



# Public and Community Engagement with Research and Innovation Strategic Plan 2024-2025

## 1. Introduction

At Imperial, we define public engagement (PE) as **a two-way process involving meaningful dialogue between diverse members of the public and those working in research and innovation**. It is where ideas are exchanged, experiences shared and questions asked, to inform, direct and shape attitudes, understanding and actions. Engagement takes place in a range of ways at all stages of any research or innovation lifecycle: from conception and design to conduct and dissemination.

Public engagement is an essential activity for any academic institution. At Imperial our PE initiatives ensure we enable access to our publicly funded research and respond to the growing significance of public engagement as part of research culture and knowledge exchange activities, and expectations for universities to enhance their civic role. Funders and stakeholders are seeking authentic engagement practices and with harder-to-reach community partners. As such, PE is a core component of our [Strategy for Engaging with Society](#) and a key method through which we make our work accessible, relevant, and responsive to the needs and insights of society. Collectively our activities play a key role in our REF<sup>1</sup> and KEF<sup>2</sup> and UKRI<sup>3</sup> performance measures. See our final page for the range of other benefits of PE, at a societal, institution and individual level.

Many from across the College are involved in this important work. This strategic plan sets out how we intend to support, materialise, and maximise the benefits of high-quality engagement for our research, researchers and innovators and the publics we work with. It includes our shared vision, mission, objectives, principles and priority actions for PE in 2024. It will be helpful to Imperial's research and innovation community; our network of engagement practitioners, and other enablers of staff and student engagement across the College; as well as external stakeholders, such as research and education governing bodies, funders and academic or public partners.

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<sup>1</sup> REF2021: Public Engagement was included in Environment Statements for 10 of 11 Units of Assessment.

<sup>2</sup> KEF 2023: For the Public & Community Engagement narrative Imperial falls again into Quintile 5 (Very High Engagement - the highest quintile), this is above the Cluster V average (Q4) and higher than Oxford (Q3), Cambridge (Q4) and UCL (Q4)

<sup>3</sup> UKRI Audit (April 2020): Imperial received 'Substantial Assurance', the highest rating. This was supported by our PE provision. "*Returns pertaining to public engagement with research (PER), are very positive, with several years of culture change being built on to strengthen the role and profile of PER, which is embedded strategically into the College and well supported with excellent resources and support*".

## 2. The Imperial Context

Imperial is a world-leading research and teaching university with a mission to benefit society through excellence in science, engineering, medicine, and business. Societal engagement is central to this goal, and as such a key theme in our [College Strategy 2020-2025](#) is to “empower society through meaningful engagement and dialogue”.

Societal engagement is part of our wider external engagement activities, such as media, policy, and industry. We collaborate with other Imperial teams involved in external engagement to ensure we maximise potential, share learning, and enhance our impact, enriching not only the research and innovation we produce but the experiences of our students, staff, alumni, publics, partners and stakeholders. Along with schools outreach and widening participation, community engagement and patient involvement, public engagement with research and innovation forms a central pillar in Imperial’s societal engagement work. Professor Maggie Dallman, Associate Provost (Academic Partnerships) and Vice President (International) has been the senior champion for societal engagement at Imperial since 2015.

*“As College lead for societal engagement, it has been truly fantastic to see our students and staff taking great strides to evolve the way we work by starting new conversations, involving diverse voices and seeking fresh ideas. We hope that this strategic plan provides an overview of our public engagement with research and innovation work, as well as the improvements we want to make in the coming years, which can only be successful through collaboration with others across Imperial. Please do get in touch if you would like to get involved or collaborate with us to innovate, experiment and create change in exciting and meaningful ways.”*

Professor Maggie Dallman

### 2.1 Imperial’s Public and Community Engagement Team and Vision

This strategic plan is overseen by Imperial’s Public and Community Engagement Team. Our vision, mission and objectives for PE at Imperial are below, along with the principles we value, both in the engagement opportunities we create and champion and in the support and guidance we provide.

**Public Engagement Vision:** For Imperial and external public communities to connect and collaborate in mutually beneficial ways, tackling shared local to global challenges.

**Public Engagement Mission:** To embed a culture of public engagement across Imperial. At the heart of our work is connecting our internal communities with our external communities in mutually beneficial ways by providing strategic leadership, specialist expertise, capacity building activities for staff and students and public programming for diverse public participants.

**Public Engagement Objectives:**

1. To embed Public Engagement into our institutional culture, and into the research and innovation life cycle across all our disciplines, to enrich our research and teaching, enhance our impact and increase our relevance and benefit to wider society.

2. To enable thoughtful, well-planned engagement initiatives that are rooted in Imperial's research and innovation and seek to generate mutually beneficial experiences and outcomes for a diverse range of public participants, staff and students involved, prioritising people typically underserved and underrepresented in STEM opportunities.

### **Public Engagement Principles:**

1. **We value a wide range of engagement activities, from lighter-touch experiences through to in-depth collaborations;** choosing methods that best meet participants' needs and interests, and that are tailored to the goals and nature of the research or innovation in focus.
2. **We value the unique perspectives that people bring to engagement;** actively involving participants and challenging practices that perpetuate an 'expert' and 'non-expert' relationship. We avoid non-reciprocal interactions which only draw on people's insights to further our work, and instead aim for every participant to have a beneficial experience.
3. **We value an ambitious approach to collaboration and creativity** that actively aims to connect all parts of our staff and student community with each other and with a diverse range of partners and public participants.
4. **We value reflective practice, evaluation and institutional sharing and learning** to build our capacity to deliver better quality public engagement at the College and across our sector.
5. **We value a critical and sensitive consideration of inclusivity, accessibility, and diversity,** to address relevant issues of underrepresentation and champion and facilitate the meaningful inclusion of a more diverse range of voices within research and innovation.

## 2.2 Defining Public Engagement at Imperial

### **What form can public engagement take?**

Public engagement with research and innovation covers a wide range of approaches, activities and outcomes. Terminology varies across disciplines and sectors, including patient involvement, community engagement, engaged research and public participation. All engagement approaches share an open and equitable mindset. Rather than seeking to teach, persuade or direct, we look to share, learn and create together, sparking change within our Imperial community and research, as much as within our public participants.

Activities can be viewed on a spectrum that varies in terms of the degree of participation and exchange between 'academics' and the public audience (Figure 1). Across the spectrum, the role, influence and actions of all participants differ. The nature of activities, expectations and commitments of all involved also varies. All the engagement formats on the spectrum can provide value for those involved. From lighter touch engagements where the aim might be to inspire, raise awareness and/or understanding, to more in-depth partnerships enabling co-creation and participatory research, sharing insights and building trust, confidence and skills.

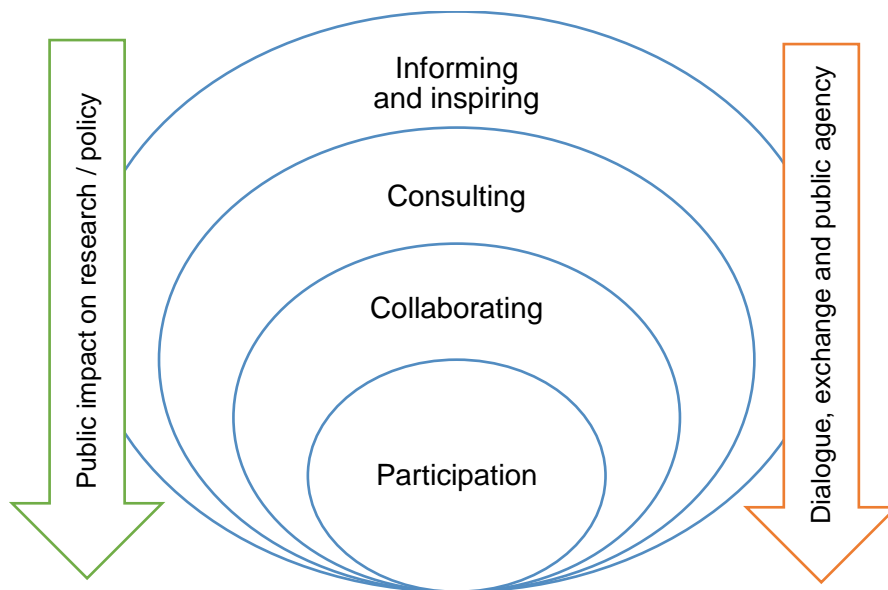


Figure 1. Range of engagement formats. Adapted from the [Wellcome Trust's 'onion' model of public engagement](#).

### Who should we be engaging with?

Imperial's research and innovation spans many disciplines with varying outputs and applications and has the potential to be relevant to a wide range of public participants. Imperial's [Strategy for Engaging with Society](#) and wider [Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Strategy](#) articulates our commitment to proactively work with underserved and underrepresented audiences. In our research and innovation, we need to work harder to identify and collaborate with those lesser heard 'voices' within these broad public groups.

Collectively through our societal engagement activities, we work with:

- People interested in or affected by our research
- Communities living or working near our campuses
- Patients, carers and their networks
- Our students, staff and alumni
- Schools, young people and their networks

Whilst our programmes across the College collectively engage a broad audience, individual activities need to define specific target groups to be most effective. Those delivering public engagement should first identify appropriate target audiences in order that the activities are developed to be of most benefit to public participants and academics.

*"We have made good progress. But despite efforts to engage the public in research there remains a significant gap between those who feel able to make informed choices, to question, challenge and influence research and innovation, and those who feel disconnected, underrepresented and disenfranchised.*

*For this group, science is something that is done to you, not something in which you have a voice.*

*In the next 20 years, we need to make the next step in the evolution of the place of science in society. It's not about science **and** society, it's got to be science **in** society. Science needs to be a normal part of cultural life. [...]*

*An expanded research and innovation concept that includes all the participants, not just the researchers and innovators, can build science capital, connecting a much wider range of people with the system, making it familiar and part of their world.*

*This approach would build the research and innovation system out into society, at the same time as continued development of public engagement to include much more embedded co-creation would bring a wider range of voices into the system.”*

[Professor Dame Ottoline Leyser](#) (UKRI Chief Executive)

## 2.3 Public Engagement Opportunities at Imperial

In order to meet the objectives articulated above, the Public Engagement team coordinate a range of practical events, activities and capacity building opportunities for staff, students and members of the public to participate in public engagement.

**Public participation:** Each year we engage with approximately 60,000 participants through our public programme, including families, young people, adults, and community groups. Interactions span from lighter-touch engagement activities to longer-term, multi-intervention programmes.

**Staff and student participation:** We support anyone at the College to engage with public or community groups, patients or schools audiences. Annually, approximately 1,400 staff and students participate in training, networks and public programme opportunities.

The tables below show our current opportunities for engagement including public programmes and creative projects (Table 1), and support and capacity building initiatives (Table 2), with annual participation figures from 2022-23.

As well as these programmes, much of the work of the Public Engagement team is to embed engagement within research and innovation culture at Imperial. For example:

- Advocating for recognition for public engagement related tasks in promotions criteria and work-load planning, as well as creating communications and news articles to celebrate engagement work.
- Systematic evaluation, monitoring, and reporting of PE across the College to ensure quality and demonstrate progress towards strategic agendas such as REF, KEF, UKRI, HEBCI.
- PE advice and guidance to academics and professional service staff across the College, including for funding proposals, community partnerships, recruitment of PE staff and activity development.

**Table 1) Public Programmes: Activities and Events (c.572 staff and c.233 student participations)**

	Target public audience			
	Families (age 0-12)	Community Groups	Young People (age 13-25)	Adults
<b>Great Exhibition Road Festival</b> Two-day celebration of science and the arts	55,000 public participants, June 2022 750+ academic staff and students involved 130+ participating research teams 35 cultural/community/creative partners			
<b>Imperial Lates</b> Themed evening events with talks, creative workshops and exhibits		200+ academic staff and students discussed their research with 3,500 attendees across four events		
<b>Festival Young Producers</b> Cohort of young people produce elements of Festival over six months			10 Young Producers	
<b>Youth Programmes</b> Building capacity within local youth ecosystem through youth group programming (e.g. Tech Hangouts) and collaborations with youth workers (e.g. Youth Science Champions)		Three Tech Hangout sessions for three youth groups Five youth workers from four community groups through Youth Champions		
<b>Family STEM workshops</b> Creative sessions delivered in school holidays with researchers	c.1,300 workshop participants			
<b>Saturday Science Club</b> Six sessions over 12 weeks for eight local families per round	16 families over two rounds			
<b>STEM Activity Packs</b> Materials and activities inspired by Imperial's research	c.3,000 packs distributed to local households and community partners in in 2022			
<b>Experimental New Approaches</b> Testing ideas and approaches with public and research groups e.g. flash mobs, engineering club, mentoring academics				

**Table 2) Capacity Building: Training and Support (c.460 staff and c.284 student participations)**

	Staff	Students
<b>Engagement Masterclasses</b> Eight termly sessions on core and practical themes, 1.5 to 2.5 hours per session	c.150 attendees	25% attendees are postgraduate students
<b>Engagement Academy</b> Seven-day training, delivered over six months with the Science Communication Unit, accredited by the Institute of Leadership.	15-20 participants	
<b>I-Explore Module</b> Public Engagement module for second-year undergraduates worth 5 ECTS		15-20 students
<b>Impact and Engagement Training</b> Accredited training delivered with the Graduate School, Postdoc and Fellows Development Centre, and Centres for Doctoral Training	c.15 Postdoctoral researchers and fellows	c.150 PhD students
<b>Engagement Day</b> Annual one-day conference with external speakers, workshops and networking	c.130 attendees	
<b>Communications, Networks and Newsletters</b> Societal Engagement Champions meet termly, and Engagement Practitioners meet every two months. Monthly newsletter to share opportunities, information and funding calls.	88 Champions, 51 Practitioners, 900+ newsletter subscribers	
<b>President's Awards</b> Annual college-wide awards to reward and promote excellence in Societal Engagement, with staff, student and partner categories	7 awards plus highly commended	2 student categories
<b>Seed Fund</b> Rolling seed fund, applicants apply for £500 - £2,500 to initiate new activities or approaches to public engagement and participatory research.	7-10 projects	
<b>Engagement Toolkits</b> Over <a href="#">30 guides and case studies</a> that support high-quality engagement with the public		

For a full description of our activities and their impacts please see our Public and Community Engagement Annual Report for 2023.

### 3. Priority Actions and Activities for 2024

The following actions to further strengthen public engagement with research and innovation at Imperial were identified via consultation with several Imperial networks.

1. **Proactively working to ensure our public programmes are even more equitable, diverse, and inclusive.**
  - Increase the diversity of public participants contributing to and benefiting from our programmes by investigating and removing barriers to their participation.
  - Monitoring trends in participation so that we can understand and demonstrate change.
  - Deliver ongoing listening exercises to better understand local agendas and priorities and to inform the public programme, by forming strategic community partnerships, community advisory boards, and youth panels.
  
2. **Enable a more diverse group of staff and students to be involved in public engagement.**
  - Monitoring trends in participation so that we can understand and demonstrate change.
  - Identify and reduce barriers to participation by collaborating with Imperial's diversity champions and networks to help develop and deliver programmes.
  - Embed EDI practices and content in all capacity building programmes, from ensuring the ways that training is delivered is as accessible as possible, to facilitating discussions about inclusivity in STEM within sessions.
  - Enabling staff and student participation in public engagement through existing institutional volunteering policy.
  
3. **Experiment with new user-centred engagement methods and partnerships to develop innovative, creative activities that develop science capital in our local communities.**
  - Collaborate with museums and cultural institutions in South Kensington to access new audiences and share best practice.
  - Identify key community partners local to our campuses with whom to form sustained, strategic partnerships, benefiting from longer-term relationships, opportunities and learning.
  - Partner with and learn from those in the creative sector to develop science engagement that appeals to a more diverse range of publics.
  
4. **Embed public engagement in both strategic-level and activity-level mechanisms within Imperial's key research centres and themes.**
  - Through consultation with our internal networks, identify how PE can support research and innovation goals and ensure PE features appropriately in any fundraising and resource considerations.
  - Establish designated link roles within the PE team to help embed PE in key research theme areas and centres of excellence.
  - Investigate the current landscape for participatory research at Imperial, including areas of good practice, appetite and motivation from public and Imperial communities, and



barriers to participatory approaches, posing recommendations for further enabling this kind of work.

- Launch a co-produced community engaged research seed fund to connect local partners with relevant research teams and projects to tackle shared issues and build skills and knowledge.
- Ensure academic themes and priority areas feature strongly in existing engagement programmes and platforms, for example the Great Exhibition Road Festival, Imperial Lates, Youth and Family Programmes at White City.

**5. Further develop engagement capacity and content within our education offer.**

- Supporting departments to embed PE content and practical opportunities within teaching modules.
- Work strategically to embed PE in student groups and research training programmes such as Centres for Doctoral Training and student societies.
- Seeking new opportunities for student involvement in our public and community programmes.

**6. Further embed public engagement into Imperial's culture by improving our engagement profile internally and externally also helping to strengthen Imperial's brand profile.**

- Further actualise recognition and reward for public engagement by ensuring PE is consistently embedded and adopted across the breadth of recognition avenues by understanding how and where this is being used and identifying areas for improvement.
- Reinstating the all-staff Societal Engagement survey, to explore levels of activity, awareness and attitudes to engagement across Imperial.
- Raising the profile of engagement with research and innovation via inclusion in strategic documents, College communication channels, external PR opportunities, and other public programme marketing and events.
- Sharing our experiences externally to inform practice and feed into regional, national, and international sector and policy developments, for example through conferences, papers and media.

**7. Measure and articulate the impact of Imperial's public engagement work.**

- Communicate the contribution of PE within wider impact agendas and develop key metrics to demonstrate the role of PE within research and innovation success measures, helping to improve practice. Contribute to key reporting such as KEF, HEBCI returns and UKRI funding assurance reporting.
- Support research teams to identify, measure and develop impact from PE in preparation for REF 2029.
- Monitor participation and experience measures to enable reporting on EDI aims such as within the Race Equality Charter.
- Providing reports and evidence to steward current and prospective funders, donors and partners.

**8. Fundraising and evaluation to sustain the delivery and impact of our current high-quality public engagement opportunities (listed in section 2.3 above).**

## 4. What Does Success Look Like: Evaluation and Evidence

To understand the progress made against the aims articulated in this strategy, we will evaluate and monitor our work. This not only enables us to evidence impacts made, but also to better understand the environments within which we operate, and ensure we remain responsive to the changing cultures and agendas at Imperial and beyond.

### Supporting evaluation of public engagement across Imperial

Evaluating the effectiveness of public engagement is as important as measuring the effectiveness of research and innovation. We support staff and students to monitor and assess the efficacy of their engagement work through:

- Our core [engagement masterclass](#), which includes content about creating an evaluation plan and using a range of creative feedback tools.
- Our online [evaluation toolkit](#), which shares tips for creating aims for engagement and ways to measure outcomes for those participating.
- Our [1-to-1 advice sessions](#), where staff and students can discuss their questions about evaluation with one of the PE team.

We use a range of measures to understand our progress in embedding a culture of public engagement at Imperial. Our evaluation is:

- Holistic, considering both the impact on research (and researchers) as well as public participants.
- Varied, using a mix of qualitative and quantitative measures through creative tools which are enjoyable to participate in.
- Long-term, exploring lasting impacts where possible, as well as more immediate outcomes.

Below we list some indicative success measures against our two objectives.

1. To embed Public Engagement into our institutional culture, and into the research and innovation life cycle across all our disciplines, to enrich our research and teaching, enhance our impact and increase our relevance and benefit to wider society.
  - The number and diversity of staff and/or students involved in producing or delivering activities, and impacts on their work/research and attitudes towards engagement.
  - Participating numbers of staff and/or students in skills development, digital communications, and networking opportunities; and whether their needs and expectations were met and positive outcomes achieved.
  - The numbers of engagement activities that are embedded within the research or innovation lifecycle and assessment, and the quality of these activities. For example, research funding proposals that include effective public engagement and/or patient involvement receive positive feedback from funders.
  - Engagement with research activities are included in College submissions to the REF and KEF, UKRI and receive positive feedback from reviewers.
  - Engagement is embedded and valued within departmental strategies, roles and support, and reward and recognition structures.

2. To enable thoughtful, well-planned engagement initiatives that are rooted in Imperial's research and innovation and seek to generate mutually beneficial experiences and outcomes for a diverse range of public participants, staff and students involved, prioritising people typically underserved and underrepresented in STEM opportunities.
  - Whether the intended benefits and outputs to all parties involved in the engagement were achieved. For example, participants experience informative and inspiring interactions, with opportunities to build confidence, understanding and skills or changes in attitudes and behaviours.
  - The establishment of productive partnerships, where all parties benefit from involvement and can contribute in meaningful ways.
  - The number of participants taking part in engagement with research activities, including who they are and the depth to which they participated.

## Contact us to get involved

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Reach the Public and Community Engagement Team: [societal\\_engagement@imperial.ac.uk](mailto:societal_engagement@imperial.ac.uk)

Visit our webpages for more information, resources and opportunities, and sign up to our monthly newsletter: [www.imperial.ac.uk/be-inspired/societal-engagement](http://www.imperial.ac.uk/be-inspired/societal-engagement)

## Appendix: The Value of Public Engagement with Research and Innovation

Public engagement with research and innovation provides a range of benefits for all involved.

### Value to society and the wider sector

- Engaging with the public supports **accountability, democracy and transparency**, building trust in research (including experts and expertise) and enabling the public to have a say in work supported by public funds.
- Public engagement is important for **social justice**. Through enabling a wider range of public participants to be aware of, involved in, contribute to, and ask questions of research, we help create a more equitable society.
- Public engagement inspires and builds **advocacy for research**, creating a pipeline of future researchers, collaborators and funders engaging with research.
- Engagement can help **broaden the diversity of people** interacting with, and working within, research. We know that the more diversity within fields and workplaces, the more positive and effective the outputs.

### Value to Imperial and our research and innovation work

- Engaging with wider society **strengthens our work and enhances the impact** of our research. It enables knowledge exchange with wider stakeholders, closing the gap between research and application, and ensures we remain relevant and responsive to our local and global communities.
- Engaging with society enables institutions to **build connections** with local and global communities, collaborate on shared issues and develop partnerships.
- Engagement enables the exchange of ideas, life experiences and skills between diverse groups, contributing to a **positive institutional and research culture**.
- A considered and appropriate plan for engaging with the public, and demonstrated commitment to do so, can help **raise the profile of institutions, attracting funding, colleagues, students and partners**.

### Value to individuals (staff, students and researchers)

- PE **enhances the quality of research** by involving diverse perspectives and forms of expertise, raising new ideas and questions, and can support recruitment of research participants.
- PE can support **career progression**, including reward and recognition, employability, promotions, and accreditation. It can raise the profile of researchers and/or projects, increasing their visibility with wider external and internal groups, leading to new opportunities.
- Participating in PE develops **transferable skills** such as communication, leadership, team building, creative thinking and understanding different perspectives – all of which are useful for teaching as well as other activities.
- Taking part in PE can be **enjoyable, refreshing and rewarding**. It brings people together in experiencing something new, gaining skills, and generating open dialogue between diverse perspectives on interesting and important issues, enhancing experiences for staff, students and partners.