

RAS 200 needs you!



The RAS 200 outreach projects are seeking volunteers from among the Fellowship, writes **Sue Bowler**, but you'll need to be open to challenges.

Volunteering and outreach work is nothing new for a lot of RAS Fellows. Many run astronomy clubs and star parties, organize and give public talks, develop teaching resources, support teachers – and much more. But RAS200 offers something a little different. The RAS is working with organizations whose expertise focuses on under-served groups such as prisoners or carers. Through these partnerships, the sciences that enthuse so many Fellows can become a source of inspiration and enthusiasm for others – and for some they offer a chance to change their lives for the better. The challenge is to find ways to communicate the excitement that drew us all into science to people with different backgrounds and priorities.

Although the RAS sciences are central to the RAS200 projects, they are also the means to an end, such as education, employability, or simply confidence. This means seeing the sciences from the point of view of people with very different interests – a fundamental element of the RAS200 project partnerships. One of them, “Astronomy and geophysics through the traditional culture of Wales” is working to bring space sciences into the heart of Welsh-speaking culture at the National Eisteddfod and National Urth Eisteddfod. Geraint Jones of the Mullard Space Science Laboratory, University College London, got involved because the project matched his interests. “The project was great in that it tied together science with the arts,” he says. “I’m sure there are many involved in the arts and humanities who aren’t naturally attracted to the sciences, and this was a fantastic idea to weave astronomy and geophysics with cultural activities.”

The Prince’s Trust

The skills that RAS200 projects need from Fellows vary, but may include support for their staff. The Prince’s Trust (TPT) works with disadvantaged young people and approached the Royal Observatory Greenwich for help with stargazing sessions. “They already had brilliant written materials,” says Liz Avery of the ROG. “They needed help with the practical side of running the sessions.” Her input was important for building confidence in staff not used to running science events. “They were enthusiastic, but nervous of talking about science and of the questions they might be asked – ‘What’s inside a black hole?’ or ‘What will happen when the Sun dies?’ – as well as the moral and ethical side of science and how religion fits in.” The commitment to learning new skills, in turn, benefited TPT staff. “It was really a sharing session, not me just telling them what to do,” notes Avery. “The staff wanted to share best and worst practice with each other, and to talk as a group.”

Sometimes the challenge of finding a different language to communicate science is exactly that

Come and join us

The RAS200 programme is recruiting Fellows to volunteer with our partners as their projects evolve towards the Society’s bicentenary. We ask that interested Fellows contact the RAS200 staff lead Sheila Kanani. If there are projects that interest you specifically, for example in geographical or academic areas, please say so; please tell us about your specific experiences and skills so that we can match you to the best project.

All projects have requested resources and materials or merchandise to hand out. Several of the projects would like to hear from Fellows with expertise in specific subjects, such as planetary science and geophysics. The Prince’s Trust is looking for Fellows to support stargazing sessions for young people across the country, for example. Care for Carers would like to hear about Fellows with links to the Royal Observatory Edinburgh, and Girlguiding is seeking Fellows who have been Brownies or Guides (members or leaders) and STEM Ambassadors. Bounce Back would like to meet Fellows to visit Brixton prison.

If you are interested in working with any of the projects for the RAS 200 programme, please email Sheila at sk@ras.org.uk. We welcome your interest and will consider how best your skills can support RAS200.

– something that Jones discovered in his work to showcase Rosetta mission science: “It’s in Welsh, which is unusual, and genuinely reaches the Welsh-speaking community, which has limited exposure to several scientific areas through its own language,” he says. “It reduces the perception that science is only carried out by non-Welsh speakers, making it more accessible to those in Wales whose first language isn’t English. It also, hopefully, demonstrates

..... that scientists are often people with wide-ranging cultural interests, rather than being blinkered in their perception of the world.”

“It’s actually a good exercise for all scientific communication”

The process of seeing scientific concepts through a different cultural frame also helped Jones to improve his own work: “The terminology and concepts are sometimes a little tricky to explain, as often the relevant vocabulary exists in Welsh, but isn’t widely known. It’s actually a good exercise for all scientific communication for sometimes challenging and complex concepts to be broken down into basic concepts.”

Developing such new perspectives is at the heart of the RAS200 mission. If you are interested in finding out more, get in touch to find out where your skills can do most good. It can be a very worthwhile experience: “The Prince’s Trust is a brilliant group,” says Avery. “Working with them was challenging and rewarding – I would say 100% get involved!” ●

AUTHOR
Sue Bowler is Editor of A&G and of A&G Forum, and a member of the RAS200 Steering Group.

MORE INFORMATION
RAS200 website <http://ras200.org>
Sheila Kanani sk@ras.org.uk