

The power of public engagement: Reflections on bring your own brain 2025

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In the lead up to the British Neuroscience Association's International Festival of Neuroscience 2025, the Liverpool Neuroscience Group put on a public programme of events intended to engage, entertain and inform local people with the science of the brain (Facer and Tse, 2025). *Bring Your Own Brain* (BYOB) was designed to be inclusive and leave a legacy of the festival's visit.

Our aim was to deliver a high-quality programme, showcasing the diversity of neuroscience expertise within Liverpool. An enthusiastic team of academics and students was recruited from three universities (Liverpool John Moores University, Edge Hill University and The University of Liverpool) and Liverpool's specialist neuroscience and neurology hospital (The Walton Centre). The team forged partnerships with local charities (The Brain Charity and Pain Relief Foundation), museums and civic institutions, laying the foundations for long-term alliances.

A significant barrier scientists report to engaging the public about their research is a lack of formal training (Royal Society, 2006). Thus, we involved our university public engagement (PE) teams early, benefitting from their expertise, networks and funding pots. Bespoke, professional training ensured the team's planning of each event reflected the National Co-ordinating Centre for Public Engagement's approach to excellence in PE (<https://www.publicengagement.ac.uk/quality-practice>).

The programme was delivered in venues across the city region. All were accessible and while some were selected to suit the content of a specific event (e.g. our public lecture on the history of neuroscience research in Liverpool took place in the 200-year-old Liverpool Medical Institution), most were chosen based on the audience we wanted to reach. For A-level biology students, since the goal was to increase aspirations regarding higher education, university laboratories were selected as the most relevant space. To reach those who wouldn't feel they belong in academic settings, we hired external venues, often in areas of high socioeconomic deprivation. To engage under 14s, we partnered with Eureka! Science + Discovery, a children's science museum. Importantly, the fact we interacted with family groups here meant adults were often learning alongside the children as their *Head of Learning and Inspiration* reflected:

The family engagement for this kind of topic (I) think it has more value than in schools because you're getting the grownups in that moment as well, because if the grownups lack confidence or knowledge, those conversations are shut down when they get home. Because, we all have that fear of failure or getting something wrong, don't we, and grownups feel it more than kids . . .

A Campaign for Science and Engineering (CaSE, 2023) poll found two-thirds of respondents didn't feel well informed about research happening in their local area, while a similar proportion confirmed they would like to hear more. These findings were borne out in the feedback we received, which frequently noted how much attendees valued learning about local research. For example, a person living with chronic pain who attended our somatosensory neuroscience event fed back:

More things like this would be really good (. . .) The demos spurred us on to ask questions and showed how patients can help with research. Lots of things aren't said in a clinical context, just presumed (. . .) Talking helps us understand.

While adults report they trust researchers to talk about their work's benefits (CaSE, 2023), surveys indicate only 16% of 14- to 18-year-olds find scientists approachable and even fewer believe scientists represent their views and values (British Science Association, 2023). Thus, it is gratifying feedback from A-level students we engaged reflected not only the value of the

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sessions they attended to their understanding of neuroscience and associated careers but also how approachable and friendly the scientists they met were:

I liked how engaging all the sessions were and how kind and friendly the staff/students were with us.

With funders increasingly expecting scientists to involve the public and patients (PPI) in all stages of their research, our charity partners noted their clients are in demand for PPI activities and participation in research studies, but that not all scientists have the skills to communicate their research in accessible ways. Thus, the varied opportunities BYOB offered, from talks and demos to stand-up comedy, were extremely valuable, especially to early career researchers. Ultimately, hearing from people that they enjoyed an event and learned something new is hugely rewarding:

I've never taken part in anything like this so I wasn't sure what to expect. I was surprised at how much interest there was from families across ages in the different activities we were showing them – their enthusiasm and joy was catching. *(BYOB STEM Ambassador)*

As neuroscientists, we are in a privileged position given the topics we research feel real and relevant to many people. So, in a time where scientific misinformation is rife, surely there is a duty

to share what we know (and what we don't), to start conversations, spark curiosity and bust pervasive myths about the brain.

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