MSc Science Communication, Science Communication Unit, UWE, Bristol

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ABSTRACT: The MSc in Science Communication offered by the University of the West of England is taught in short three day blocks, designed specifically to cater for both full and part-time students wishing to combine work and study effectively. Started in 2004, the programme emphasises the development of practical skills as well as developing a wider understanding of the key issues facing science communicators today. With this in mind, workshops explore theory and practice, considering the potential of a range of creative, targeted and innovative opportunities to enable greater community participation in scientific issues.
engagement and participation models. In Science and Society students are encouraged to consider the implications of changes in the relationships between science and society and the practical ramifications this can then have for science communicators seeking to communicate controversial, complex and uncertain science. This is then followed in the optional modules by a considerable emphasis on the practical with students encouraged to build a portfolio of work in areas such as science writing, broadcasting or direct science communication media.

Optional modules currently offered include Writing Science, Broadcasting Science and Science Direct in Practice. A recently introduced module, New Opportunities in Science Communication is particularly illustrative of the practical focus in addition to the responsive and forward-facing qualities of the MSc. The module encourages students to consider fresh formats for communication, differing cultural contexts and novel audiences exploring techniques such as Sci-Art, podcasting and grassroots journalism. The final project module provides students with a further opportunity to partake in a project specific to their science communication interests or to work with an external organisation such as a science centre, production company or learned institution.

In 2006 we took the opportunity to survey our existing students and graduates. 32 students participated in the survey, a response rate of 63 per cent based on graduate figures at that time. Of those students half were living in Bristol during semester, with the remaining students commuting from across the UK and Europe for teaching blocks. 60% (n=19) of students had completed undergraduate degrees since 2000, with nine of these entering postgraduate study straight from an undergraduate degree. 25% (n=8) were already working full-time in a science communication or communication field, and four students were PhD students or Post-Docs. During the course at least 15 students took up jobs in the science communication field, with 53% (n=17) working full-time whilst being enrolled on the course, and 25% (n=8) working part-time. From this survey we know that the biggest attraction to our students is the modules (n=31) the Science Communication Unit offer, closely followed by the practical aspects (n=28) of the course and the academic staff (n=25). The style of teaching in three day blocks remains popular with students; qualitative feedback established that students believe it helps them to gain focus, concentrate, to bond as a group and to maintain a good work-life balance.

The MSc Science Communication remains successful in attracting 15-20 students per year from a broad range of academic perspectives, a variety of levels of experience and a number of different countries. Following the course our students take up positions with a range of employers including science centres, universities, media organisations, and publishers. A number have also launched freelance careers whilst participating in the course.

The Science Communication Unit is also keen to engage with would-be science communicators that do not have the financial or time commitment for a postgraduate course. To that end the Unit offers both an annual Science Communication Masterclass and a bespoke training portfolio for organisations seeking tailored training. These training opportunities build upon the course structure and content of the Masters programme. Further information on the MSc Science Communication, Science Communication Masterclass and bespoke training portfolio can all be found at the Science Communication Unit website http://scu.uwe.ac.uk/

Notes and references

1 A. Fuller (2001), Credentialism, adults and part-time higher education in the United Kingdom: An account of rising take up and some implications for policy, J Educational Policy, 16 (3), 233-248.

Authors

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