



NEWS RELEASE: for immediate release

Attention: for news desks & education correspondents

Universities look to put the public at centre of research

Principals and staff from Scotland's universities will meet with MSPs from all parties in the Scottish Parliament today (Wednesday, 15 June) to focus on the wider value of university research and the importance of involving members of the public with this work.

Putting issues of funding to one side, a group of Principals and staff will highlight the valuable, non-economic benefits that university research is delivering to a wide range of community groups across Scotland, including local authorities, third sector organisations, schools, patients and others. The meeting will also explore further ways to promote a culture of effective public engagement in all areas of university research in Scotland.

Speaking at the briefing event, Professor Sir Tim O'Shea, Acting Convenor of Universities Scotland Principal of Edinburgh University, said:

"All too often, the focus on Scotland's universities comes down to our economic contribution. Whilst undoubtedly important, this narrow focus overlooks the equally valuable role that universities play in Scottish society; working with schools, community groups, environmentalists, patients, policy makers and others, actively involving them in the research we do."

"Scotland has always had a proud history of discovery and its people a curiosity and appetite for knowledge. It's important that we hold onto these values. Universities can support this by getting their research out of laboratory or library more often and engaging with local communities. This is hugely important as universities lead research into some of

the major issues facing Scottish society whether it's our public health problems or how to address environmental challenges. Closer public engagement can very often improve the quality and impact of research by widening researchers' horizons."

The event has been organised by Edinburgh Beltane, a partnership of Edinburgh's five universities, the University of the Highlands and Islands and 10 other partners including the Edinburgh International Science Festival, Our Dynamic Earth, the Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh and National Museums Scotland.

Edinburgh Beltane aims to embed a culture of public engagement throughout all strands of university research, and supports university researchers who want to communicate their work effectively and ensure their work is relevant and responsive to the needs of society.

The event is also hosted by Scotland's Futures Forum, an organisation created by the Scottish Parliament which looks strategically at the long-term challenges faced by Scotland.

Professor Mary Bownes, Director of Edinburgh Beltane, said:

"Many researchers are already actively engaging with public audiences about their work. The Edinburgh Beltane aims to ensure their efforts are recognised and supported, so that even more researchers are willing and able to communicate with the people that can most benefit from the work that they do, and that the work that they do is of benefit to more people.

"Researchers need the skills to communicate complex subjects effectively; to listen; to value and respect the perspectives of others and involve wider society in the decisions that could affect our lives. Public engagement equips researchers with these skills, and contributes to a culture where people feel they can ask questions and raise issues, confident that their voice will be heard."

Ends

Examples of public engagement in university research:

Bilingualism Matters

The University of Edinburgh's Professor Antonella Sorace has established an information service for the public about the benefits of bilingualism. Research that has shown that bilingualism is

beneficial for children's development and their future however, bilingualism is still surrounded by negative beliefs and misunderstandings with some considering that growing up with more than one language could be 'dangerous' for a child's development. Bilingualism Matters aims to encourage families, educators, and policy makers in supporting children's development of multiple languages.

The service, first started in Edinburgh, will soon have branches in Norway, the Western Isles and Greece. www.bilingualism-matters.org.uk/

The Festival of the Sea

The Scottish Association for Marine Science (SAMS) as part of the University of the Highlands and Islands held a festival of the Sea for the local community in Oban. Celebrating the local marine environment and engaging the public in the research of SAMS, the festival included lunchtime and evening lectures, discovery walks, exhibitions and boat trips. The aim of the event was to engender pride and stewardship in the local community towards the sea, to excite interest amongst school pupils in careers related to the sea and science and to promote discussion of how best to manage the many and often conflicting uses of the sea.

<http://www.marinesciencefestival.com/>

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