



Keele's hugely successful project to reach out to the next generation of stargazers and science students by taking an inflatable "stardome" into local schools was a deserved winner in this category.

Launched in 2012 by the university's head of astrophysics, Rob Jeffries, with funding from the Science and Technology Facilities Council, the Exoplanetarium initiative has engaged with more than 13,000 schoolchildren, making it the most popular outreach project in Keele's history.

The dome uses a spherical-mirror projection system to present astrophysics resources, with the aim of explaining Keele's worldclass research on planets beyond our solar system, linking it to the school science curriculum, and inspiring children to think about science and higher education as a future pathway. Key to the programme is the use of student ambassadors to increase the number of visits that are possible while at the same time giving students vital experience and a role in enthusing the next generation.

The statistics on the sheer number of children and schools associated with the project demonstrate its success, with more than 5,000 children involved in 2013-14 alone. Post-visit evaluations found that 52 per cent of children said they were more likely to study science, technology, engineering or maths at university as a result.

The judges said the project made excellent use of "astronomy as a gateway into physics" and explained "the work of a university to a wider group of people".