

**Embedding Public Engagement in the Curriculum:  
A Framework for the Assessment of Student Learning from Public  
Engagement**

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## Acknowledgements

Ideas are rarely generated by one person in isolation from others. Therefore it goes without saying that many people have contributed to this document, whether this be through critique, discussions, the sharing of ideas, or just moral support.

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Finally it is important to acknowledge the people who have offered comments on the early drafts of this document; these are Professor Kris Mason-O'Conner, Professor Tom Bourner, Dr Philippa Bayley, and Steffi Barna.

## Background

The [National Coordinating Centre for Public Engagement](#) (NCCPE) was established in 2008 as part of the [Beacons for Public Engagement Initiative](#), an £9.2m initiative funded by the UK Funding Councils, Research Councils UK and the Wellcome Trust to develop how universities manage, support and deliver public engagement for the benefit of staff, students and the public.

In 2009 the NCCPE secured additional funding from **v, the national young person's charity** to provide compelling evidence of the impact of role of students in how universities engage with the public, and to explore how universities can enrich this activity through support, recognition and reward.

This framework for student learning from Public Engagement draws from learning from both the above projects and it was created to help enhance the role that Public Engagement currently plays within the taught curriculum at universities.

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## Introduction

Public Engagement plays a central role in helping Universities deliver on their core functions of Research, Knowledge Exchange, Teaching, and Social Responsibility. It is defined by The National Coordinating Centre for Public Engagement (NCCPE) as:

‘...the many ways in which higher education institutions and their staff and students can connect and share their work with the public. Done well, it generates mutual benefit, with all parties learning from each other through sharing knowledge, expertise and skills. In the process, it can build trust, understanding and collaboration, and increase the sector's relevance to, and impact on, civil society’ (NCCPE, 2011).

There are ever-growing dynamics which encourage Universities to enrich their connection with wider society, and to enhance the impact of their research and of their teaching. Developing an outward-facing, dynamic and two-way exchange with the world beyond the academy is being encouraged by a host of external policy drivers, but also by the values of many in the sector, both staff and students, who believe that universities are there to ‘make a difference’ and to transform individuals’ lives.

*‘It has never been more important for universities to demonstrate the important wider role they play in society, to be outward-facing and to engage with the public across a range of issues... It involves challenging some entrenched attitudes and ways of working, and learning new skills and approaches. But the rewards are significant, as this summary demonstrates, and the project is helping to redefine what it means to be a university in the 21<sup>st</sup> century’<sup>1</sup>.*

*Sir Alan Langlands, Chief Executive, HEFCE*

Public Engagement continues to play an important part in the professions. Students today need to be continually developing their capacity to communicate effectively with others, to support the learning of others, to work across cultures and institutions, and to operate in complex inter-connected environments. With the impact agenda growing in UK universities, we are seeing public engagement play an important part in the professional development standards for researchers, and likewise an important role in how research is delivered; see for example the [Researcher Development Framework](#) and the [Concordat for Public Engagement](#). Students too are seeking educational experiences that are socially engaged and prepare them for the challenges that they will encounter:

“What I learnt from my experiences of volunteering has equipped me with a huge amount of knowledge in dealing and working with people, organising events and how to deal with certain situations and responsibilities. What I have done since, in my

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<sup>1</sup> ‘Beacons for Public Engagement’ (2010) available at [https://www.publicengagement.ac.uk/sites/default/files/NCCPE%20bridging%20the%20gap%20brochure\\_0\\_0.pdf](https://www.publicengagement.ac.uk/sites/default/files/NCCPE%20bridging%20the%20gap%20brochure_0_0.pdf)

working and personal life, I believe would've been far more challenging for me if I hadn't had those earlier experiences.' (Brewis et al. 2010)<sup>2</sup>

At a senior level public engagement is a clear driver in the learning and teaching strategies of many UK Universities. University of Manchester talks of a vision which goes beyond the development of highly employable individuals, to preparing graduates to take personal responsibility, as citizens for addressing the great social and environmental issues confronting humankind. The University of Gloucestershire's Learning and Teaching Strategy embeds public engagement as a key principle within its priorities, with active engagement being a critical component for developing the graduate attributes associated with independent and collaborative learning, learning for life and employment, learning for the future, and research/practice-informed learning and teaching

At the same time the professional bodies are recognising the potential of their discipline to make a difference. For example the Royal Academy of Engineering, in collaboration with Engineering Council (UK) talks of a profession in which individuals can enhance the wellbeing of society through the exploitation of knowledge and the management of creative teams. Likewise the UK standard for professional engineering competence includes metrics around communication, teamwork and working with the public.

There are also a plethora of programmes and modules which have public engagement embedded within them, for example:

- [Student Community Engagement, University of Brighton](#)
- [Applied Social Research Module, University of Liverpool](#)
- [Communicating Maths, University of Bath](#)

A recent national development which has huge implications for realising the benefits of public engagement by students as part of the broad student experience and development of graduate attributes has been the introduction of the Higher education Achievement Record (HEAR). 'The development of the HEAR was recommended by the Measuring and Recording Student Achievement Steering Group ('Burgess Group'), chaired by Professor Sir Bob Burgess, Vice-Chancellor of the University of Leicester. In their report, '[Beyond the honours degree classification](#)' the group concluded that... both students and employers deserved a more detailed record of achievement.' (<http://www.hefce.ac.uk/learning/diversity/achieve/>). The HEAR has now been implemented successfully in a group of pilot HEIs and is currently being developed in over 70 institutions.

Section 6.1 of the HEAR allows information to be included 'which provides a richer picture of achievement that is not credit-bearing related directly to the programme of study.' In practice this means that students' achievement through such activities as volunteering can now be 'verified' by their institutions and recognised by inclusion on the formal transcript issued as their HEAR at the time of graduation. It remains appropriate therefore to consider means by which students'

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<sup>2</sup> Brewis, G. Russell, J. & Holdsworth, C. (2010) Bursting the Bubble: Students, Volunteering and the Community, NCCPE, Bristol

achievements through public engagement activities can be recoded even if they are not accredited as a competent and assessed part of the formal curriculum.

In recent years the NCCPE has been pro-active in encouraging universities to ensure there is equality and mutual benefit in their partnership work with the public. This framework for assessing student learning from Public Engagement, forms part of this work, for although it is focussed on supporting student learning, we argue that this learning may also have the potential to enrich how the students work with the Public. We believe it is important to prepare students for their preferred futures and help enrich how they contribute to society as professionals, and as citizens.

### ***The thinking behind this framework***

We have come across many academics who have developed programmes that are incorporating public engagement. Academics have often told us that the 'real-world', experiential learning opportunities have enriched subject knowledge and given students the opportunity to apply and develop the learning from their course. However, they have also told us that they perceive a whole host of other outcomes many of which might not be assessed as part of the course. These outcomes could include:

- how to extract meaning from experience;
- ways to apply academic knowledge to real world problems;
- about a specific community, population, geography;
- about expectations, quality, negotiation, client relationships;
- about self, society and context;
- about collaborative working.

(NCCPE, 2011c)

With this framework we hoped to provide academics with a tool for thinking about how these other outcomes could be incorporated into their assessment of student learning. Our aim was to draw together skills and attributes that are required to do public engagement well, and then to focus on what learning might look like in relation to this. This led us to a set of learning outcomes that are relevant to public engagement. From this point we developed a set of assessment criteria for these learning outcomes targeted at Honours/SEEC level 6.

### ***How to use this framework***

This framework supports the development of learning outcomes and assessment criteria for courses or modules which include public engagement. It can also be used when an academic is considering including engagement within an existing programme. Some of the learning outcomes in the framework may already be embedded in your courses, and some may be irrelevant to your area. However, they may provide a stimulus to refresh your criteria and learning outcomes, and can be particularly useful when you are considering adding an engagement element.

The framework is intended for use by staff in any subject or multidisciplinary area who either use or are considering using Public Engagement to enrich student learning. The framework is designed for

use at Honours/SEEC level 6, but can be adapted or used flexibly to fit different levels, module or programme outcomes. In addition to developing assessment criteria and learning outcomes the framework may also support:

- Curriculum design and assessment methods
- Developing policy and practice around graduate attributes
- Communicating expectations to students, and supporting self-assessment
- Staff understanding of the benefits of embedding Public Engagement in learning and teaching
- Auditing and benchmarking existing curricular against public/community engagement aspirations
- Making the case for Public Engagement in learning and teaching
- Enabling graduates to articulate their achievement

Whilst the Framework is intended for use in formal learning contexts where there has been a substantial level of engagement and achievement of sophisticated outcomes, many students will also become involved in public engagement activities which are not assessed but may form part of HEAR. Such engagement will contribute to the achievement of broad graduate attributes at the same time as enabling them to do something which 'makes a difference'. The principles which underpin the Learning Framework still apply in the co-curricular context, and students can, therefore, be offered the opportunity to state simply how their achievement map onto that framework in terms of

1. co-creation of knowledge;
2. managing engagement;
3. awareness of self and others;
4. communication;
5. reflective practice.

## How this framework was developed

The first stage to developing this framework was to synthesise the core capacities that are necessary to engage with the public well. To do this we drew on the following:

- [Attributes Framework for Public Engagement](#) - This attributes framework for public engagement was developed by Graphic Science and the NCCPE. It was informed by the work of the Science for All Training sub-group, and the work of the Beacons for Public Engagement in particular the Edinburgh Beltane Beacon and the Manchester Beacon, each of which had developed competency frameworks of their own. It was designed to act as a guide for staff and students in UK Universities with regard to the personal attributes and skills required for different public engagement (PE) activities.

- **Embedding Community Engagement in the Curriculum: An example of University-Public Engagement** – An extensive literature review which formed a significant part of a Higher Education Academy National Teaching Fellowship project entitled *‘Learning Empowerment through Public-Student Engagement’* (LEAPSE). The Literature review explores policy and practice around student learning from community engagement and provides an extensive evidence-base to support this framework.
- **[Bursting the Bubble: Students, Volunteering and the Community](#)** – Engaging with over 5,000 students and graduates across six universities, this study reported on the impacts and outcomes from student-community engagement for students and community groups.
- **[Student Volunteering: Background, Policy and Context](#)** – Reviewing the wider literature on volunteering, and reporting on over 60 semi-structured interviews with Higher Education (HE) staff managing student-community engagement projects.

In addition to the above, this project has been informed by an extensive consultation and range of publications and journal articles exploring student learning from community engagement, assessment and curriculum design.

## A framework for the assessment of student learning from public engagement

Our framework builds on the [attributes framework for Public Engagement for university staff and students](#) which identify the key attributes of reflection, empathy and communication – see figure 1 below.



Figure 1: Draft attributes framework for public engagement for university staff and students

These attributes were developed to inform the provision of training and development for public engagement, for use by staff in universities, research institutes and professional networks (such as learned societies and professional membership bodies). We began by exploring these attributes and how they would look in the assessed curriculum. This led us to narrow the focus of 'empathy' into something which could more comfortably sit within a formal curriculum: 'awareness of self and others'; and to adapt 'reflection' to 'reflective practice'. It was felt that there was something missing around project management and therefore we added 'managing engagement' which focuses less on the specific skills (i.e. project planning, teamwork) but on the student's capacity to work in complex interconnected environments. Finally, we recognised that that across all forms of public engagement was the application, transfer, exchange or co-creation of knowledge between student and the public and therefore it was necessary to assess student learning in this compartment.

The framework is shown below, followed by assessment criteria for each learning outcome.

## Learning outcomes

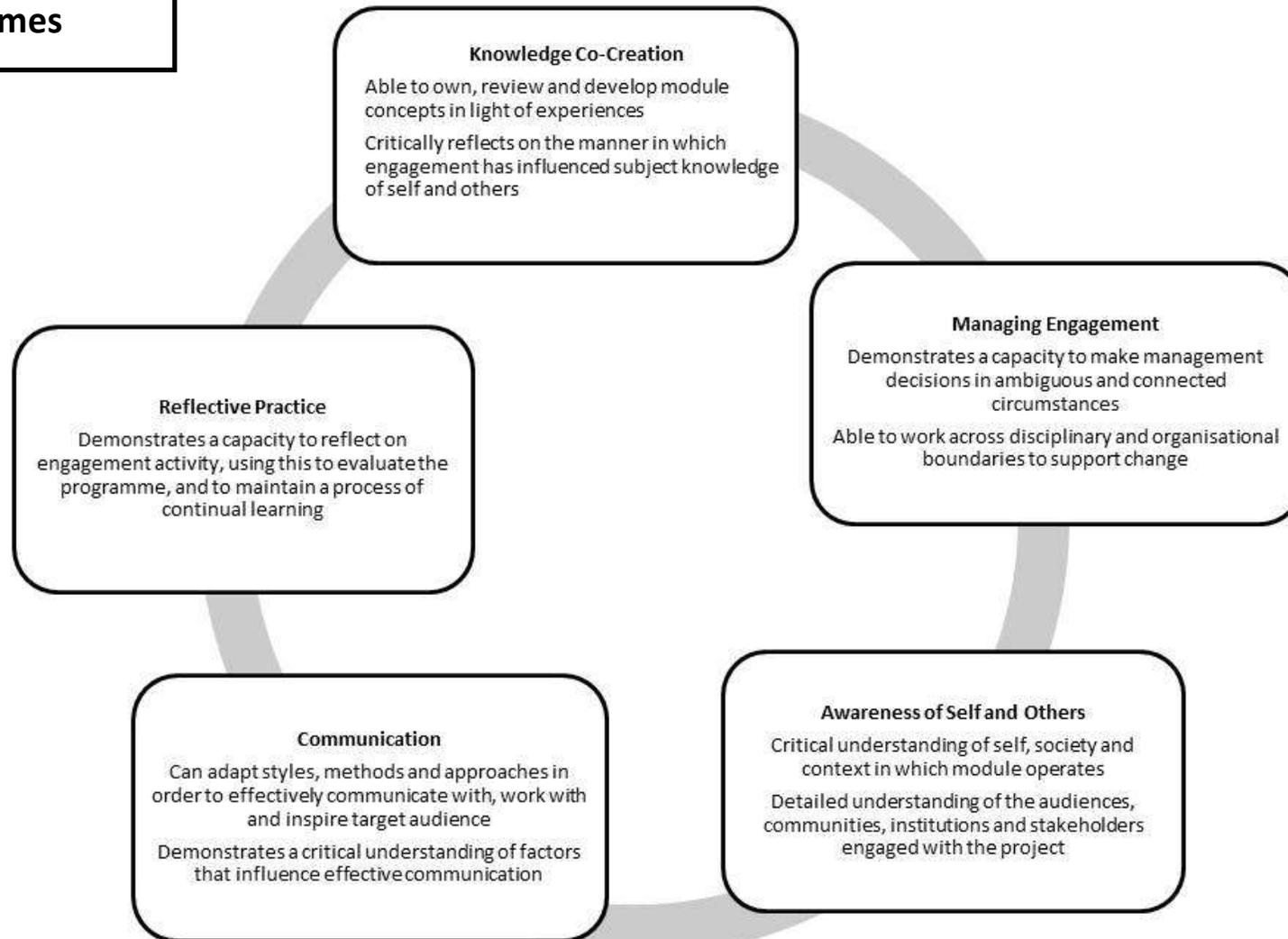
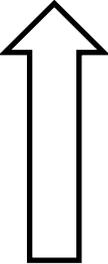


Figure 2: Framework for the assessment of student learning from public engagement

## Assessment Framework

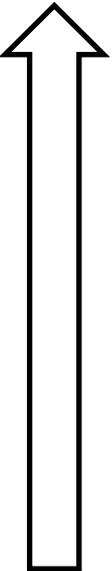
### KNOWLEDGE CO-CREATION

- Critically reflects on the manner in which engagement has influenced subject knowledge of self and others
- Able to internalise, operationalise, review and develop programme and/or module content and concepts in light of experiences

THRESHOLD	ASSESSMENT CRITERIA
<p><b>First Class</b></p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Demonstrates an excellent grasp of relevant concepts in relation to their 'real-world' application which is thoroughly evidenced</li> <li>• Ideas are applied in a sophisticated and creative way, varying approach with context, across multiple layers of complexity</li> <li>• Excellent exploration of the manner in which engagement activity influenced the knowledge of others, explored critically and fully supported with examples</li> </ul>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A solid understanding of relevant concepts in relation to their 'real-world' application with adequate appropriate evidence</li> <li>• Ideas are applied in a logical way, varying approach with context</li> <li>• Good exploration of the influences of the project on the knowledge of others but may lack some critical development</li> </ul>
<p><b>Third Class</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Understanding of relevant concepts and their application to the 'real-world' is basic</li> <li>• Ideas are applied competently, but mechanically, in uncomplicated circumstances</li> <li>• A basic understanding of how knowledge of stakeholders may have been influenced, but may lack evidence or support from appropriate examples</li> </ul>

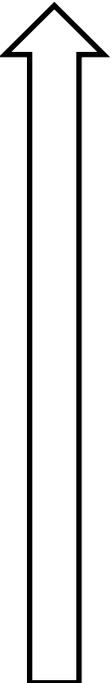
## MANAGING ENGAGEMENT

- Demonstrates a capacity to make management decisions in ambiguous and connected real-world circumstances
- Able to work across disciplinary and organisational boundaries to support change

THRESHOLD	ASSESSMENT CRITERIA
 <p data-bbox="164 539 300 573"><b>First Class</b></p> <p data-bbox="164 1487 304 1520"><b>Third Class</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Demonstrates an excellent level of critical thought around the choice, framing and understanding of the engagement situation</li> <li>• Provides a comprehensive account of influences of project partners; resources; disciplinary, organisational boundaries; and different levels of expertise on project management decisions and delivery</li> <li>• Conflicting goals within the situation are recognised and evaluated in relation to different approaches to managing them</li> <li>• Reflects critically on how to support the learning of others, to support emergence and self-organisation</li> </ul>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The choice, framing and understanding of the engagement situation is good but may need further critical development and supporting examples</li> <li>• Effective exploration of a wide range of situational influences on decision making</li> <li>• Conflicting goals are recognised, and approaches to managing and evaluating these are explored.</li> <li>• Demonstrates a good understanding of the processes that are important to supporting the learning of others and provides some relevant examples of how these processes have been implemented</li> </ul>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Information about the choice, framing and understanding of the engagement situation is basic and could be supported with more detailed evidence</li> <li>• Describes a range of situational influences on decision making Conflicting goals are recognised, but suitable approaches to managing and evaluating these are not offered</li> <li>• Demonstrates some understanding of the processes that are important to supporting the learning of others and provides some examples of how these processes have been implemented</li> </ul>

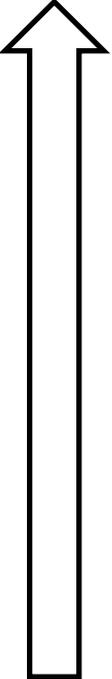
## AWARENESS OF SELF AND OTHERS

- Critical understanding of self, society and context in which module operates
- Detailed understanding of the audiences, communities, institutions and stakeholders engaged with the project

THRESHOLD	ASSESSMENT CRITERIA
 <p data-bbox="164 539 300 573"><b>First Class</b></p> <p data-bbox="164 1559 304 1592"><b>Third Class</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Excellent description of the contextual detail in which the engagement activity takes place</li> <li>• Situations are viewed critically from multiple perspectives and these perspectives have been placed in context</li> <li>• Is able to interpret different value systems, attitudes and emotions including the student's own, and is able to perceive legitimate differences between them</li> <li>• Excellent critical reflection on how the student's knowledge and understanding of 'place' (the communities, audiences, institutions and stakeholders involved) has developed through the programme</li> </ul>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Good description of the contextual detail in which the engagement activity takes place</li> <li>• Situations are viewed critically from at least one perspective which has been placed in context</li> <li>• Acceptable attempt to interpret other perspectives value systems, attitudes, emotions and their contexts</li> <li>• Good exploration of how the student's knowledge and understanding of 'place' has developed, including some analysis of the implications of these changes (i.e. for the delivery of the programme or future activity)</li> </ul>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Basic description of the contextual detail in which the engagement activity takes place</li> <li>• Situations are reported from at least one perspective which has been placed in context</li> <li>• Limited interpretation of other perspectives, value systems, attitudes, emotions and their contexts</li> <li>• Basic description of how student's knowledge and understanding of 'place' has developed is provided, with limited exploration of the implications of these changes</li> </ul>

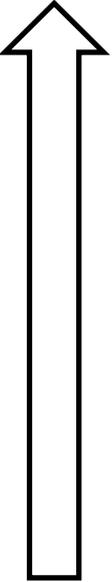
## COMMUNICATION

- Can adapt styles, methods and approaches in order to effectively communicate with, work with and inspire different audiences
- Demonstrates a critical understanding of factors that influence effective communication

THRESHOLD	ASSESSMENT CRITERIA
<p style="text-align: center;"><b>First Class</b></p>  <p style="text-align: center;"><b>Third Class</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Demonstrates an excellent understanding of how the prior knowledge, experience attitudes and beliefs of stakeholders has influenced the student's communication style and approaches</li> <li>• Differentiates in a sophisticated way between the needs and interests of different audiences and stakeholder groups</li> <li>• Demonstrates a high level of appreciation of communication as a complex process involving social roles, norms and conventions of project partners/target audience</li> <li>• Provides rich examples from practice of steps taken to communicating effectively with specialist and non-specialist audiences</li> </ul>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Demonstrates a good understanding of how the prior knowledge, experience attitudes and beliefs of stakeholders has influenced the student's communication style and approaches</li> <li>• Can differentiate effectively between the needs and interests of different audience and stakeholder groups</li> <li>• Demonstrates good appreciation of communication as a complex process involving social roles, norms and conventions of project partners/target audience</li> <li>• Provides a range of examples from practice of steps taken to communicating effectively with specialist and non-specialist audiences</li> </ul>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Demonstrates a basic understanding of how the prior knowledge, experience attitudes and beliefs of stakeholders has influenced the student's communication style and approaches</li> <li>• Demonstrates some capacity to differentiate between the needs and interests of different audience and stakeholder</li> <li>• Demonstrates basic appreciation of communication as a complex process involving social roles, norms and conventions of project partners/target audience</li> <li>• Provides a limited range of examples from practice of steps taken to communicating effectively with specialist and non-specialist audiences</li> </ul>

## REFLECTIVE PRACTICE

- Demonstrates a capacity to reflect on engagement activity, using this to evaluate the programme, and to maintain a process of continual learning

THRESHOLD	ASSESSMENT CRITERIA
<div style="text-align: center;">  </div> <p data-bbox="164 504 300 533"><b>First Class</b></p> <p data-bbox="159 1236 304 1265"><b>Third Class</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Demonstrates excellent capacity to evaluate and reflect on the appropriate skills, capabilities and attributes required for project delivery</li> <li>• Demonstrates excellent use of reflection and feedback to adapt own actions and project plans, supported by a range of well-chosen examples of how emerging/new knowledge is integrated with existing knowledge</li> <li>• Full and insightful evaluation of the methodological approaches utilised and their effectiveness, with cogent recommendations for future projects rooted in a comprehensive evidence base</li> </ul>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Demonstrates good ability to evaluate and reflect on the appropriate skills, capabilities and attributes required for project delivery</li> <li>• Demonstrates a good use of reflection/feedback to adapt own actions and project plans, supported by appropriate examples of how emerging/new knowledge is integrated with existing knowledge</li> <li>• Competent evaluation of the methodological approaches utilised and their effectiveness, with recommendations for future projects rooted in a broad evidence base</li> </ul>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Demonstrates a basic ability to evaluate and reflect on the appropriate skills, capabilities and attributes required for project delivery</li> <li>• Demonstrates some use of reflection/feedback to adapt own actions and project plans, with a limited range of examples of how emerging/new knowledge is integrated with existing knowledge</li> <li>• Limited evaluation of the methodological approaches utilised and their effectiveness, with basic recommendations for future projects rooted in a limited evidence base.</li> </ul>

## Further Developing the Framework

This framework is by no means the final step in this area of work. By some regards it is only the first. The next steps revolve around further consultations with academic departments, publics/community groups, and students to explore the extent to which the framework is felt to add merit to and enrich the activities already on the ground.

The framework is being explored at the University of Bristol as part of a HE STEM funded project looking at incorporating community-based learning into the engineering curriculum at undergraduate level. Our aspiration at this stage is to see what currency the framework has across different disciplines and to track the thoughts of academics, students and partners about its relevance for the curriculum and for the projects as a whole.

In the longer term we would like to track its development across a number of academic departments and initiate a research and evidence gathering exercise that captures the impact of these types of programmes on students, academics and communities. We would be particularly interested to hear from colleagues who would be interested in trialling and evaluating the framework in action.