

Dundee Women's Festival – Diversity in Science Project

By Amy Cameron

Public engagement is an opportunity for communities to gain an insight into current research and the people behind it. Just as importantly, it also offers scientists themselves a space to learn.

Every year, the [Dundee Women's Festival](#), a city-wide event, takes place in Dundee, Scotland, during the first two weeks of March including International Women's Day on 8th March. This festival is organised by women in the local community and is an established and popular festival. As a group of colleagues involved in STEM related public engagement, across the University of Dundee, we felt it was important for women in STEM to be represented in the 2019 Festival programme.

I was awarded a Diversity in Science Grant from the Biochemical Society, contributing towards the costs of participating in the Festival. We also received funding from the British Science Association - Tayside and Fife Branch and our respective University departments.



Children becoming scientists as they extract DNA from strawberries with our female plant scientists from the University of Dundee. One of the hands-on activities at Family Fun with Women in STEM, part of Dundee Women's Festival, March 2019.

The events and their aims

We ran two events during the 2019 Festival, one aimed at young families and another at adults.

Family Fun with Women in STEM allowed visitors to meet female scientists, find out about their amazing research work and get hands-on with activities on topics ranging from plants to clinical trials, and from forensic science to DNA.



A little girl giving her shoe footprint as part of the Leverhulme Research Centre for Forensic Science Sole Searching Citizen Science project. One of the hands-on activities at Family Fun with Women in STEM, part of Dundee Women's Festival, March 2019.

Inspirational Stories from Women in STEM empowered women in STEM to share their varied career stories through personal monologues. The stories were not only entertaining and funny but also moving and poignant. The speakers, who ranged from nurses and doctors to researchers and forensic scientists, showed passion for their work and the reasons why they do what they do. This was clearly appreciated by the audience.

With these two events, we aimed to increase awareness of the diverse challenges women in STEM can face, to share their research and achievements, and to confront stereotypes of what a scientist 'should' look like. To achieve this, we provided training and practical experience for female scientists to increase their confidence and capability in public speaking.

"There is no room for preconceived notions about people based on their job title."

Feedback from an attendee to the storytelling event.



Clinical Researcher Amy sharing the story of her journey from GP to her job today at the School of Medicine. One of a number of inspirational talks given by women in STEM, as part of Dundee Women's Festival, March 2019.

Organising and running events involving multiple areas of an University adds complexity but also allows for better events with the inclusion of a wider diversity of participants and subject areas. These events were a huge success and had capacity crowds due to the diligence and hard work from all involved. It was also very enjoyable experience which has resulted in a number of legacies in the 18 months since these events took place.

Legacy

The most immediate beneficial effects were on the event participants. The speakers at the storytelling event displayed increased confidence and reported that the bite-size format of the training leading up to the event was very helpful.

"The event was very well organised from the initial talks to the event on the night. There was support (which I needed) and helpful information given. This is something that I am very glad that I have taken part in and I would encourage others to do so in the future."

Feedback from one of the speakers, 2019 event.

Several members of the public who came to our events requested that we host these events again for the 2020 Festival. We were fortunate enough to host our events again in early March 2020 (plus two additional new events) though COVID-19 did impact on the attendance of one of our events that took place just a week before lockdown. Once again, all our events were well received, and we were able to involve a wider demographic of researchers and cover more STEM topics than in 2019. The previous events provided a positive precedent, including previous participants' recommendations, to encourage new attendees.

The small team running Dundee Women's Festival must be commended for all their hard work in pulling together an outstanding programme of events which we were but a small part of. Without them and many other community groups and organisations in the city, there would not be a Festival. Impressed by the Festival and its reach to new audiences, the University has sponsored the Festival for three years from 2020 – 2022 through the Wellcome Institutional Strategy Support Fund. The Leverhulme Research Centre for Forensic Science in the University will also sponsor the Festival in 2021. I have now become a trustee

of the Festival and look forward to providing my professional expertise to support future Festivals.

There is a Festival planned for 2021. The format and size are very uncertain at this time but with a theme of 'The Power of Women' and the 100th Anniversary of International Women's Day, I'm sure the women involved will produce another successful Festival reflecting the theme perfectly!

Diversity in Science Grants scheme

The existence of this funding scheme not only supports events such as ours but also sends an important message that esteemed learned societies are supporting diversity in science. In the 10 years since the scheme started, we have seen positive shifts within academic science, but as recent events such as the Black Lives Matter movement show, there is still much more to do.

About the Author

Dr Amy Cameron (she/her) works at the School of Life Sciences at the University of Dundee as their Public Engagement and Communications Officer. She has organised events for the Dundee Women's Festival since 2019 with colleagues Dr Amy Rogers, a Clinical Research Fellow in the School of Medicine and Dr Heather Doran, Public Engagement Manager in the Leverhulme Research Centre for Forensic Science (LRCFS) and Rolf Black, Deputy Director for Public Engagement & Outreach for the School of Science and Engineering at the University.

Amy has a background in academic research with a decade of experience in basic research. In the public engagement part of her role, Amy works closely with members of the School of Life Sciences public engagement team to formalise public engagement practice and procedures in the School. She works alongside PE colleagues (School and across University), School staff and students to deliver a programme of activity and events. She was a member of the School team responsible for the successful submission and award of a Gold Engage Faculty Watermark from the National Co-ordinating Centre for Public Engagement's (NCCPE) in 2017.

Personal twitter: @amcam40

UoD: @dundeeuni

UoD PE: @engageUoD

Website: Dundee Public Engagement page:

<https://www.dundee.ac.uk/engage/publicengagement/>