

Engagement for culture change



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What is engagement for culture change?

Doing engagement with the aim of changing society's views about an issue, or creating a different environment around a research area.

How I use this method of engagement in my research

I didn't realise this at the time but I was one of the first UK scientists to talk openly on the news about using animals in my research.

It all started 10 years ago, when I'd just published a paper about how an acne drug might be associated with depression in animals. I did a press briefing at the Science Media Centre, and it was picked up in all the broadsheets, on Radio 5 Live, and I was interviewed on BBC News 24. I got a lot of emails from people taking the drug saying thank you for doing the research. I just felt hugely validated and that the research was really worthwhile. That was the start of my public engagement journey. Since then I've become an ambassador for an organisation called Understanding Animal Research, and I regularly do talks at schools.

The vast majority of the UK public support the use of animals in medical research where there are no alternatives. However, polls also show that there is increasing mistrust of regulation and scientists and organisations engaged in animal research. I'm Chair of the Animal Users Forum here at Bath, and have used the role to encourage the University to be much more transparent about how and why it uses animals.

The University was among the first signatories of the *Concordat on Openness on Animal Research* launched by Understanding Animal Research in 2014. We now publish the statistics of how many animals we use every year and have case studies highlighting the value of animal research carried out at the University. In 2017, the University was nominated for an 'Openness Award' in Understanding Animal Research's annual Concordat celebration.

My research

My research is in depression and anxiety, and the neurobiology of stress. It crucially depends on the use of animals to gain a better understanding of brain circuitry and to test new potential drugs.



Other types of engagement I'm interested in

I'm interested in how art can engage the public with science and specifically, with drug discovery research. I've worked with two local artists. Firstly with Stephen Magrath, who created artworks inspired by observations and conversations with brain researchers in the Department of Pharmacy & Pharmacology. The art was a great way of starting a conversation with people about their personal experiences of, for example, depression and our research into new antidepressants. More recently, Michele Whiting has produced new artworks for the Forbes Fraser Pharmacy building at the Royal United Hospital, inspired by drug discovery research in the Department.

How public engagement benefits me

I'm contributing to a climate where it's okay to talk about animal research, making it easier for me to engage others with my own research. I've not had any adverse reaction when talking about animal research through the media which has given me increased confidence to engage.

It's also been satisfying to influence University policy on openness, and to work with learned societies, such as the British Pharmacological Society and the British Association for Psychopharmacology, to help them work towards more transparent and explicit communication with the public about the benefits of the humane use of animals in research.

