

Background on cs4fn

cs4fn (www.cs4fn.org) is a public understanding of science project consisting of a magazine, webzine and linked live shows. It aims to enthuse school children and others about Computer Science as well as Science, Engineering and Maths more generally. The target age is 14+ though younger children and adults also enjoy it. It was developed by Dr Paul Curzon and Professor Peter McOwan of the Department of Computer Science, Queen Mary, University of London, originally in their spare time with the aim of getting across their own passion for the subject. The focus is on getting across both core computer science concepts and leading edge research in a fun and accessible way - for example using magic tricks, links to films, TV and music, games and puzzles.

The magazine (www.cs4fn.org/magazine/) is distributed at outreach events by both QMUL and other Universities including Bristol, Edinburgh and Dundee and US Universities. To date Peter and Paul have written the majority of the articles but with contributions including interviews, images and full articles from academics UK-wide about their research. We aim explicitly to illustrate the diversity of the subject, its links to the arts and the way modern science is interdisciplinary. Computer Science provides an ideal focus to do this.

The magazine was created for the Department of Computer Science's 2005 Royal Society Summer Exhibition Sodarace stall. We continued because of the extremely positive feedback we received. It has since been distributed in support of a range of outreach events including Science week events, the BA Science Festival and the 2007 Royal Society Summer Exhibition.

Feedback has continued to be excellent including from school and college students, teachers and science communication professionals. cs4fn was one of only two public engagement in science projects cited by EPSRC's International Review of Computer Science.

We have recently been awarded a significant 5-year EPSRC Partnership for Public Engagement grant to cover the basic running costs of producing cs4fn. This will start early in 2008. In addition to QMUL and EPSRC cs4fn has also been supported financially by Microsoft, ARM, Intel and is also supported by the British Computer Society and the Higher Education Academy. The current (December 2007) issue is being supported by Equalitec and is a special issue on Computer Science Everywhere, with a focus on women in computing.

We produce two issues of the magazine per year, each on a specific topic, sometimes linked to other science areas (eg Computer Science and Biology). We also write additional articles for the webzine on a monthly basis with 5-10 articles per month. The free magazine is distributed to around 3500 secondary schools / sixth form colleges UK-wide. Depending on the issue it may be sent to either the Head of Maths, Science or IT. Further copies are sent on request to people worldwide including class sets to teachers who request them.

The webzine currently has over 67 000 visits per month (doubling in less than 6 months). In October 2007 there were over a million page hits on the site.

Securing the Future: Expanding the cs4fn Project

The EPSRC funded project aims to create a national campaign based on cs4fn that others can buy into to "market" Computer Science as a subject to school students within its more general Science, Maths and Engineering context. The project will build on the success of the webzine ensuring its continued existence and expansion by providing a stable platform that can be used to sustain and grow both existing and new support and sponsorship. We will further develop a range of innovative aspects of cs4fn that pilot developments have shown to be successful. The project will, in addition, allow us to support, extend and expand a network of communications champions.

The specific objectives are to:

- Increase the readership of cs4fn, introducing Computer Science to new generations of school children
- Extend the range of topic portals covered, giving wide and deep coverage of major topic areas of Computer Science
- Extend the degree of interactivity on the site including additional methods of dialogue
- Extend the way multidisciplinary links between Computer Science and other research areas are covered.
- Encourage and mentor others to engage with CS public engagement
- Capture and share learning as to effective approaches through a formal evaluation
- Create a sustainable governance framework to ensure the long-term stability of the campaign

Overall the objective is to replicate in a sustainable way the effect UK-wide that cs4fn has already had locally in turning round interest in the subject.

The deliverables to achieve this are to:

- Write monthly articles on Computer Science topics for the cs4fn webzine
- Produce 2 issues of the magazine and an annual per year
- Hold a series of cs4fn live shows/workshops each year for school children
- Develop a range of interactive material following the pattern of interactive materials already on the site, allowing readers to engage with research topics.
- Develop new ways for the readership to interactively engage with the material and to support dialogue between the cs4fn team and the readership.
- Develop Computer Science topic portals as entry points into the large body of materials that give an overview of that area of Computer Science
- Develop science and engineering subject portals following the pattern of the piloted "Biology and Computer Science" portal that show the deep links between Computer Science and other subject areas.
- Develop an informal support network to nurture and mentor computer science communication champions in other Universities.
- Develop a business plan for the sustained delivery of the campaign beyond the time-frame of the grants funding.
- Publish an extensive final evaluation report.