



## **BIRKBECK RESEARCHERS' ENGAGEMENT DEVELOPMENT**

### **YEAR ONE REPORT**

**Public Engagement with Research**  
December 2018 |

#### **LONDON'S EVENING UNIVERSITY**

Supported by UKRI/RCUK  
Strategic Support to Expedite Embedding of  
Public Engagement with Research (SEE-PER)

---

# CONTENTS

---

**OVERVIEW.....3**

**OUR SUCCESSES.....6**

- Building infrastructure and expertise..... 6
  - Governance ..... 6
  - Increased Capacity ..... 7
- Creating Birkbeck’s PER Awards.....10
- Building Systematic Support of PER ..... 13
  - Engaged Practice Symposium..... 14
  - Pilot Training Programme..... 15

**OUR CHALLENGES.....18**

- Confusion Between Impact, Public Engagement and Communications..... 18
- Fixed-term, Part-time Contracts.....18

**WHAT NEXT?.....20**

**ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....23**

---

## OVERVIEW

In October 2017 Birkbeck, University of London received a £60,000 award from Research Councils UK through their Strategic Support to Expedite Embedding Public Engagement with Research (SEE PER) funding initiative. The College received this award for its Birkbeck Researchers' Engagement Development project (BRED) which aimed to enrich and embed an institutional culture supportive of public engagement with research (PER). This report gives an overview of the project and outlines some of the successes and challenges over the first year.

Birkbeck, University of London, has a unique history and mission, linked to its commitment to public engagement. It was established in 1823 by George Birkbeck, a physician and early pioneer of adult education, who founded the then 'London Mechanics' Institute' at a meeting at the Crown and Anchor tavern on the Strand. The new institution's purpose was not only to provide education for working people through evening classes, but also to involve ordinary people (the public) in making and transforming knowledge.

These founding beliefs still drive the College's mission today. There is a sustained collective commitment throughout the institution to education for adults, regardless of background. This is made possible through its ongoing commitment to evening education (Birkbeck is 'London's evening university'). There is a plethora of PER at Birkbeck, ultimately intended to influence, inform and shape social change in one way or another. A special feature of the College is its myriad formal and informal networks for democratising research knowledge and promoting civic and public debate: for example, the [Birkbeck Institute for the Humanities](#), the [Birkbeck Institute for Social Research](#), the [Pears Institute for the Study of Antisemitism](#), the [Raphael Samuel History Centre](#), the [Peltz Gallery](#) and many other Birkbeck-based networks all run PER programmes.

So, where PER enablers often cite the challenge of persuading researchers to participate, this is rarely the case here. Although there might be some uncertainty amongst colleagues about

---

### BIRKBECK'S VISION FOR PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT WITH RESEARCH

The College's vision for Birkbeck PER is to build on our founding principles of reaching non-traditional learners and providing access to knowledge for all. Birkbeck is a place where we connect, collaborate, challenge received wisdom and build on the expertise of life and work, as well as official, knowledges.

We see our public engagement as sitting within the heart of our values, as a core part of research, enabling us to interact with a wide and diverse range of people for the betterment of our research, our researchers and society.

---

identifying these activities as PER, there is no doubt that the call for universities to enhance PER falls on highly receptive researcher ears at Birkbeck. However, in common with other universities, while we have been engaged in some aspects of public engagement since our inception, we have done so on a voluntary basis, relying on individual commitment and enthusiasm, rather than a strategic approach and systematic support. In order to realise the full potential of our vision for public engagement, the College required a step change to address its key challenge: to build sustained infrastructure for supporting PER, with a secondary focus on reward and recognition.

---

“Birkbeck researchers are some of the most actively engaged researchers I have come across in the sector – this funding really gives the College a chance to support their activities, reward excellence and inspire others to do the same.”

Mary-Clare Hallsworth,  
Public Engagement Manager

---

When the College applied for SEE PER funding we had already taken the first steps towards embedding PER. In summary these included: securing Wellcome Institutional Strategic Support Funding (ISSF) for PER development and activities (2014); appointment of a PER officer in 2015 to oversee embedding support for PER across the College; agreeing our PER strategy (2015); investing additional funds in the expertise and time of its PER officer (now manager) to support the work in research areas within the College not covered by the ISSF (2016); agreeing an overall plan for embedding PER at Birkbeck in March 2017.

Over the last three years Birkbeck’s ISSF funding has provided an excellent start to embedding PER support but the College recognised that relying on only a single post to support its engagement aims put significant limits on embedding support. The College was looking to capitalise on its achievements to create a step change in available support. PER at Birkbeck was therefore at a critical moment and in need of an injection of resources to kick-start the changes envisioned. The SEE PER call was consequently extremely timely and has allowed the College to address the aims laid out within the March 2017 plan:

- **Strategy:** to enhance the planning, governance and management of PER support for the benefit of the College, its research and its researchers.
- **Infrastructure development:** To build the necessary infrastructure to support and promote excellent public engagement.
- **Reward and recognition:** To enable our researchers and professional staff not just to participate in public engagement but to regard PER as an integral, distinctive and valued aspect of research at Birkbeck, University of London which is incentivised, celebrated and rewarded.

The College used SEE PER funds to appoint additional expertise in the form of a PER Coordinator (full-time) and a PER Evaluation Officer (part-time). The additional expertise enabled the College to establish a number of identified 'quick wins': training; Seed Funding; PER Awards and raising the visibility of PER. The College also hoped that by strengthening the PER culture change team and, collating evidence through evaluation, this would also go some way to meeting our challenges. Putting in place sustainable infrastructure, processes to support researchers and building relationships with other teams to maximise PER support has therefore been the main aim of BRED.

---

## OUR SUCCESSES

Our SEE PER funding has enabled us to be successful in three main areas: building infrastructure and expertise, piloting training for PER and establishing the Colleges PER Awards.

### BUILDING INFRASTRUCTURE AND EXPERTISE

To strengthen and embed PER support the College used a large proportion of its SEE PER funding to invest in infrastructure. Our SEE PER award enabled the College to appoint a full-time Public Engagement Coordinator and a part-time Public Engagement Evaluation Officer, whilst also confirming Professor Miriam Zukas's role as Academic Champion for PER and the role of the Public Engagement with Research and Impact Committee (PERI). This allowed enhanced planning, governance and management of PER support in the College.

### GOVERNANCE

The BRED project was managed by our Public Engagement (PER) Manager, Mary-Clare Hallsworth with advocacy and mentoring from Professor Miriam Zukas as Academic Champion for PER. This partnership worked extremely well. Professor Zukas is formerly the Dean of the School of Social Science, History and Philosophy she is both well connected and well respected as well as having an intellectual interest in PER practice. From this stand point she was able provide effective advocacy for the PER programme, guidance and strategic insight. The PER Manager's previous knowledge of strategic culture change management and extensive project management experience ensured the project ran smoothly and was lead with entrepreneurial vision.

---

“Before Miriam came on-board I was having to drive much of the change for PER by myself. Having Miriam's support has made a huge difference to me. She has been my mentor and collaborator throughout the BRED project – she has not only been an advocate for the work of the PER team but also a brilliant sounding board for me for strategic ideas as well as a source of hope and intellectual stimulation.”

Mary-Clare Hallsworth,  
Public Engagement Manager

---

*“We have great leadership in the Public Engagement Team, and a great team to work with. I think Birkbeck has the potential to show how PER is much more than it is often imagined – and I think it could inspire many academics in other institutions to understand PER as part of their social and political research agenda. Birkbeck needs to make the most of its wonderful resources and ‘natural’ inclinations though, rather than treating this as just another requirement or promotion criterion – and that requires vision from the top of the organisation.”* **Professor Miriam Zukas, Academic Champion for PER**

Through BRED we have developed our structure for oversight and governance of PER, with a proper reporting structure through to the College Research Committee.

The BRED project brought together the BRED steering group (made up of the Pro-Vice Master for Research, the Head of Research Strategy Support, the Academic Champion for PER and the PER Manager) and gave renewed life to the PERI Committee. The PERI Committee had been struggling to retain academic attendance because its purpose was not clear; this has changed since the Committee became responsible for reviewing Public Engagement Seed Funds and Award applications. The PERI Committee now reports into the College Research Committee which together with the BRED steering group allows for better strategic alignment of PER and research agendas and has ensured that BRED is properly embedded in the academic leadership of research.

*“The BRED project has played a crucial role in enabling us to meet the objectives set out in our PER strategy. Public engagement is part of a broader research support function within the College and is closely integrated with research impact. I see public engagement as an important part of my responsibilities and through the PERI committee, which I chair, I am in a position to help to promote PER throughout the College.”* **Julian Swann, Pro-Vice Master for Research**

**INCREASED CAPACITY**

With our SEE PER funding we successfully recruited a full-time Public Engagement Coordinator and part-time (0.6FTE) Public Engagement Evaluation Officer. This additional capacity has had a significant impact on activity across the College. Since 1 January 2018, we have improved data capture for public engagement support, significantly increased the number of individual researchers able to benefit from advice on their public engagement activities, launched the first Birkbeck Public Engagement Awards, and established and awarded PER Seed Funds, as well as doing the development work on new webpages and training opportunities. Evidence of this success can be seen in Table 1.

<b>Support type</b>	<b>Jan-Apr 2017</b>	<b>Jan-Apr 2018</b>
<b>Meetings and 1:1s given</b>	22	43
<b>Assistance and information requests dealt with</b>	17	53

Table 1: Comparison of year on year support requests for PER from researchers to the PER Team

Having the new staff in place has enabled the PER team to be more visible, and improved communications to academic staff about the work of the team has been a significant step-change. In addition to case studies of PER activity from across College

being included in Birkbeck publications, there has been active promotion of the new opportunities (awards, funding, training), and more face-to-face interactions. This work has been a crucial part of implementing plans for evaluation, and helps to ensure that the support we offer is available throughout the College.

---

### Our PER Coordinator, has been responsible for:

- Responding to researchers seeking advice and guidance on PER and its evaluation;
- Developing, planning and running the series of PER training workshops integrated with HR, Impact Development and Birkbeck Graduate Research School (BGRS);
- Supporting the communications plan for PER seed funds and the awards;
- Establishing an annual symposium of engaged research at Birkbeck;
- Maintaining our webpages to signpost opportunities for PER;
- Leading on scoping and establishing a 'network' for engaged researchers at Birkbeck;
- Maintaining contact with PER trainees, staff and engaged researchers to provide continuing support to developing projects;
- Scoping opportunities for public engagement including establishing contacts with potential non-academic partners. (e.g. Science Museum Lates, Foundling Museum, Being Human Festival);
- Brokering relationships between academics and potential non-academic partners where appropriate;

### Our PER Evaluation Officer, has been responsible for:

- Developing plans and methods for evaluation of PER Team activities, such as training and awards;
- Collecting data on the effectiveness of PER Team activities and provide analysis and evaluations to support reporting, team learning and continuing best practice;
- Responding to researchers seeking advice and guidance on PER and its evaluation;
- Working with researchers and impact officers to support evaluation planning of public engagement projects, including advice on resourcing needed for effective evaluation. (ie will additional funds be necessary, will a facilitator, note taker or transcriber be needed);
- Developing cases studies and articles featuring Birkbeck PER to show case PER activity;
- Supporting the writing of interim funding reports and final reports;
- Developing guidance and training on evaluating PER;
- Working with impact officers to encourage academics to gather appropriate evidence of Impact from PER activities where ever possible.

Requests for support have come from every School in the College, with the most requests coming from researchers and academics from the School of Social Science,



History and Philosophy. On a department level, however, these requests are largely coming from four out of our nineteen departments: Psychological Sciences; English and Humanities; Film, Media and Cultural Studies; and History, Classics and Archaeology. We have plans in place to help extend our visibility across all departments and we would, in future, hope to see more requests coming in from a wider spread of departments.

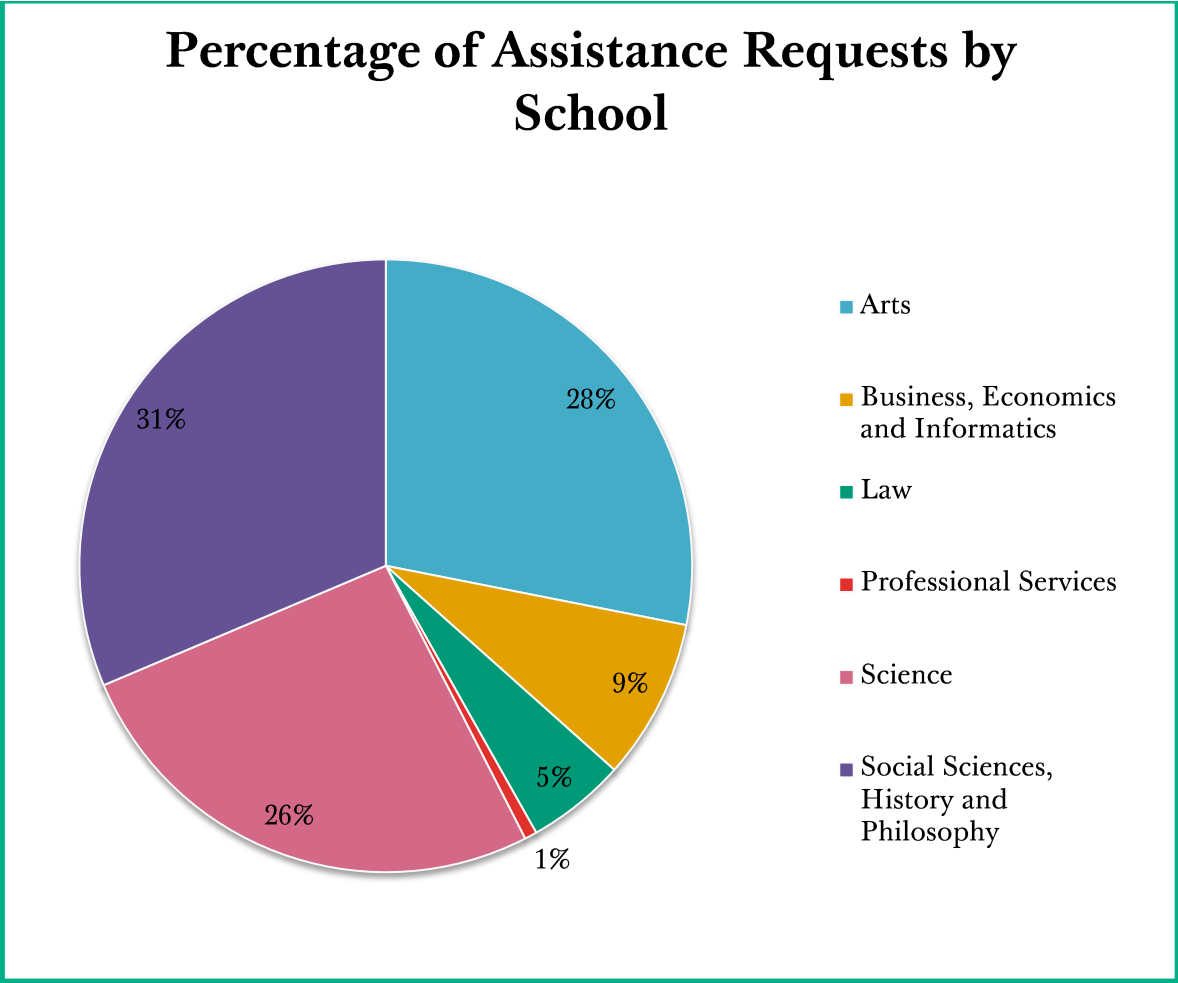


Figure 1: Percentage of assistance requests made to PER team from researchers and academics broken down by School.

## CREATING BIRKBECK'S PER AWARDS

The College ran its inaugural PER awards in March 2018 with support from SEE PER and Wellcome ISSF funding. Highlighting and rewarding PER has been shown to be key for creating a culture where PER is recognised as an integral, distinctive and valued aspect of research. Our public engagement intern at the time, Rhea Sookdeosingh (funded through Wellcome ISSF) was given the project to research and develop our awards in collaboration with the Public Engagement Manager.

*“The driving priority at the outset was to build up a picture of the research and research engagement landscape to ensure the awards scheme was reflective of practice on the ground. I immersed myself in Birkbeck’s rich research culture and met with research support colleagues from across the College to get a sense of the full range of engaged research practices undertaken by our researchers. Experienced [public engagement professionals](#) at other London universities were also really helpful and generous in sharing their advice about organising successful and inclusive public engagement awards.”* **Rhea Sookdeosingh, Public Engagement Intern August 2017 – April 2018.**

Our awards aimed to:

- raise awareness of PER in the College
- recognise and reward PER best practice
- raise awareness and recognition of the PER team expertise and support available
- enable the PER team to collect examples of best practice PER that could be used in training and College communications.

To do this effectively the PER team decided it was important to use our award categories to try and represent the breadth of engagement activity that happens in the College rather than focusing on more traditional disciplinary boundaries. As such we created five award categories: Collaboration; Communicating Research; Engaged Practice; Transforming Culture or Public Life; and a dedicated category for PhD and Early Career researchers. Our Public Engagement Manager wrote [a blog discussing the choice of these](#)

---

### COLLABORATION

This award recognised outstanding engagement work based on an active collaboration with an external partner or partners. Whether working with artists, charities, galleries, museums or professional societies, each of the projects in this category were based upon meaningful, two-way working relationships.

### COMMUNICATING RESEARCH

This award recognised excellence in communicating research projects and ideas through stimulating or innovative activities such as: creating installations for festivals and museums; working with school groups; and fostering and engaging in dialogue with public stakeholders. Researchers in this category used their research to inspire wonder and curiosity among their chosen publics

---

[categories](#) for the London Public Engagement Network, which to date has received 264 views since June 2018.

We received [twenty-five applications](#) in total for the awards from across all of the Schools in the College and into all of the categories. These applications were assessed first by the Public Engagement Team and then by the College's Public Engagement with Research and Impact (PERI) Committee which made the final awards. The awarding committee was impressed by the calibre of applications received, and, in addition to the category winners, a further 10 projects were Highly Commended by the judging panel. Academics at the awards ceremony stated that they were pleased to see this work being rewarded. Those who received awards and commendations have since added the accolade to their academic pages and three have cited the award in professional promotion and funding applications showing the value of these awards. Winners were also announced in both [College](#) and departmental communications.

The award ceremony itself was very well received with academics in attendance commenting on how much they appreciated the opportunity to find out more about what others were doing in different departments. The PER team are building on this feedback to ensure the next Awards ceremony provides clear opportunities to be inspired and reflect on the projects awarded, and also networking which hopefully might lead to more peer support and interdisciplinary collaborations, which the PER team is keen to support.

*“The PER awards have been one of the highlights of the academic year, we don't often get the opportunity to see what everyone else is doing, especially not from other Schools and Departments. It was a really enjoyable and inspiring evening.”* **Julian Swann, PVM Research.**

Immediately after the awards the PER team noticed an increase in referrals by word of mouth as well as academics who took part in the awards inviting the team to speak at

---

### ENGAGED PRACTICE

This award recognised high-quality research that uses participation and involvement of publics as a core approach to the creation of research. These projects were built on a foundation of dialogue and deliberation with public participants throughout the lifespan of their research projects.

### TRANSFORMING CULTURE OR PUBLIC LIFE

This award recognised exemplary research engagement activities which aimed to stimulate change within culture and society. Projects in this category tackled a range of societal challenges, often working with organisations and policy makers to highlight the voices of those their research affects.

### PHD/EARLY CAREER

This award recognised the inspiring public engagement work undertaken by researchers in the early stages of their career.

---

department meetings. Successful academics have also been very generous with their time: supporting the pilot training programme as speakers; becoming active participants at the Engaged Practice Symposium; feeding into plans for next years' Awards and more generally demonstrating an eagerness to support the work of the PER team. The PER team would not have been able to capitalise on this increased support from academics if it wasn't for the expansion of the team provided by SEE PER support.

---

## **BUILDING SYSTEMATIC SUPPORT FOR PER**

With the increased capacity provided by appointing a new PER coordinator post through SEE PER, the PER Team were able to develop and deliver a more systematic approach to public engagement training and support. The PER team's training provision now targets three distinct groups of researchers: researchers planning PER; researchers already doing PER successfully; researchers new to PER.

For researchers planning PER, support is simple to access – the PER team offer mentoring and one-to-one meetings providing guidance and advice to anyone writing funding proposals or seriously developing an engagement idea. The PER team will also review funding applications or plans and provide feedback. Researchers are therefore able to access continued coaching throughout their projects: from the very beginnings of an idea; through planning, designing and applying for funding; to continued guidance on implementation and managing a project or problem solving once funding is secured. For example, our Public Engagement Manager has worked with the '[Reluctant Internationalists](#)' research project on their engagement activities: supporting their initial funding application; assisting in the writing of a job description and recruitment of the project's Communications and Public Engagement Officer; meeting regularly with the Communications and Public Engagement Officer throughout the project to provide mentoring and guidance on engagement and evaluation best practice.

*“During my time at Birkbeck College, Mary-Clare has provided a wealth of support and advice. This has been invaluable in helping to continue my professional development in the field of public engagement. In particular, Mary-Clare has provided practical guidance and examples of best practice for evaluating the research engagement activities I have helped to organise.*

*In her role overseeing public engagement activities across the College, Mary-Clare has also facilitated numerous connections to be made with staff. Through introducing me to the central supports being put into place for public engagement, Mary-Clare has made me aware of work taking place across different departments and of potential collaborations.*

*Additionally, Mary-Clare has also been vital in opening up avenues for professional development. This has included inviting me to take part in training courses, alerting me to development opportunities and ensuring that I have access to policy documents and relevant public engagement literature.”* **Siobhan Morris, Reluctant Internationalists'**

**Communications and Public Engagement Officer**

## SYMPOSIUM

Our initial plans assumed that researchers who are already doing PER successfully may not need so much support from the PER team. However, feedback after the PER Awards showed that these researchers did not currently have a space to discuss their engagement practice. Discussion with this group showed they placed high value on having the opportunity to share experiences peer-to-peer and across disciplines. As such, the original plan for training was expanded to add an Engaged Practice Symposium for experienced researchers which ran in September 2018. The format and content of the Symposium was devised through a consultation process of three focus groups with academics who were known to the PER team to be active in their public engagement with research practice. The consultation highlighted academics' needs and interests of sharing experience, networking and discussing common challenges. From the challenges identified the PER team developed the content of the sessions to focus on:

- What is a university for and why do we engage?
- Ethics, consent and inclusion in PER
- Outputs, methodologies and data in engaged research: what alternatives should we be thinking about?
- Equitable knowledge production: do we have the right to speak for others?

Attendees also heard from Key Note speaker Bella Starling, Wellcome Trust Engagement Fellow and Co-Director of Public Programmes at Manchester University Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust and Paul Manners, Director of the National Coordinating Centre for Public Engagement (NCCPE), before hearing from colleagues.

The day was very well received with researchers in attendance from all Schools across the College. One of our researchers, Dr Sophie Hope also shared her experience of the day in a blog post entitled [Finding my People: Engaged Practice Symposium at Birkbeck](#).

*“This workshop felt like an important step in finding out who is doing engaged research already at Birkbeck, bringing those of us together who have been practising and critically reflecting on this for years from their different inter-disciplinary perspectives. It was an important occasion for us to listen to each other and exchange experiences and quandaries. It was also important for the College management to hear more about how we can be supported and find out what barriers we face and issues we are encountering.”* **Dr Sophie Hope**

---

## SYMPOSIUM FEEDBACK

“It provided a really valuable opportunity to meet up with like-minded (publicly engaged) colleagues at Birkbeck and to learn about their research”

“The standard of the presenters and their engagement of the other attendees far surpassed anything I could have expected... and the other people attending were a fascinating bunch!”

---

## PILOT TRAINING PROGRAMME

For researchers new to PER, the PER coordinator designed a set of pilot training workshops as a core part of the BRED project. Previously an Introduction to Public Engagement was offered once a term for PhD/post doc researchers but no specialised training or staff training was available. Desk and field research was conducted to review what is known and practiced in the sector about PE training. In the 2015 Factors Affecting Public Engagement by Researchers report, the least active researchers were those with less training and those who reported lower confidence in PER. Training and previous experience were both reported to make researchers feel well equipped to do public engagement. Lack of awareness of opportunities and ways to find audiences, as well as not knowing about funding opportunities were listed as barriers so we intended to cover these in the workshops.

Planning workshops were developed and delivered around four skill sets/ types of engagement:

- Developing Interactive Activities
- Engaging with Schools
- Presenting to Public Audiences
- Online Engagement

The workshops were aimed at PhD students and early career researchers new to the idea of PER and looking to gain foundation skills to later be able to fully embed public engagement within their research. Workshops focused on basic skills needed to begin to think about PER and wherever possible encouraged participants to take part in opportunities to practice those skills. The training was advertised through Birkbeck's Graduate Research School (BGRS), which also provided administrative support and advice in order to better advertise and integrate the offering with the training already available. Workshops were branded as 'planning workshops' to denote their interactive and practical nature. Each workshop also featured a short talk and Q&A from at least one Birkbeck academic experienced in the type of PER featured in the workshop, giving students and researchers a chance to hear real-world examples.

---

“Researchers who are well-established in public engagement are a valuable resource for the whole college. In these cases we see our role as facilitators in sharing their challenges and successes, as well as enabling peer-peer support for those leading complex, long term projects..”

Katy Glazer,  
PER Coordinator

---

*“We exploited the experience within the team to deliver/facilitate a lot of the content. In areas where we lacked expertise, we invited internal or external specialists to speak. We also invited relevant Birkbeck researchers to talk about their experiences at every workshop. The majority of attendees said this was the most useful part as hearing from peers makes engagement more tangible and relatable.”* **Katy Glazer, Public Engagement Coordinator**

As each workshop had a different focus and cross-disciplinary cohorts, we started all of them with a discussion of why this type of engagement was important and how PER poses specific challenges to different disciplines. Whilst the skills we chose for each of the workshops are arguably very dissemination focused, we felt they were the best options for providing an opportunity to gain experience working with non-academic groups. Our intention was to help academics and PhD students to develop skills and confidence to hopefully lead to more embedded, two-way engagement at a later stage. Our evaluation process for the training includes contacting attendees periodically, one week, one month and then a year, after the training to enable us to continue to guide them as they move into our other training and support services.

We chose to have all workshops open to all disciplines as we had found previously when piloting our ‘Introduction to Public Engagement’ training that sessions were more dynamic and creative when academics were challenged to work in cross-disciplinary groups. We are also a relatively small university and our students and researchers often have differing constraints on their time because of part-time study and evening teaching so opening the sessions up

---

## PRESENTING TO PUBLIC AUDIENCES

Training scheme:

- Consider why public engagement is important for you
- Understand the support Birkbeck offers in engagement work
- Practice verbal communication through group activities
- Consider how the content of your research can be shared with non-specialists
- Discuss jargon and use of technical language
- Recognise how to adapt content and style for different audiences
- Hear from Birkbeck researchers
- Discover opportunities to gain experience
- Start planning your next steps

---

## RESEARCHER DEVELOPMENT FRAMEWORK AREAS

Domain B: Personal effectiveness

B1- 1. Enthusiasm

B1 – 5. Self-reflection

Domain D: Communication, influence and impact

D1 – 1. Collegiality

D2 – 1. Communication methods

D2 – 2. Communication media

D3 – 2. Public engagement

---



across all Schools was an effective way to guarantee attendance. We ran four sessions in total, each had a sign up of at least 18 people. The average actual attendance rate was 55% which is the average for other sessions run by BGRS. We did not offer any incentives to attend or penalties for not attending, although this is something that BGRS has been thinking about separately. We also found no discernible difference in attendance rate between the one session run in the evening after 6pm and the other three sessions run in the afternoon.

---

---

## OUR CHALLENGES

---

Our challenges to embedding PER support have stemmed largely from confusions around definitions of public engagement and the timescale of funding available to help support this work.

### CONFUSION BETWEEN IMPACT, PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT AND COMMUNICATIONS

Across the College there is universal confusion about the differences between impact for the REF, public engagement with research, and research communication. This is a common challenge cross Higher Education institutions. The PER team has found that almost every conversation with an academic inevitably has to tackle this issue. The idea that PER is a potential pathway to Impact is not well understood, neither is the spectrum of activity that constitutes PER. Many members of staff expect PER to only involve contacting media or public lectures. There are many academics who use public engagement methodologies extensively as a part of their research, but do not name it as such. Our Public Engagement Awards have begun to tackle this by showing examples but it is a slow process.

Further confusion results from the current College structure. The PER Team is based centrally in the Communications Team within External Relations, whilst individual Impact Officers sit within each School. This causes two challenges:

1. PER being synonymous with communications and marketing for student recruitment or College profile.
2. Members from the PER team and the Impact Officers meeting with slightly different self-selecting groups of academics from each School and therefore messaging not being consistent.

The PER team have therefore been working together with the Impact Officers to map out the research process, when researchers ask for help and who they are going to for that help. This will enable us to make clear what support is available, from which teams and the value added by the expertise in each team. By working more closely together, and being seen to work together we are hoping to alleviate some of the confusion. The PER team will also be moving to a newly created Research Office (discussed more fully in the 'What Next?' section of this report) which will allow for better strategic alignment and day to day working practices.

### FIXED TERM, PART-TIME CONTRACTS AND STAFF RETENTION

A key aim for the BRED project was to build infrastructure for supporting PER by increasing the PER team's capacity. This was achieved by recruiting a full-time PER Coordinator and a part-time PER Evaluation Officer. Unfortunately for the team the Evaluation Officer who was initially appointed was offered a full-time, five-year

position elsewhere, only three months after starting at Birkbeck. Now at the end of BRED year one, we have lost our second Evaluation Officer to another full-time, open ended post. For a short term project such as BRED which aims to lay the foundations for a much longer term PER support solution for the College staff turnover such as this has been highly disruptive and potentially damaging for the whole project. As we have not had an Evaluation Officer in post for large proportions of the project it has been more difficult to show how the role is necessary.

*“Stability and relationship building is so key to these projects working, it means keeping hold of good staff is absolutely essential. No one can keep talented staff on part-time, fixed-term contracts - this is a major problem across the sector, as is inconsistencies with grading public engagement roles. It means we spend more time and energy having to prove our value rather than actually doing the valuable work.”* **Mary-Clare Hallsworth, Public Engagement Manager**

---

## WHAT NEXT?

---

The PER team currently sits within the Communications team as a part of External Relations. This has been a very useful position for the team to be situated for the last three years, allowing the development of successful working relationships. However, the College has recently refocused the work of the External Relations team on marketing and student recruitment. The Widening Participation and Outreach team have already been moved out of External Relations to facilitate this refocusing. The unintended consequence of these changes is the marginalisation of PER's activities in the context of the team, and the potential co-option of at least some of PER's effort for marketing and recruitment.

However, the College is also restructuring its research support provision to establish a new Research Office. The PER team will therefore be moving from External Relations into the Research Office. The rationale is to bring together the College's research support functions including PER, so that research strategy will be better integrated and managed across the College. This move will also protect the PER function within the College. The success of BRED year one and the obvious strategic alignment of PER with the Research Office led to this decision and it demonstrates the College's commitment to PER at a strategic level. The Research Office launched on 1<sup>st</sup> August 2018 and the PER team will move across from September and will be fully integrated from January 2019. The co-location of PER with research will lead to a much improved support environment for all research.

The changes also mean that there are fresh opportunities to better coordinate PER and other research innovation initiatives and incentives across the College. Our successful initiatives from BRED year one such as the seed fund and researcher recognition awards will need some redesign in the light of these changes and our evaluations. New relationships will also need to be established between the PER team and other new members of the Research Office, to ensure the expertise of the whole team is being used effectively and strategically.

---

“Birkbeck, like the rest of the HE sector, is facing a challenging future with competition for students, finite resource and Brexit. However, we have, thanks to BRED, laid the foundations for the future development of PER and have a clear strategy for integrating within a new Research Office as a crucial component of Research support.”

Julian Swann, PVM Research

---

With these changes in mind our objectives for BRED year two are:

- to provide stability and strategic continuity of purpose for PER at a time of structural change;
- to take advantage of that structural change to embed PER further in the research infrastructure and changing research processes at Birkbeck;
- to build on the evaluation of BRED1 initiatives in order to develop the activities further.

In order to achieve these aims the College will be retaining the PER Coordinator and PER Evaluation posts for a second year.

At the end of September 2018 Professor Miriam Zukas will retire and step down as Academic Champion for Public Engagement with Research. It will be important for the College not to lose momentum in securing continued PER support provision after the loss of this strong advocating voice. Much of the burden for driving change will again fall to the Public Engagement Manager. The move to the Research Office and the continued support from the PVM Research and the Head of Research Strategy Support should help to ensure the successes achieved by BRED continue past the end of the project.

---

“I think the challenge for Birkbeck is to recognise that it has always been important to the institution, though not as a strategic or explicit attribute but, instead, as a political aspiration. The origins of the institution are aligned with an understanding of knowledge making as a form of public engagement which, to a greater or lesser extent, is a core value of Birkbeck. Whether or not academics recognise the relationship between PER as articulated in the UK today and that core value depends on the way PER is framed within the institution. At the moment, I think PER is important to Birkbeck because of the general requirements of the funding councils, Wellcome etc but I think it has yet to understand fully its unique historical connection to PER and to articulate fully what’s special about PER at Birkbeck.”

Miriam Zukas, Academic PER  
Champion

---

---

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

Many thanks go to all those at Birkbeck, University of London that have made the Birkbeck Researchers' Engagement Development project successful over the past year. Special thanks go to Ana Rita Rodrigues, Katy Glazer, Miriam Zukas, Julian Swann, Sarah Lee, Nicholas Keep and Charlotte Thorley for feedback on this report and their support throughout the project.

---



**PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT WITH  
RESEARCH AT BIRKBECK**

Contact:

[public-engagement@bbk.ac.uk](mailto:public-engagement@bbk.ac.uk)

Report written and compiled by  
Mary-Clare Hallsworth,  
Public Engagement Manager