

Public and Community Engagement: The State of the Sector: Recommendations for action



National
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Public Engagement



Introduction

Public and Community Engagement: The State of the Sector

report offers insights and reflections on the current state of engagement across Higher Education (HE) in the UK. Delivered as part of the *Engaged Futures* programme, the report shows significant progress over the last twenty years; engagement is now widely recognised as central to universities' public purpose. However, it also highlights that engagement is not fully embedded in the systems that sustain it, leaving it vulnerable and often treated as expendable.

Recent evidence points to worryingly low levels of public understanding and appreciation of the value universities create. Only 18% of UK adults can name a way university research benefits them, their families or their local area,¹ and the value of universities is increasingly contested.² At the same time, policymakers, funders and universities are placing growing emphasis on how research and higher education contribute to wider public benefit, helping to improve lives, strengthen communities and support growth and prosperity across all parts of the UK.

These developments raise two closely connected challenges for the sector. The first is how to strengthen public confidence in research and higher education at a time when trust and legitimacy can no longer be taken for granted. The second is how universities demonstrate the public value they create for people, places and communities through their research, teaching, civic contribution and wider activities.

The evidence reviewed in the *State of the Sector* report suggests that public and community engagement has a vital role to play in addressing both challenges. Effective engagement helps connect research and knowledge to the priorities and experiences of people and communities, creating opportunities for participation, collaboration and mutual benefit. It enables universities not only to communicate the value they create, but also to realise that value through stronger relationships, more relevant research and deeper connections with society.

The challenges also highlight a significant tension for the HE sector. At the very moment when strengthening public confidence and demonstrating public value have become increasingly important, the engagement infrastructure needed to build and sustain these relationships is being eroded.

The NCCPE is referring to this as *the drift*: a quiet dismantling of the hard-won foundations that have enabled engagement to become embedded across the sector. It is not driven by a loss of commitment, but by decisions made under pressure, ranging from incremental reductions in support to the loss of whole teams, that weaken the conditions needed for effective engagement. Each individual change may appear manageable. Taken together, however, their cumulative impact risks undermining the relationships, capabilities and partnerships on which both public confidence and public value depend.

The evidence points to four defining features of this drift:

- **A strong foundation has been built.** Engagement is embedded in national frameworks, institutional strategies and professional roles, supported by a generation of skilled people.
- **Financial pressures are acute.** Sustained strain across the sector means engagement is often among the first areas affected.
- **Commitment remains, but capacity is eroding.** No one is choosing to weaken engagement, but decisions made under pressure are reducing the infrastructure on which it depends.
- **Engagement is not yet structural.** It is reflected in how universities describe themselves, but not consistently embedded in how they are funded, assessed and rewarded, leaving it exposed.

¹ Public Attitudes to R&D 2025, CaSE, November 2025. (Less than a third could immediately think of lots of ways R&D benefits the UK (29%) or their region (22%), falling to just 18% when asked about their local area or them and their family. (p.20)

² British Social Attitudes 43: Higher Education. National Centre for Social Research, June 2026



The risks we face

Left unchecked, the *drift* will erode what we have built. We need to name and confront the risks this poses:

- **Losing essential capacity that will take years to rebuild.** Engagement depends on skilled people, trusted relationships and the partnerships they sustain. This *relational infrastructure* is critical to how universities are creating public value. Once lost, it cannot be quickly replaced.
- **Relationships turning transactional.** Short-term funding drives “helicopter in, helicopter out” working that favours the extractive habits that damage trust, undermine mutual benefit, and weaken the relationships on which confidence in universities depends.
- **The value of engagement becoming less visible.** Engagement creates public value, but much of that value is relational, long-term and difficult to quantify. Unless it is better recognised and evidenced, engagement risks being undervalued despite contributing to many of the outcomes the sector is now being asked to deliver.
- **Inequities being left unaddressed.** Power imbalances persist in who controls funding and in our inability to pay partners fairly, undermining the equity engagement is meant to advance.
- **Reversing hard-won progress.** Engagement capability exists in deep pockets across the UK. The question is whether we sustain the conditions that allow it to flourish, or allow this moment to hollow them out.

The *drift* is not inevitable. It is the cumulative effect of decisions made under pressure, and it can be addressed through deliberate choices made across the system.

The future will not look like the past. As universities respond to new technologies, devolution, changing public expectations, and increasing demands for public value, engagement infrastructure will need not only to be protected but reimagined too. The institutions most likely to thrive will be those with strong relationships, deep connections to place and the ability to work collaboratively with others to address shared challenges.



What all of us can do

Drawing on the work of *Engaged Futures* and findings in the *State of the Sector* report, we have identified key recommendations for all those involved in the sector, including the NCCPE. No single actor can hold this ground alone; that is the nature of *drift*, and the reason this is a collective call. Recent reports from the Royal Society examine the evolving relationship between science and society and set out compelling recommendations for action. Many of these align closely with those outlined here, and we join their call for action. The question is not what someone else should do. It is what each of us, in our own part of the system, can do to protect and strengthen what we have built together.

Below are actions shared by all of us, followed by what they look like for each group. The NCCPE is part of this collective effort, and our own commitments sit alongside those of others.

Two commitments cut across every part of the sector and underpin everything that follows:

1. Treat engagement as essential infrastructure. Recognise and resource engagement as a core part of how the sector creates value, legitimacy and public trust: load-bearing, not discretionary; structural, not an optional extra. The task is not only to protect what has been built, but to develop and strengthen it for the future.

2. Close the gap between values and systems. We already understand why engagement matters. The shared task is to align funding, evaluation and institutional structures with that understanding, so commitment is carried by the system, not only by individual goodwill. In a changing world, these systems must enable engagement to adapt, innovate and continue creating public value for people, places and communities.



Recommendations

These recommendations focus on a small number of priority actions that will protect and strengthen the relationships, capacity and visibility that make meaningful engagement – and public trust – possible.

For Funders

To enable high-quality, equitable, and sustainable public engagement:

- **Signal strategic commitment to engagement.** Clearly articulate how engagement contributes to funder priorities to avoid perceptions that it is optional or declining in importance.
- **Invest in long-term, place-based partnerships, not short-term projects.** Move beyond 2–3 year cycles to funding models that sustain relationships over time and connect research and innovation to local knowledge, priorities and opportunities.
- **Align funding and assessment with relational value.** Recognise trust-building, partnership quality and long-term change, not just short-term metrics.
- **Fund the full costs of engagement.** Include people, partnerships and community capacity, not just project delivery, and support fair and equitable distribution of resources across partners.

For University Leaders

To move from rhetorical commitment to structural embedment:

- **Value and invest in engagement capacity.** Value engagement roles, teams, leadership and partnerships as core institutional infrastructure, especially in times of constraint.
- **Align strategy with resourcing and systems.** Ensure commitments to engagement are reflected in budgets, governance and operations.
- **Make engagement count in careers.** Embed it in promotion, workload and recognition systems for all staff.
- **Articulate and evidence public value.** Make the case that engagement helps create outcomes people can recognise, strengthens regional contribution and connects the university's work to societal priorities.

For Public Engagement Professionals

To sustain quality and influence under pressure:

- **Use your expertise to strengthen institutional capability for engagement.** Continue to lead culture change to embed engagement across research, teaching and civic activity.
- **Make engagement legible beyond the sector.** Translate practice into narratives that resonate with publics, partners and policymakers.
- **Champion meaningful evaluation approaches.** Prioritise methods that capture relational, long-term and qualitative value.
- **Model and advocate for equitable practice.** Embed fair partnerships, inclusive processes and non-extractive ways of working.

For Academics and Researchers

To embed meaningful engagement in research practice:

- **Respect engagement as core scholarly practice.** Treat engagement as integral to research excellence; part of research design, not an add-on.
- **Use engagement to strengthen research quality.** Draw on diverse perspectives to improve relevance, ethics and impact. Move beyond dissemination to co-creation and collaboration, where it is meaningful to do so.
- **Invest in long-term relationships and involve partners from the start of research design.** Prioritise trust, continuity and mutual benefit over transactional approaches.
- **Advocate for engagement within disciplines.** Help normalise engagement across research fields where it is less embedded. Be curious about other peoples' practices, and what you can learn.

For Government and Policymakers

To recognise and protect the whole system that generates public value:

- **Align expectations across government.** Ensure relevant departments align policy, funding and accountability frameworks so that engagement and civic contribution are consistently recognised and reinforced.
- **Invest in the system that generates public value.** Recognise engagement as essential infrastructure, including its role in strengthening public trust in research and universities, and reflect this in funding settlements and policy design.
- **Enable universities to deliver on civic and public missions.** Ensure that expectations around place, participation and impact (e.g. in DfE policy) are supported by resourcing and incentives through long-term research and innovation funding (e.g. via DBIST). Strengthen and extend the role of universities as partners in achieving inclusive and place-based growth, increasing opportunities and long-term funding for universities, communities, businesses and local government to work together on shared regional priorities.
- **Mobilise cross-government demand for research.** Encourage departments to work more systematically with universities and communities to co-produce solutions to public challenges—strengthening relevance, visibility, trust and public value.

For NCCPE: Our Role in Strengthening the System

Through *Engaged Futures*, the NCCPE will work to strengthen alignment, connection and shared purpose across the system, ensuring that the value of engagement is recognised, supported and sustained in practice as well as in principle.

We will:

- **Connect and align action across the sector.** Convene funders, policymakers, institutions and practitioners to build shared understanding and co-ordinated approaches to strengthening engagement and building public value.
- **Translate insight into practice.** Turn evidence from the *State of the Sector* and *Engaged Futures* into practical guidance, tools and examples that support implementation.
- **Make engagement capacity visible and valued.** Develop clearer language and evidence to support recognition of the people, partnerships and expertise that underpin effective engagement.
- **Reframe the national narrative on engagement.** Publish a curated, high-profile series of evidence-led stories that demonstrate the public value realised through engagement.
- **Champion long-term, relational approaches.** Work with partners to shift expectations away from short-term, transactional models towards sustained, meaningful relationships.



What's next

These collective actions are intended as practical priorities to guide immediate and longer-term decisions across the system. Given no actor in the system can effect systemic change alone, now is a time to align to effect the changes we hope for.

We invite everyone involved in this work to consider what action they can take within their own role and organisation. We also invite you to join the [Engaged Futures](#) movement: a coalition committed to a higher education sector that is meaningfully and equitably engaged with society. By acting together, we can protect, adapt and strengthen the relational infrastructure on which the sector and its partners depend.



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