The history of the National Co-ordinating Centre for Public Engagement

The NCCPE was established in 2008 as part of a £9.2m project to inspire a culture change in how UK universities engaged with the public. This ‘Beacons for Public Engagement’ project has provided useful insights into how to galvanise universities to embrace greater societal engagement in their work.

Hosted by the University of Bristol and the University of the West of England, the NCCPE has been working with universities across the UK to embed engagement. This article unpacks some of the learning from the project, and invites others to join in the conversation, to encourage universities to engage with society in mutually beneficial ways.

The genesis of public engagement

The tradition of ‘public understanding of science’ within the UK was initially framed as a need for scientists to communicate their work better and to promote understanding, however the paradigm shifted in the 2000s when it was realised that such a stance implied a ‘deficit’ in the public. Public concerns about emerging technologies like GM foods reinforced the strategic importance of building a more robust and mutually respectful dialogue with the public, where their views should be taken account of within decision making processes. The notion of ‘public engagement’ (PE) emerged.

Rather than being the fault of the public, a more nuanced analysis highlighted issues with the professional culture of science. An influential Royal Society Report (2006) was published where the authors interviewed researchers and identified barriers, including the research-driven culture; the fact that PE was seen to be not well regarded by peers; and that it was hard to resource.

This report led to the decision by the UK Research Councils, Higher Education Funding Councils and the Wellcome Trust to establish the ‘Beacons for Public Engagement’ – to:

‘create a culture within UK Higher Education where PE is formalised and embedded as a valued and recognised activity for staff at all levels, and for students’ (HEFCE, 2006).

Six Beacons – partnerships between HEIs and civil society organisations – were established, along with the NCCPE, to synthesise and disseminate the learning from these projects.

The history, aims and objectives of each of the individual beacons and the NCCPE are well documented elsewhere (NCCPE, 2011). All the Beacon projects focussed on critiquing, challenging and nudging their institutional systems and cultures to make them more supportive of engagement. At the heart of all the projects was an active commitment to learning and reflection. As part of this, the NCCPE invested in a national action research process which drew on a systemic action research methodology to develop a systemic inquiry process (Burns 2007). Six parallel learning streams were established, and participants with different organisational relationships to PE were drawn into small inquiry groups.
The findings from this research are summarised in a final report (Burns et al, 2011) which identified a number of barriers to change, as well as ways these barriers might be overcome. The report ended with seven recommendations – which accorded with much of the learning from the Beacon projects:

- While some “third stream” activities will need to be pursued independently of research and teaching, for most universities a focus on integrating PE into research and teaching is likely to be the most effective approach.
- PE is likely to have the greatest impact if it is focused at the level of the group (department, research & development team, and or curriculum development leaders).
- Universities should build a central support function for PE, not as the place where PE happens, but as a resource for those that are carrying it out. Key functions should include: training; development of networking opportunities; use of space; marketing and communications.
- Pro-Vice Chancellors need to have the integration of PE into research and teaching as an explicit part of their brief.
- Expectations around PE need to be made clear to staff when they are recruited. This means building it into job descriptions and making it clear at job interviews and induction.
- Universities should pay greater attention to their accessibility, becoming more welcoming and friendly places, and thinking strategically about where the university might take its work beyond its buildings and campuses.

**Changing contexts**

While the Beacon projects were undertaking their 4 year culture change programmes – the world around universities was changing dramatically.

Alongside the global economic crisis and increasing devolution between the four UK nations, UK universities also had to contend with new policy directives. These included the so-called ‘impact agenda’, where research funders expect people bidding for research to articulate the engagement pathways they intend to pursue in executing their research and the new research assessment exercise which, for the first time, requires departments to submit case studies to articulate the impact of their work ‘beyond academia’. 20% of the total quality assessment would be based upon that external impact. These changes brought engagement centre stage. In addition, there were profound changes to the ways students were expected to pay for their education, with fees in England tripling in most universities, creating a strong backslash against the perceived ‘marketization’ of HE.

The findings distilled from the Beacons projects informed the creation of a new PE Concordat (RCUK, 2010), signed by all the major research funders, which articulated their expectations of institutions they funded:

1. UK research organisations should have a strategic commitment to PE
2. Researchers should be recognised and valued for their involvement with PE activities
3. Researchers should be enabled to participate in PE activities through appropriate training, support and opportunities

4. The signatories and supporters of this Concordat will undertake regular reviews of their and the wider research sector’s progress in fostering PE across the UK

Whilst the Beacons projects drew to a close, the NCCPE received funding to continue to support universities across the UK to embrace engagement as part of their work.

What have we learned so far?

The project has elicited substantial learning to date, full details of which can be found on the NCCPE website www.publicengagement.ac.uk.

- To embed a culture of PE you need to consider three main areas
  - People: involve your staff, students, and communities in helping define what you do
  - Processes: put in appropriate support for staff, students and partners to develop effective relationships, learn together and reward and recognise this work in appropriate ways
  - Purpose: Ensure you are clear about the strategic purpose of your engagement, communicate it effectively, and support leaders throughout the university and community

- Effective partnership work is at the heart of engaged practice. If you want your work to make a difference you need to work effectively with others both inside and outside your institution, and learn to value, respect and recognise their expertise and experience.

- Funding and institutional structures mean that engagement is fragmented across institutions – from engagement with research, teaching and learning, volunteering and so called corporate social responsibility. When considering the type of university you want to be, you need to consider these things in the round.

- Finding effective ways to evaluate and measure the impact of your engagement work is an important part of establishing effective engagement practices, and protecting this work in the future.

The NCCPE’s on-going work is exploring some of the current barriers and opportunities including:

- An ‘engaged futures’ consultation exploring the interests, needs and expectations of university partners and publics. What do people really want from universities, and how could or should universities respond? (NCCPE, 2013)

- Internationally there is lots of expertise and experiences of engaged work with universities. We are keen to develop more opportunities for people passionate about this work to share their ideas and insights, and help galvanise university engagement to the benefit of society.

- Working with a group of community partners, engaged academics and the Community University Partnership Programme at the University of Brighton we are developing a UK
Community Partner network, to share learning, build capacity and stimulate change (NCCPE, 2012).

**Conclusions**

Principles of engagement capture the imagination and commitment of many working in higher education – at an individual level, a belief that we should ‘make a difference’ through our work; and at an institutional level, re-connecting to the founding principles of the institution, for instance as a ‘civic’ university. But this only takes you so far. Shifts in funding priorities – for instance the expectation that impact ‘beyond academia’ is assessed – provide an equally important driver in the system.

Last but by no means least, what has also come sharply into focus is how engrained and embedded certain values and ways of working are which make developing open, mutually-respectful collaboration both within and outside universities difficult. Idealism and coercion are potentially uneasy bedfellows. The challenge lies in building capabilities and capacities to work in more cooperative and engaged ways, where different kinds of expertise are genuinely valued. While real progress has been made to re-orientate HE in the UK towards a more engaged mind-set, it feels like we are still at a relatively early stage of the journey.

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