Engaging publics with research

National Co-ordinating Centre for Public Engagement

Reviewing the REF impact case studies and templates
Executive summary

Introduction

This report shares the results of a long process of review and reflection. The story begins in 2012 when the NCCPE was invited by HEFCE to submit a discussion paper[1] about assessing the impact of public engagement to inform the guidance for REF 2014. We were pleased to see this advice informing the guidance provided by the Main Panels.

In the run up to the REF we were able to run a number of workshops to help people develop their case studies and impact templates. After the submission process was completed, we conducted a 'Lessons learned from the REF' workshop in 2014.[2] Since the results were announced in 2015 and the case studies and templates were published online for all to browse, we have spent many fascinating hours poring over the submissions. This report shares the key findings from that analysis and reflection – findings which we have tested iteratively with the sector through a variety of workshops and events over the last 18 months.

Now is a very timely moment to be publishing this report. We were encouraged recently to see Lord Stern's review[3] of the REF calling for Public Engagement to be more firmly incentivised and embedded in the next REF and that this prompt was picked up in the HEFCE consultation on REF 2021. We hope that our report will provide useful evidence and a useful set of frameworks to progress our collective understanding of how best to plan, deliver and describe the process and outcomes of engaging the public with research.

We believe that this report provides clear evidence about why it is important to see public engagement more prominently featured in the next REF. While there was a surprising amount of public engagement featured in REF 2014 – nearly half of the case studies make some mention of it – our research reveals significant potential to scale up the quality and extent of the public engagement that features.

We hope this report provides people with confidence in the value of public engagement to research that builds on the 'best' of REF 2014 – by identifying examples which demonstrate the compelling value that public engagement with research can realise, and by identifying areas where our collective efforts can be better focused.

We look forward to your feedback and comments.

1. Discussion Paper: Assessing impacts arising from public engagement with research (2012) https://www.publicengagement.ac.uk/sites/default/files/publication/impacts_arising_from_public_engagement_discussion_paper_0.pdf
2. After the REF - Taking Stock (2014) www.publicengagement.ac.uk/sites/default/files/publication/nccpe_after_the_ref_write_up_final.pdf
3. Building on Success and Learning from Experience An Independent Review of the Research Excellence Framework (2016) www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/541338/ind-16-9-ref-stern-review.pdf

Background to the REF

The 2014 Research Excellence Framework (2014 REF) was conducted jointly by the UK HE Funding Councils to inform the selective allocation of their grant for research to institutions, with effect from 2015-16. REF assessment is intended to provide accountability for public investment in research and produce evidence of the benefits of this investment. The assessment outcomes provide benchmarking information and a reputational standard.

For the first time, the 2014 REF took research impact into consideration and assessed the impact of higher education research outside academia.[1] The assessment of impact was based on expert review of case studies and impact templates submitted by 36 Units of Assessment (listed in annex 1). Case studies could include any social, economic or cultural impact or benefit beyond academia that arose during the assessment period (1 January 2008 to 31 July 2013) and that was underpinned by excellent research produced by the submitting institution within the given timeframe.[2] Future and potential impact were not included. To be credited for an impact, the submitting unit had to show that it had undertaken research of a certain standard that made a distinctive contribution to achieving the claimed impact or benefit. Impacts or benefits arising from engaging the public with the submitted unit's research could be included. Dissemination activity alone, without evidence of its benefits, was not considered as impact.

Submitting units were also required to submit an Impact Template, spelling out how they had supported and enabled impact during the assessment period.[3] Case studies were submitted using a generic template (see annex 2), with word limits (four pages of information). This was designed to enable institutions to explain, and demonstrate clearly, research impact through a narrative that included indicators and evidence as appropriate to the case being made. The impact element of the REF contributed to 20% of the unit's overall REF score. The scores of individual case studies (unclassified, 1*, 2*, 3* or 4*) were not published, but the overall impact score for each unit was.

The REF impact case study database
Over 6,000 REF impact case studies have been made publicly available on a searchable web-based database.[4] To support accessibility, the case studies are uniformly presented, while preserving original detail and text. Original files can also be downloaded. Case studies have been tagged with information about fields of research, impact types and location of activity to enable indexing and faster searching based on HEI, region or subject area, for example. The range of search options includes flexible keyword-based searching. This database provided the primary source material for this review.

1. REF (2011a). Research Excellence Framework 2014. Decisions for assessing research impact http://www.ref.ac.uk/media/ref/content/pub/decisionsonassessingresearchimpact/01_11.pdf
2. Ibid
3. REF (2011b). Research Excellence Framework 2014. Assessment framework and guidance on submissions. July 2011.
4. http://impact.ref.ac.uk/CaseStudies/

Our approach and methodology

Our approach has been exploratory, using a variety of methods. Our intention was to identify trends and patterns in the data which would help people understand how public engagement featured in the REF; how it was assessed; what (in our judgement, and in the judgement of the panels) appeared to be the hallmarks of quality; and to draw out implications for future activity. To do this we:
- Used a structured approach to searching and analysing the database to identify the distribution of key terms describing types of interaction with the public within the case studies;
- In the process, identified a sample of 731 case studies which reference 'public engagement' and a further 2377 case studies featuring other descriptions of interaction with the public;
- Performed further text searches and analysis of these two samples to identify broad trends and patterns in the distribution of these terms (and others, e.g. impact types) across the 36 Units of Assessment;
- Looked at a sub-set of these 'engagement' case studies from across the four main panels to explore how they constructed effective narrative accounts, working qualitatively to develop a model of public engagement research impact;
- Identified impact templates from the highest performing Units of Assessment to explore how they framed their support for public engagement, and derived a model to describe how to create an effective environment for public engagement;
- Used the above findings to elucidate what in our opinion constitutes good practice in the creation of excellent case studies and templates;
- Developed a framework to describe the complex process of judgement which we conclude is necessary if impacts arising from engaging the public with research are to be effectively assessed, to inform future iterations of the REF.

Caveats
While the REF impact case studies provide a fascinating snapshot of public engagement with research practice in the UK, it is important to recognise that the case studies do not represent a comprehensive picture of the extent and nature of public engagement with research. In particular, it is worth noting that:
- There is anecdotal evidence that some staff were actively discouraged from submitting case studies featuring public engagement due to the perceived ambiguity of the guidance. This means that the some excellent practice in the sector was not captured by the process.
- It is widely recognised that one of the most significant benefits arising from engaging the public with research is the impact realised on the research and researchers involved. However, the REF was focused on impact 'beyond academia', and so this rich seam of engagement practice rarely featured in the submitted case studies.
- There is a wealth of effective, purposeful public engagement that is not directly related to a specific area of research. This engagement is an important part of the HE landscape, but is not aimed at developing research impact. This work is not included in the REF but still has huge value.

Acknowledgements and thanks

A large number of people have contributed their insight and expertise to this report, although any errors or omissions are fully our responsibility at the NCCPE.

In particular, we would like to thank the following people for their input to and critical reading of the many iterations of this research:

Jenny Ames   Nick Mahony
Richard Bond   Averil McDonald
Jenni Chambers   Kate Miller
Sharon Clancy   Alison Powell
Steven Hill   Mark Reed
Rick Holliman   The Catalysts for Public Engagement and Catalyst Seed Fund teams

If you have comments on this report, or would like to adapt the content and re-use it, please contact the NCCPE: nccpe.enquiries@uwe.ac.uk

To cite this report:
Duncan, S. and Manners, P. (2017). Engaging Publics with Research: Reviewing the REF Impact Case Studies and Templates, Bristol/NCCPE.

The full report

The full report details the key findings of our analysis in five different sections, represented below. The report can be accessed by contacting the NCCPE: nccpe.enquiries@uwe.ac.uk

1. Mining the database (p.19 – 42)

Searching the database to identify how public engagement featured – to identify broad trends and patterns

2. Interpreting the case studies (p.43 – 92)

Reading a sample of case studies in depth to interpret the different storylines and framings of public engagement, and developing a framework to capture the critical elements in an effective case study featuring public engagement

3. Reviewing 4* impact templates (p.93 – 99)

Looking in depth at the highest performing units of assessment to identify how they are supporting public engagement, as expressed in their impact templates

5. Concluding comments (p.105 -107)

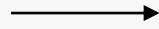Summarising the key lessons learned and identifying action points to improve future practice

4. Reflections on the process (p.100 – 104)

Identifying what the review has told us about the challenges of describing and assessing impacts arising from public engagement

Executive summary

Key findings

1. Mining the database ⟶

Searching the database to identify how public engagement featured to identify broad trends and patterns

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What do we mean by public engagement?
By 'public engagement' we mean interaction with people outside academia, in their capacity as citizens and members of communities 'of place or interest. We differentiate public engagement from engagement with policy making, business and the professions, but recognise that in practice they often overlap.

- **Public engagement is pervasive:** 3108 of the 6640 case studies (47%) made some reference to engaging with the public.
- **Public engagement can happen 'alone' but more often is integrated into a blend of external engagement, with policy or the professions, and very occasionally with business:** This suggests a significant virtuous circle or association: those institutions that engage well with a range of different stakeholders include 'the public' as one of those groups.
- **Public engagement appears to be more prevalent in the Arts and Humanities:** The extent of public engagement reported across the four main panels differed strikingly. There was surprisingly little public engagement reported in areas like medicine and public health, where there has been a long standing expectation that researchers should engage patients. This merits deeper analysis.
- **Different 'flavours' of public engagement feature in different discipline areas**: for instance, 'outreach' is prevalent in physics.
- **Public engagement is nearly always focussed on changes to understanding and awareness. Much more rarely is it foregrounded as a route to realising legal, technological or commercial impacts or more instrumental outcomes:** many researchers default to a paradigm of public engagement as 'dissemination', and in the process limit its potential to contribute at all stages of the research cycle. The public are most often framed as an 'audience' for research findings, rather than as experts in their own right or as active participants in the process.
- **Evidence provided of impact on public understanding and awareness is often weak**: usually researchers limit their evidence to a list of the outlets they have used and the numbers of people engaged.
- **Public engagement is often 'mediated' through the involvement of organisations like schools, broadcasters, charities or museums:** there is significant potential to benefit from these organisations' expertise in engagement and evaluation of impact, but this is rarely made explicit in the case studies (for instance, by utilising evaluations conducted by them). The impact on these organisations as a result of their mediation is often a significant aspect of the impact, but not always made explicit.
- **We didn't discover any significant difference in the scores awarded to case studies featuring mentions of public engagement compared with those that don't:** anecdotally, there was nervousness in the sector that public engagement would be valued less highly than other types of engagement. This finding challenges that assumption.

Key findings

Reading a sample of case studies in depth to interpret the different storylines and framings of public engagement and develop a set of lenses for 'reading' the REF

What does an excellent case study featuring public engagement look like?

The case studies provide a rich data set to address the question: how can excellence in generating impacts from engaging the public with research best be evidenced in a case study? We approached the analysis with some assumptions: that a quality engagement process will typically involve (for instance) clarity about your purpose and sensitivity to the public(s) you intend to engage. Reading a range of case studies allowed us to finesse these assumptions. We have derived a set of prompts that make explicit our conclusions about what excellent case studies do to 'tell their story' and offer evidence of impact.   Excellent case studies typically articulate the following 'links in the chain':

What?
A convincing account of the significance of the research: why it matters beyond academia. Who should care about it? What is distinctive about its potential?
Where?
An explicit, intelligent acknowledgement of the external context, and a clear grasp of the potential contribution of the research to influence thinking, practice and people's capabilities beyond academia
Who with?
A clear articulation of the key publics and partners involved and a rationale for their involvement, with clear insight and knowledge about their interests, motivations and needs in relation to the research
Why?
A confident sense of purpose animating the engagement that underpins the impact claimed
When?
An intelligent sense of timing to maximise the potential impact of the engagement activity, with activities differentiated by the phase of the research
How?
Drawing on appropriate methods, tailored to purpose, context and the publics they are seeking to engage
With what impact?
A convincing account of the difference it has helped to generate, and credible claims for the contribution made by the research to that impact
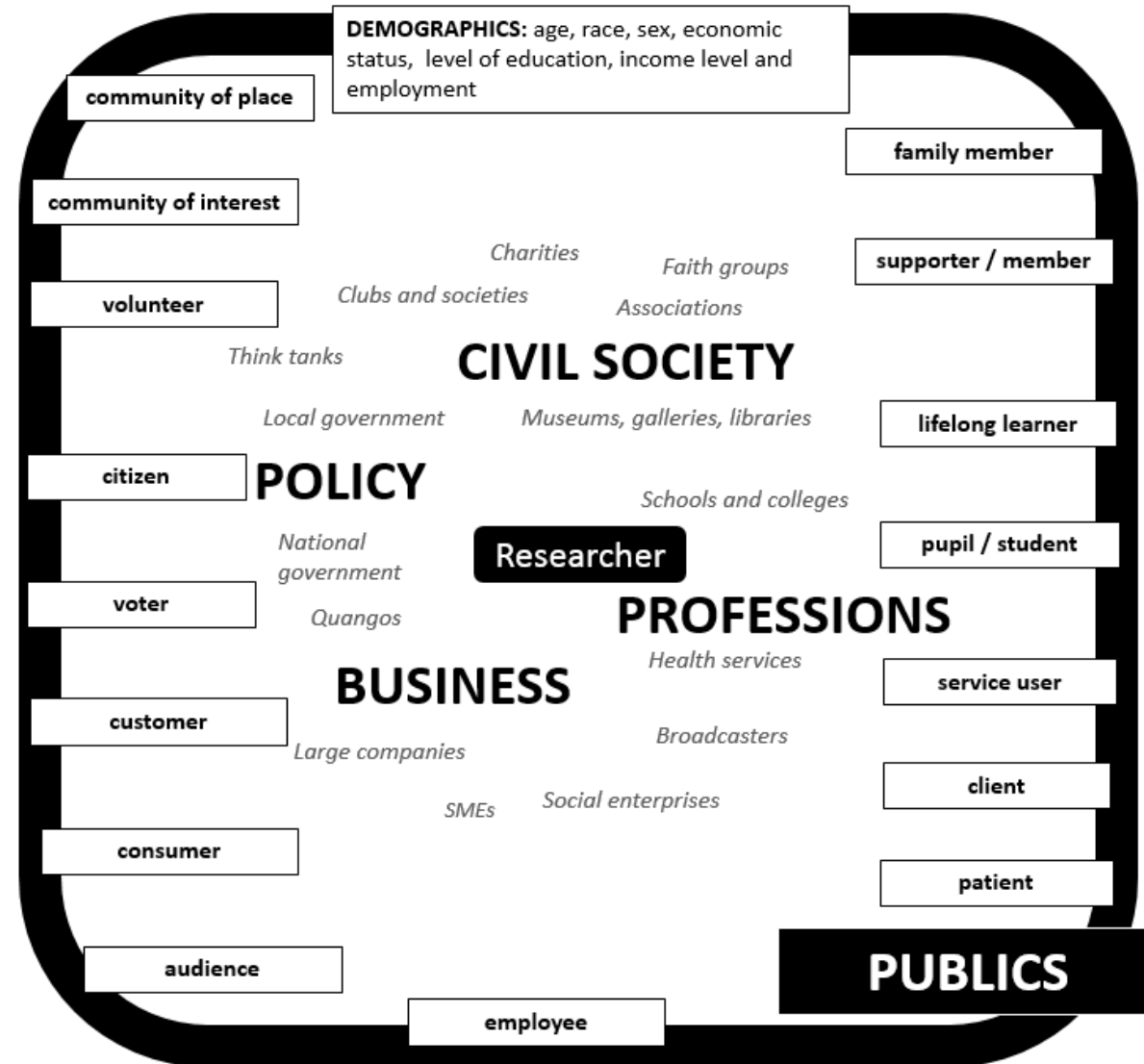
2. Interpreting the case studies

Reading a sample of case studies in depth to interpret the different storylines and framings of PE and develop a set of lenses for 'reading' the REF

Who are the public?

Making sense of the complex way in which people beyond academia engage with research is important. Many case studies just talk about 'the public' in an undifferentiated way. More clarity and precision about who was engaged is important. We derived the following 'map' from the case studies. It articulates the world 'beyond academia' as a variety of spheres: policy, professional practice, business and civil society.

In each of these spheres individual members of the public, and collectives of people, play a variety of roles – as citizens, consumers, voters etc.: focusing on the active roles the public can play in the public sphere seems to us to be a helpful way of providing more specificity about the nature of the interaction between researchers and publics.

DEMOGRAPHICS: age, race, sex, economic status, level of education, income level and employment

community of place

community of interest

volunteer

citizen

voter

customer

consumer

audience

employee

Charities
Clubs and societies
Think tanks
CIVIL SOCIETY
Local government
Museums, galleries, libraries
POLICY
National government
Quangos
BUSINESS
Large companies
SMEs
Schools and colleges
Researcher
PROFESSIONS
Health services
Broadcasters
Social enterprises
Faith groups
Associations

family member

supporter / member

lifelong learner

pupil / student

service user

client

patient

PUBLICS

Key findings

→ **2. Interpreting the case studies** →

Reading a sample of case studies in depth to interpret the different storylines and framings of PE and develop a set of lenses for 'reading' the REF

How can the public engage with research?

The case studies reveal a variety of ways in which researchers typically engage the public with research:

Involve public in the design and framing of the research	Engage public in the research process	Maximise uptake of the research by the public

There are rare examples of the public – for instance in their capacity as service users or volunteers – being involved at the formative stages of a research project.

Co-production or collaborative research are terms often used to describe this approach. Sometimes, too, the public are involved as members of advisory groups.

Although the impact of this way of working can be really powerful, influencing the quality and robustness of the research and ensuring its sensitivity and relevance (and the likelihood of its impact), the impact component of the REF is not focused on how involvement of the public enhances the research.

Nevertheless, there can be significant benefits for the public in playing such active roles in the research process, for instance in terms of their skills, understanding and empowerment.

There are some compelling examples of the public being involved in the research process itself, actively contributing to the process of investigation.

Examples include:
- Citizen science where the public are contributing data
- Co-production where the public are acting as co-investigators and contributing their expertise
- Dialogic approaches where public expertise, attitudes and values are actively sought throughout the process

This approach can also realise powerful personal outcomes for the public involved.

The most common way in which the public are engaged is once the research is complete, or nearly complete: researchers actively seek ways to ensure the significance of their research is widely understood and shared 'beyond academia'.

Typically this activity might involve:
- Dissemination activity that seeks to target people who might benefit from the research and engage them with its findings
- Working with partner organisations to integrate the findings from the research into their public-facing products and services, networks, training or outreach activity

The framing of the REF encourages the submission of activity which is focused in this area, which helps explain why so many case studies describe activities focused on translation and uptake.

2. Interpreting the case studies

Reading a sample of case studies in depth to interpret the different storylines and framings of PE and develop a set of lenses for 'reading' the REF

What types of public engagement featured?

We identified five distinctively different approaches to public engagement
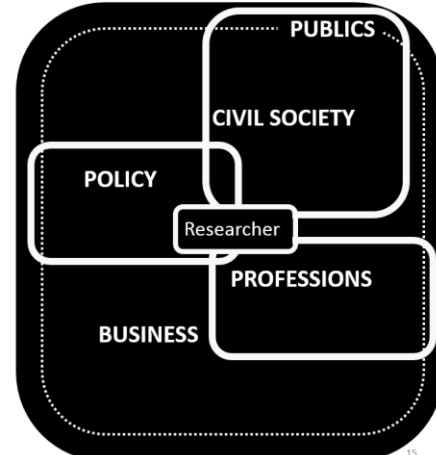

'Classic' public engagement

'Mediated' public engagement'

'Blended' public engagement'

'Behind the scenes' public engagement'

'Bolt on' public engagement'

'Classic' public engagement involves researchers engaging directly with a community of place / interest – e.g. with adult learners – with this engagement forming the backbone of the case study.
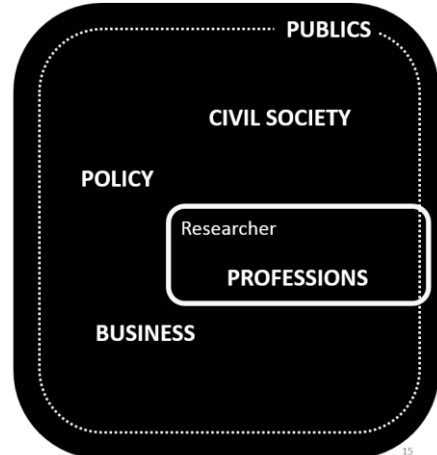
'Mediated' public engagement sees an active collaboration with intermediary organisation(s) like a charity, museum, media or school to reach their audience / public.

With 'blended' public engagement, the public engagement forms part of a wider knowledge exchange project – e.g. to engage policy makers, practitioners and service users around a particular health issue.

'Behind the scenes' PE sees no direct engagement with publics – all the effort is put into improving the quality of PE undertaken by intermediary organisations, by influencing their practice or making new resources available.
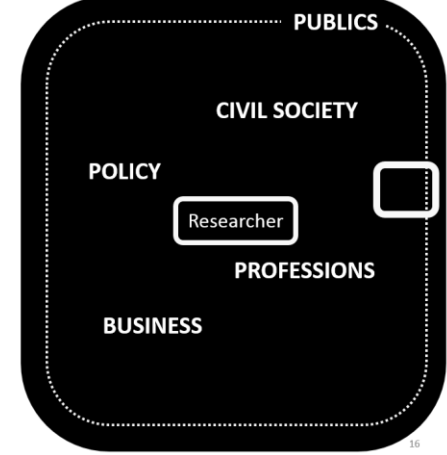
With 'bolt on' public engagement there is a cursory role for public engagement (for instance, some media coverage was achieved) but it is peripheral to the main engagement activity being undertaken.

What kinds of impact can arise from public engagement?

Our review of the case studies allowed us to develop a framework that helps to capture why public engagement with research 'matters' and helps to describe the types of impact that are typically generated. Adapting the ESRC's categorisation of impacts (conceptual, instrumental and capacity building) we identified six broad outcome areas and various indicators of impact.

Type of impact	Typical outcomes arising from public engagement	What kinds of impact can be realised?
Conceptual	**Enlightenment:** inspiring wonder, curiosity and learning; affecting meaning & sense-making; challenging conventional wisdom **Criticism:** provoking challenge, scrutiny & debate; holding to account	• Changed understandings • Enhanced learning and reflection • Increased empathy
Instrumental	**Innovation:** prompting new ideas and ways of acting; creating new products and knowledge; galvanising change **Reflexivity:** prompting dialogue & deliberation; exploring risk; informing decision making	• Changed standards / regulation • Changed accountability regimes • Products and services are influenced and changed • Changed policies • Changed planning processes • Changed / enhanced public realm and environment
Capacity building	**Connectivity:** building networks; encouraging participation & involvement **Capability:** building skills; influencing behaviours and practices; empowering; improving well-being	• Increased participation and progression • New skills • Changed behaviours • New or strengthened networks • Enhanced collaboration • Enhanced well-being

Key findings

What's the 'point' of public engagement? We identified three stylised 'storylines' which recurred throughout the sample

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Research generates powerful new knowledge and meanings.

Public engagement brings that knowledge into the public sphere to animate conversation, inspiring learning, reflection and empathy: circulating new ways of making sense of a complex, ever-changing world.

Enlightenment and empathy

Storyline 1: Enlightenment and empathy

What's the motivation?

Making the research:
- **Meaningful**
- **Persuasive**

by

- Stimulating learning
- Influencing public debate
- Changing understandings
- Challenging conventional wisdom
- Fostering empathy

Which methods?

- Media
- Websites
- Debates
- Archives;
- Social media
- Publications
- Performances
- Exhibitions
- Presentations
- Festivals etc.

With what pay off?

Enlightenment: inspiring wonder, curiosity and learning; meaning- & sense-making; empathy

Criticism: provoking challenge, scrutiny & debate; holding to account

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Involving the public as partners in research brings their insight and expertise to bear on how 'the world works'. It helps to generate innovation, enhance quality of life, and improve accountability and decision making.

Social innovation

Storyline 2: Social innovation

What's the motivation?

Making the research:
- **Relevant**
- **Practical**

by

- Changing standards / regulations
- Influencing new products and services
- Changing policies / planning
- Influencing decision making
- Influencing the public realm

Which methods?

- Consultation
- Dialogues
- Co-production
- Advisory groups etc.

With what pay off?

Innovation: new ideas and ways of acting; new products and knowledge; creating; galvanising change

Reflexivity: prompting dialogue & deliberation; exploring risk; informing decision making

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Involving the public in research can help people to develop their skills and capabilities, and to 'live' and 'work' better. Involving them in critiquing and influencing the practices of key agencies – like government or the public sector – enhances the capacity, capability and equity of society

Social action

Storyline 3: Social action

What's the motivation?

Making the research:
- **Motivating**
- **Useful**

by

- Inspiring participation and progression
- Teaching new skills
- Changing behaviours
- Influencing practitioner and policy makers' behaviour /practice / standards
- Fostering collaboration

Which methods?

- Outreach
- Education
- Lifelong learning
- Network-building
- Training and development

With what pay off?

**Connectivity:** building networks; encouraging participation & involvement

Capability: building skills; influencing behaviours and practices; empowering

Key findings

Looking in depth at the impact templates produced by the highest performing units of assessment to identify how they are supporting public engagement

The Impact Templates submitted by the highest performing Units of Assessment reveal that successful departments pay attention to the following:

- Treating public engagement as an integral part of their impact strategy
- Clearly articulating who their 'publics' are
- Expressing an explicit rationale for their public engagement activity
- Having an authentic flavour to their public engagement, sensitive to their discipline, context and values
- Investing in building sustained partnerships and collaborations with external intermediary organisations
- Deploying appropriate methods of engagement, and investing resources and effort to develop their expertise in engagement
- Investing in the creation of a culture in which researchers are supported and incentivised to engage with the public

Key findings
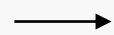
Whilst public engagement is pervasive, and there is some coherence across the sector in the types of approaches being deployed, there is a lack of clarity in our collective thinking about how best to assess the societal impact of such activity. There are two critical challenges to address:

Being more robust and realistic in how we make expert judgements about the impacts that can arise from public engagement (and other forms of engagement)

- Social impact is not a stand alone effect that can easily be isolated & measured. Aspects of impact can certainly be quantified, but ultimately we are involved in a process of **peer judgement** (just as we are when we judge the excellence of research). It is vital that a narrative format & a peer review process are retained.
- We need to be more explicit about the assumptions that we use collectively to 'weigh up' claims of impact. Key to those judgements are considerations of how **context**, **approach** and **method** inform the credibility of the claims being made for the impact and value of the work being described (just as they are to judgements about research excellence).
- In preparing for the next REF, teasing out the relationship between 'measurement' and 'judgement' of impact will be important. We have provided a **framework** to make explicit some of the critical focal points which we think inform rigorous, robust judgements of excellence in public engagement, to underpin assessment of the impacts claimed to have arisen from such activity. This framework is shown on the next page.

Being more creative and ambitious in how we deploy public engagement to generate public benefit

- Although a significant amount of public engagement features in the case studies, it is in many cases under-developed: done with good intentions, but rarely demonstrating excellence and innovation. There is little room for complacency and much work still to be done to build on the foundations laid in REF 2014. We offer the following challenges as areas where we think there is significant opportunity to improve our collective practice:
    - We tend to use public engagement as a way of disseminating research, and miss the opportunity to involve people more actively in contributing their expertise to the research process
    - We fall back on the comfort zone of 'enriching public understanding' and underexploit the potential of public engagement to lead to impact in other areas of public life, for instance enhancing the environment, or influencing the practices of policy makers, business and the professions.
    - When we do seek to animate public understanding we struggle to find convincing ways to describe the significance of what is achieved.
    - We are not interested enough in method: there are pockets of excellence in how people are engaging, rich; long-standing traditions being drawn on; and innovative new methodologies in development. We need to recognise that engaging with the public is a highly skilled and professional practice and work harder to realise excellence in, and assessment of, that practice.
    - We should learn from beyond academia: there is significant expertise beyond higher education and we shouldn't assume we can do this on our own.

Judging the excellence of impacts arising from research: a framework

Underpinning research
- Is the significance of the research within its social context convincingly explained?

Societal context 'beyond academia'
- Is the engagement activity intelligently 'tuned' to its context and stakeholders?
- Are the researchers aware of / alert to cutting edge thinking and practice in each area?

The approach
- Are the researchers clear about what they are trying to achieve through their engagement, and is their activity animated by a clear sense of purpose?

The methods deployed
- Is the engagement being executed in ways that are appropriate to context and purpose?

The impacts claimed
- What difference is it actually making? What changes has it contributed to? How convincingly are these described and evidenced?
- How significant is its contribution to the field it works within?

Research activity

Which aspect of public life is it seeking to investigate and explore?

Social context

Meaningfully engaged with existing knowledge and practice, and with public and professional interests

The intellectual landscape
What is its potential contribution to thinking and sense-making outside academia?

The practice landscape
Which areas of policy and practice does it contribute to?

The people landscape
Who has a stake in this work, why might it matter to them, how might they benefit?

Approach

Purposefully seeking to realise public benefit from the products and processes of research, for instance through:

Enlightenment and empathy
Enlightenment: inspiring wonder, curiosity & learning; meaning- & sense-making; empathy
Criticism: provoking challenge, scrutiny & debate; holding to account

Social innovation
Innovation: new ideas and ways of acting; new products and knowledge; creating; galvanising change
Reflexivity: prompting dialogue & deliberation; exploring risk; informing decision making

Social action
Connectivity: building networks; encouraging participation & involvement
Capability: building skills; influencing behaviours and practices; empowering

Method

Deploying methods that are appropriate to their context and aims

The methods deployed
Are the methods appropriate to the context and purposes?

The 'blend' of engagement
Is it involving the right people in a purposeful and intelligent way?

The timing of the engagement
Is the timing well judged to maximise its potential impact?

Peer review
Have they secured feedback and challenge from peers?

Societal impact

The impacts arising
What is the reach and significance of its impact 'beyond academia'? How are they evidenced? Is the evidence provided proportionate to the impacts claimed?
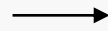
Conceptual
Ways of thinking and making sense

Instrumental
Products & services; ways of doing things

Capacity building
Skills, behaviour and collaboration

What next? What other areas should we focus on to build on the lessons learned from REF 2014?

The review has identified four other areas where we think attention could usefully be applied:

Getting better at understanding conceptual impact
The bulk of public engagement reported in the REF is focussed on conceptual impact – the sharing and nurturing of meaning. We need to invest effort to better understand how such impact can be realised, and how it can be both described and assessed. Projects like AHRC's Cultural Value project provide a really useful basis for deepening our understanding of such processes and how they can be described and assessed.

Understanding a range of impacts
Whilst we need to get better at facilitating and evaluating conceptual impact, we also need to look to other forms of impact that can be generated through engaging the public with research. For instance, public engagement has significant potential to realise instrumental impact: to change the infrastructure of the public realm and the practices of policy makers, business and the professions. We rarely realise its potential to contribute to the shaping of research questions; to ensure research is focused on areas of real resonance and relevance to the public; to feed public expertise into the sense making process of the research; to challenge the ethics and values of our practice; to involve the public as partners and collaborators in making sense of the world and helping to change it in practical ways. The guidance for future REF exercises could broaden and deepen its framing of impact to encourage more of this type of activity.

Focusing on method
Our analysis of the case studies has provided a useful set of insights and 'building blocks' to equip researchers to plan, deliver and evaluate excellent public engagement with research that leads to impact. We need to invest in people's knowledge and skills so that they can use such tools intelligently and judiciously to improve their practice We should make sure that we benefit from the expertise of partners and collaborators from outside higher education in developing our collective expertise.

Thinking beyond the REF
While the REF provides a welcome opportunity to secure funding and recognition for excellent public engagement, it should not become the exclusive frame of reference for university public engagement. Many forms of valuable engagement cannot be captured by the REF, but they are still important and require investment and evaluation.

References

REF publications, guidance and data

REF (2011a). Research Excellence Framework 2014. Decisions for assessing research impact
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The Concordat for Engaging the Public with Research

http://www.rcuk.ac.uk/documents/scisoc/concordatforengagingthepublicwithresearch-pdf/

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