

Enriching Doctoral Research Through Community and Public Engagement: The role of Research Administrators

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Background:

Enriching doctoral research through community and public engagement (CPE) not only improves the quality of research but also helps researchers focus on areas of relevance and increases impact (Tomlinson, 2019). Despite the opportunities that come with CPE, it is not clear to most doctoral researchers on how to engage the public with their research. It becomes even more challenging for those who attempt because of limited engagement skills, knowledge and experience in CPE.

We describe the roles of Research Administrators in facilitating community and public engagement in doctoral research in a capacity-building program – Training Health Researchers into Vocational Excellence in East Africa (THRiVE).

Methodology:

1. Sensitised and trained doctoral fellows on CPE
2. Identified and engaged CPE stakeholders – Ministry of Education & Sports, schools and Non Government Organisations
3. With experts' guidance, developed CPE guiding documents (reporting tools, CPE M&E framework) and guided implementation of CPE projects
4. Monitoring progress of CPE activities



Goal: Integrating public engagement into doctoral research



How Research Administrators facilitated CPE

CPE Training/Awareness:

- Organised CPE trainings/meetings for fellows.
- Mobilised and organised meetings between fellows and stakeholders based on the needs of the fellows
- Helped doctoral fellows to refine their CPE activities from a lay man's point of view
- Facilitated appreciation of CPE by a local IRB
- Provided logistical support to CPE training sessions
- Shared engagement outputs with the rest of the world through various social media channels

Foster Collaborations:

- Identified subject matter experts and linked them with researchers to develop engagement strategies

Monitoring and Evaluation:

- Supported researchers in refining their implementation plans to track CPE outputs
- Tracked and documented engagement activities through field visits, video recording and report writing

Ongoing support:

- One-on-one support on execution of identified engagement activities



Early Observations:

The public is eager to engage with the doctoral fellows.

Plenty of opportunities exist for CPE. Continuous support to researchers is key to getting positive outcomes

Significant resistance among doctoral researchers to incorporate public engagement in their ongoing research. This is mainly attributed to:

- Scepticism about public to understand research and science
- Perceptions that it takes away time for scientific research
- Fear for contamination of primary research
- Limited knowledge on how to engage the public

Early Results:

- ✓ Increased awareness of CPE amongst fellows, IRB
- ✓ Increased interest in CPE among fellows
- ✓ Fellows have applied for AAS CPE Research enrichment seed funds

Challenges:

- Poor attitudes of scientists towards CPE
- Insufficient funds
- Inadequate CPE capacity
- Lack of skilled practitioners to provide support



In conclusion, there are numerous unexplored opportunities to involve the public in research. Managers of research projects have to develop the goodwill and strategically set the environment that will accelerate public and patient participation in research