work strategically with key national partners who are also interested in understanding and listening to audiences better and generating knowledge with them.

These organisations, including the BBC, the Museums, Libraries and Archives, and the volunteering organisation v, will help to professionalise how Higher Education engages with the public.

The Beacons are:

- **University of Newcastle / Durham University / Centre for Life**

The Newcastle Beacon's iKnow project joins the Universities and the Centre for Life with the mobile phone network Three, acclaimed artist Antony Gormley, and local community groups, to pioneer a series of conversations informing key research issues such as ageing, the environment and social justice.

iKnow will create an innovative public sphere for dialogues between academics and a range of 'publics' including those who often expect little or no contact with Universities.

- **University of Manchester / Manchester Metropolitan / University of Salford / Museum of Science and Industry / Manchester:Knowledge Capital**

The Manchester Beacon's activities will be shaped and informed by the creativity and dynamism of the people of Manchester and Salford to ensure that all members of the community, particularly residents from the poorest and most excluded neighborhoods, benefit from their work.

They will focus on "reaching out", "listening to" and "learning from" local people. Their programme of activities will be delivered in partnership with a

wide range of local businesses, sports clubs, cultural venues, community groups and media organizations.

- **University of Edinburgh / Heriot-Watt University / Napier University / UHI Millennium Institute and other partners**
Edinburgh Beltane, the Beacon in Scotland, aims to encourage citizen participation and understanding of areas of research relevant to public policy such as health and life sciences, energy and environment.
It will bring together researchers in medicine and the sciences and engineering with those in social sciences, arts and humanities. This will ensure breakthroughs in technology, medicines and treatments, and that new discoveries about big issues such as global warming are described in a human context that relates to health and the environment we live in.
- **University of Cardiff / University of Glamorgan / Amgueddfa Cymru – National Museum Wales / BBC Wales / Techniquist**
The Beacon for Wales will be a collaborative public engagement programme for higher education Institutions in Wales. Their plans include the establishment of a Wales Higher Education Engagement Network (WHEEN) to provide opportunities for HE staff and students to network and share ideas on public engagement ; the appointment of a high-level champion for public engagement, working with senior staff and university management to negotiate any necessary changes in policies and employment practices; the establishment of an awards system recognising engagement excellence in a variety of sectors; and four pilot projects to test approaches to new audiences and new techniques.
- **University College London / Southbank Centre / British Museum and other partners**
UCL's plans include tailored training courses designed to empower staff and students to be part of the ongoing dialogue between researchers and the public, and the use of space on main routes of their campus for public activities, tours and installations.
Their partners, the British Museum, the Southbank Centre, Birkbeck College, Cheltenham Science Festival, Arts Catalyst and City and Islington College - provide a unique grouping of expertise, networks and contacts which give them opportunities for wide engagement with the general public, and also for focused work with small groups, including some of London's most disadvantaged communities.
- **University of East Anglia and other partners**
UEA and partners, as CUE East (Community University Engagement East) will establish a one-stop shop for the public, located in 'The Forum' at the heart of Norwich, alongside the UK's most successful regional library and the BBC's regional offices and studios.
Their overall theme will be sustainable living, with a priority target audience of pupils, teachers and parents.
The twenty two external partners, including the East of England Development Agency, Business in the Community and BBC East will play a vital role in their delivery programme and critical thinking.

Beacons for Public Engagement is a pilot initiative which will be reviewed to determine future public engagement policy.

The recent report on attitude to public engagement is: 'Survey of factors affecting science communication by scientists and engineers', Royal Society, RCUK and Wellcome Trust, June 2006, available at <http://www.royalsoc.ac.uk/page.asp?id=3180>

About Research Councils UK

The seven Research Councils are independent non-departmental public bodies, funded by the Science Budget through the Department of Innovation, Universities and Skills (DIUS). They are incorporated by Royal Charter and together manage a research budget of over £2.8 billion a year.

Research Councils UK (RCUK) is the partnership between the UK's seven Research Councils. Through RCUK, the Research Councils work together to champion the research, training and innovation they support.

The Research Councils UK Science in Society Unit provides a gateway to the science in society activities of the Research Councils, manages cross-council programmes and complements the individual work within each Council.

The seven UK Research Councils are:

- Arts & Humanities Research Council (AHRC);
- Biotechnology & Biological Sciences Research Council (BBSRC);
- Economic & Social Research Council (ESRC);
- Engineering & Physical Sciences Research Council (EPSRC);
- Medical Research Council (MRC);
- Natural Environment Research Council (NERC);
- Science and Technology Facilities Council (STFC).

About HEFCE

The Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) is responsible for distributing around £7.1 billion a year in public funds to universities and colleges, to support high quality education, research and related activities. HEFCE also has a leading role in developing and implementing policy for higher education, based on research and consultation.

About HEFCW

The Higher Education Funding Council for Wales (HEFCW) is an Assembly Government Sponsored Body responsible for administering funds made available by the Welsh Assembly Government in support of:

- education in higher education institutions (HEIs);
- research undertaken by HEIs; and
- higher education courses at further education institutions.

HEFCW is also responsible for accrediting providers of initial teaching training for school teachers and commissioning research to improve the standards of teachers and teacher training.

In addition to its funding responsibilities, HEFCW provides advice to the Welsh Assembly Government on the funding needs, aspirations and concerns of the higher education sector in Wales.

About SFC

The Scottish Further and Higher Education Funding Council (SFC) is a non-departmental public body responsible to – but operating at arm's length from – the Scottish Government. It distributes more than £1.6 billion of public funds annually to colleges and universities on behalf of the Scottish Government for teaching and learning, research and other activities in Scotland's colleges and universities. Established in 2005, the Council provides a strategic overview of tertiary education in Scotland to help secure a more coherent system of high-quality learning, teaching and research.

About the Wellcome Trust

The Wellcome Trust is the most diverse biomedical research charity in the world, spending about £450 million every year both in the UK and internationally to support and promote research that will improve the health of humans and animals. The Trust was established under the will of Sir Henry Wellcome, and is funded from a private endowment, which is managed with long-term stability and growth in mind.