

Tools for talking... about public engagement

Resources to help you initiate purposeful conversations about public engagement

Tools for talking... about public engagement

Tools to help you kick start purposeful conversations about public engagement

Developing a strategy for your public engagement support programme requires you to really tune in to how your colleagues and partners make sense of public engagement. Your strategy needs to 'go with the grain' and align with colleagues' goals and values. It is much more likely to succeed if people feel that they have been listened to and involved in the development process.

Therefore, making time to talk, discuss, and explore how people make sense of public engagement is a vital part of the process. But managing such conversations requires a careful approach. If they are too open-ended, you can go around in circles.

In this short guide we share a few of the frameworks and tools that we have used at the NCCPE to focus these kinds of vital conversations. From experience, we have found that it can really help to use what we term 'scaffolds' - frameworks which represent the topic or issue you wish to focus on, and focus attention on critical issues. The topics we cover are:

1. Why does public engagement matter?
2. What is public engagement?
3. What purposes can public engagement serve?
4. Who are the public?
5. When does public engagement happen?
6. How well supported is public engagement at our institution? And what could we do to improve things?

Used well they can allow groups of people or individuals to share their own sense making, and to begin to construct a shared understanding (or to acknowledge the important differences between them). This will provide you with vital intelligence to inform your support strategy.

We explore six useful conversation starters below. The linked resource pack provides you with versions of these diagrams to incorporate into your own presentations.

1. Why does public engagement matter?

An important place is to explore why public engagement matters. A strategy needs a clear sense of purpose.

This simple diagram is a great conversation starter to allow you to explore people's personal perspectives. People tend to feel several of these reasons are important – but be prepared to push people to choose the most important, and to explain why they have prioritised it.

Why is public engagement important?

Which of these arguments best represents your view?

- A** It's our duty / responsibility to engage with the public
- B** Engaging with the public helps us do better research and teaching
- C** We should engage with the public because funders increasingly expect it
- D** In the grand scheme of things, public engagement isn't a priority

It is also important to explore the wider social and political context for public engagement. The slide below identifies four broad challenges which universities – and in fact all public institutions – need to confront in terms of public perceptions of their work.



Secretive and untrustworthy

Irrelevant and out of touch with society

Elitist and reinforcing inequality

Unaccountable and a waste of tax payers' money

We explore these challenges on our [website](#).

The next slide turns these challenges on their head, and describes how public engagement can address these pressures and deliver positive outcomes in terms of trust, relevance, accountability and the responsibility of the sector.



2. What is public engagement?

Another challenge for you to navigate is the fact that public engagement is a very broad term encompassing a host of approaches and methods. Every university will approach it differently – and within each university people will have very different views.

We explore this on our [website](#).

At the NCCPE we celebrate the diversity of approaches, thinking of them as a family of related types of activity. What we emphasise is mutual benefit and listening as fundamental characteristics of good engagement.

What is Public Engagement?

Public engagement describes the myriad of ways in which the activity and benefits of higher education and research can be shared with the public. Engagement is by definition a two-way process, involving interaction and listening, with the goal of generating mutual benefit.

National Coordinating Centre for Public Engagement



A useful framework for beginning to explore public engagement with colleagues is to consider how it can animate all areas of an HEI's activity - its research, knowledge exchange, teaching and its broader social responsibility.

The diagram below can help you explore where your university wants to 'draw the boundary' around its public engagement.



3. What purposes can public engagement serve?

Given the breadth of activity that sits under the umbrella of public engagement, it can be really helpful to encourage people to clarify the purpose of engagement. We have found a really useful device for doing this is to offer three distinct (if overlapping) purposes which typically underpin engagement:

Ways of engaging...



For each of these purposes, there are a range of methods that can be deployed. For instance, for ‘inspiring’, public lectures and talks, media and festivals; for ‘consulting’, public dialogues and advisory groups; and for ‘collaborating’, citizen science and co-produced research.

There are lots more tools to support good practice on the [‘do engagement’](#) area of our website.

4. Who are the public?

It really helps to talk about who we think we mean when we talk about ‘the public’. It is also important to explore how public engagement sits alongside other kinds of external engagement – for instance with policy makers or with business.

At the NCCPE, we try to emphasise two things when thinking about ‘the public’. One is that the more precise and targeted engagement is, the more likely it is to work well. We encourage people to think really carefully about *why* people might be motivated to engage, and what would be meaningful for them.

We also encourage people not to think about public engagement as existing in its own ‘box’, but to consider how it interacts with and can enhance other kinds of external engagement, for instance with policy or with practice.

The diagram below provides a useful framework to scaffold conversations about this. It shows how ‘publics’ can be engaged in different roles relevant to different domains of civil society: for instance, as patients and service users (alongside engagement with health and social care professionals), or as customers or employees alongside engagement with businesses. We also foreground the importance of taking account of demographic factors such as age, ethnicity and economic status.

Who are ‘the public’?

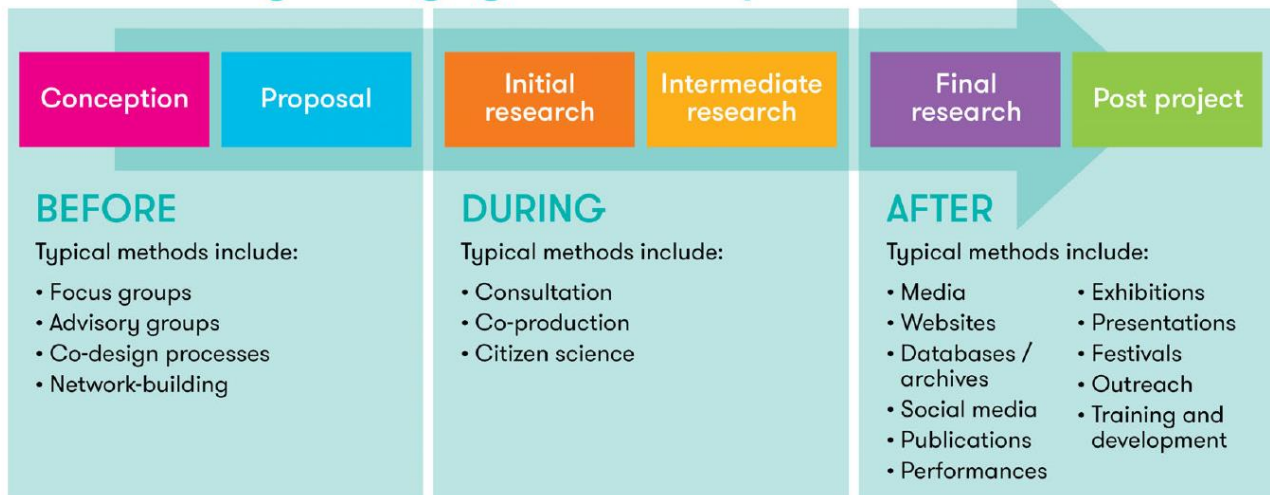
DEMOGRAPHICS:
 age, ethnicity,
 gender, economic
 status, level of
 education,
 income level and
 employment



5. When can public engagement happen?

Another really useful ‘frame’ to use when exploring public engagement practice is to consider when it can happen in (for instance) a research programme. For many people, engagement happens at or near the end of a project, in order to share the findings. The diagram below can help you to explore the benefits of developing engagement activities earlier in the process:

WHEN can you engage with the public?



6. How well supported is public engagement at our institution? And what could we do to improve things?

Last but not least, you will want to encourage colleagues to share their views on how well public engagement is supported in your institution and to identify some priority areas where you can make a difference.



The interactive EDGE

Use this interactive tool to assess your institution's support for public engagement.

Have a go at using the EDGE tool – drag the sliders to the statement that best describes how your institution is currently supporting public engagement. Submit your results to us and we'll offer some top tips about what to do next.

Part one: Purpose

Clarify your PURPOSE for engaging with the public

1

Mission

Create a shared understanding of the purpose, value, meaning and role of public engagement to staff and students and embed this in your strategy and mission.

Choose a description

Embryonic Developing Gripping Embedding

We developed our [EDGE tool](#) for this purpose. Based on learning from the Beacons for Public Engagement – and broader learning about culture change – the EDGE tool provides a quick way to allow people to assess how well they think your institution is doing against a set of nine key areas (for instance, the strength of leadership, and the extent of reward and recognition for public engagement).

You can find out more about the EDGE tool and how to use it in this area of our website. There is an [interactive version](#) you can complete, and share with colleagues. We have also developed '[mini EDGE tools](#)' for each of the nine areas, and an [EDGE survey](#) which we can run with you to benchmark your support.

How we can help

At the NCCPE, we love working with Public Engagement professionals to support your work.

Please do get in touch if you would like us to run a session with your colleagues, building on these and other tools. Seeing them 'in action' can help you feel more confident in beginning to use them yourself.

Our [Engage Academy](#) is also another way in which you can work with us to explore these different tools and learn how to act as a 'change agent' in your institution.

Do get in touch!