The NCCPE is creating a survey for PE professionals to share the ways in which the current COVID-19 crisis has affected their ways of working. This will be available soon.

The NCCPE is currently involved in supporting various national responses to the crisis, including:

- Universities UK ‘National Effort’ project, to triage and publicise requests for help from the HE sector from other sectors
- Working with Sheffield Hallam University and various other project partners to launch a new Civic University Network, funded by UPP, Arts Council England, DfE and Carnegie UK Trust

The topic of next week’s session will be ‘The Civic Agenda and Public Engagement’, examining the relationship between the two and showcasing the ways in which PEPs are working (or adjusting their work) to cover both areas.

For PEPs who wish to share any news, updates or stories during future sessions, please contact Maddy Foard (Maddy.Foard@uwe.ac.uk)
Poll: How much has your role changed since COVID-19?
The session opened with a quick poll asking participants how much their role has changed since COVID-19 on a scale from 1 (not at all) to 5 (completely different)

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Community Engagement

This session’s speakers were:

- **Pippa Coutts**, policy and development manager at Carnegie UK Trust. As an organisation, Carnegie UK Trust promote societal wellbeing, while supporting those who face systemic inequality; their work with the NCCPE includes the Engaging Libraries and Civic University projects, with a strong focus on the co-production of research.

- **Lewis Hou**, director of Science Ceilidh, an education and community organisation exploring science, traditional arts, health and wellbeing with adults, youth groups and schools across Scotland. Lewis is also an ambassador for the Fun Palaces campaign, a research project focusing on grassroots approaches to arts, sciences, and cultural engagement.

**Pippa Coutts – Carnegie UK Trust**

- During her talk, Pippa raised the important issue of inequality with regard to communication and technology, with regard to the longer term impact of the pandemic.
Due to the increased reliance on digital communication during the crisis, social divisions relating to accessibility, resources and income are also being thrown into stark relief. There is a worry, at present, that this reliance on digital communication will exacerbate these divides, and have a negative impact on already struggling communities.

Not everyone is privileged enough to have around-the-clock access to digital devices, or possess the money, time, or skills to use technology in the ways demanded by home-working or online schooling.

These divisions also come into play in terms of age differences; for many young people, internet access is unaffordable, and for those who rely on Wi-Fi from libraries or cafes, socialising has become markedly more difficult.

- Recent events have made it clear that the scale of action is often local, with the lack of travel ensuring a greater focus on the immediate area.

- How can Universities help?

  - Think about the principles of co-production - how can we listen to communities, and ensure we reach people who are seldom heard? And how can universities find ways of listening to those who aren’t well connected?
  - Current campaigns have focused on supporting frontline staff during the crisis; going forward, how can we support those suffering from a loss of income too?
  - How can we help with practical services, such as catering or assisting volunteers? How can we support charities?
  - Universities are concerned with income, but as institutions, they are not as precarious as small charities
  - PEPs have many diverse skills; not just in engagement but in their different connections and modes of engaging (such as art).

**Lewis Hou – Science Ceilidh**

- Lewis’s talk brought to attention the need for emotional availability, empathy and thoughtfulness in creating and maintaining relationships with communities.
- Current connections are likely to be hyper-local.
- We, as PEPs, are not experts in the lives of other people. Instead of assuming we know what communities need, how can we better listen to them and build relationships?
- Emotional availability is important, especially as you and your colleagues are part of the local community too!
- Some communities currently need relationship building more than research; this fosters greater trust, which is a foundation for longer term engagement. That trust is also useful in combatting other negative elements circulating in the digitally orientated age, such as fake news.
Intermediaries can be invaluable in fostering relationships with certain communities; organisations that are already trusted and have an established network/role to play.

Questions and responses from delegates

1) As well as being emotionally available, PEPs need to feel secure in seeking support too, in order not to feel ‘burnt-out’.

2) There may be a change in attitudes from community organisations and members to engagement during the crisis.

3) Q: Is this the wrong time to be engaging with new communities?
   - Pippa argues that while it’s not necessarily the wrong time, it does need a careful approach. Listen and be attentive; the community in question will tell you whether it’s appropriate or not.

4) Q: How best to engage with BAME communities, or other communities who are currently more susceptible to the impact of COVID-19?
   - Pippa suggests intermediaries would help; communities will want to work with people they know and trust, and so organisations who can act as bridges are crucial. However, it could be argued that this is not necessarily the time for new research projects, but rather practical support.
   - Lewis suggests looking to the third sector - they have been masterfully readjusting to meet their communities, regardless of their original remit. This kind of adjustment is a possibility our sector should be considering with regard to public engagement; can it be done, and if not, what are the structural barriers preventing us?
   - Pippa points out that the third sector is struggling financially; this is something to consider in terms of how we can support them. These sudden changes are expensive for those intermediary groups.

5) Q: Certain communities have essentially been disbanded by the shift to digital communication, and our current methods of PE are not reaching them. Should there be research to assess this, and how can we reach them again?
   - Pippa brings up storytelling; there are new local government platforms where stories of good practice can be compiled, in theory through a civic hub; these initiative would be led by intermediary organisations over universities.
   - Lewis agrees on the hyper-local aspect of current engagement, and points out there are opportunities to rethink our approach to knowledge-production e.g. more practitioner-based action-research led by intermediaries outside academia. Past programmes which Lewis has been involved with have focused on developing communities of practice and "training the trainers' with libraries, community groups and individuals across Scotland.
6) Q: Are there ways of engaging without using online technology?
   - Pippa points out that use of the phone is becoming more common, particularly with regard to mental health professionals and their service-users.
   - Lewis suggests intermediaries are crucial for engaging certain communities (such as BAME communities), as they have had the time and experience to better prioritise and ensure nothing is being overlooked.

7) ‘People are working so hard to do things in new ways; taking the idea of tailoring to an audience to a whole new level, and really looking at what matters on an individual basis. We don’t normally have time and resources to do this’.

**Group discussion: How are you currently engaging with community organisations?**

*Participants then worked in break out groups to share how they were currently working with community organisations. Key themes surfacing in the discussion included the following:*

**What kinds of activity are PEPs undertaking to engage with communities?**

- Current project in India: a messaging help-line, providing answers to questions related to COVID: a project designed to combat rumours and disinformation spreading.
- Some PEPs had plans to integrate themselves with a community, but now can’t see a way to start. Could do light touch work through social media.
- Listening work in community groups that they’ve got good relationships with.
- In one instance, the local council supplied food during the Easter holidays for school children, which was extended to anyone that was in need. QMUL signed up to be one of the places that served food.
- Soften definitions. Providing food isn’t knowledge exchange, but it is what people need.
- Use of Instagram; while Twitter is more for academics, the former is a way to reach out to young people.
- Providing help with home schooling, providing resources and better accessibility for parents; decided on a department level response.
- Making connections with those in other departments.
- UWE is researching neighbourhood response. Manchester is researching lorry driver health impacts.
- It’s important to make links between researchers and community groups where one can - use the fund to provide extra money for community partners to help support/make the necessary adaptations needed for them to work as best they can during the crisis. Work with an agency in drawing up guides.
- Emotional availability; some argue those relationships should be in place anyway, and should be a focus of the work regardless. It’s important that people you’re working with are able to ask questions; while simultaneously ensuring you’re not stretching herself too thin
- Parents with home-schooling; starting a book group chat, whereby these relationships can be cultivated.
- Community groups crowdfunding for vaccines.
○ St Andrews are doing engagement locally and are seeking to mail out to their local groups.
○ Dundee have offered support on the technical side to help communities in the past, and so have been able to continue to do this in this context. Some have been doing letter writing.
○ New services are being developed to support clinical staff: for example, a service which sends messages to loved ones on the ward so clinicians don’t have to do it.
○ Engaging with people as they want to be engaged with: from welfare checks to documents to feedback, tailored to what the individual wants.
○ Building up contacts and relationships; new fortnightly newsletter, information, resources and opportunities in communities: access and support. This helps the team’s wellbeing as it feels meaningful and matters/helps the community.
○ Using social media more, but looking at phone and letters more for those not online.
○ Posting letters on behalf of those who can’t leave their homes.
○ Using the lost art of diaries/letter writing-- where people can engage and respond with one another.
○ If communities are still wanting to engage-- using engagement packs (like craft packs) to facilitate the engagement, with notes, letters, to help facilitate without people being there - but equally having opportunities for people to respond back (including postcards with stamps already paid!)

How has COVID impacted on PEPs work and approach?
○ QMUL run a community festival every year; in the wake of Covid 19, the event has been cancelled.
○ Scrambling to answer questions can be chaotic at first, and it takes some time to streamline processes.
○ Looking at ways to fund things that will catalyse in the next term. With a view to do things face to face which is changing all the time.
○ Definition of community engagement is changing every day; what do we need to be engaging and what do they need from us? What’s a priority; community engagement, yes, but how do we support communities too?
○ For some PEPs, they are not part of a team, and are quite isolated in their role.
○ For many PEPs, it’s difficult to define the current purpose of their role.
○ Spending a lot of time focusing inwards; supporting researchers inside the organisation, and also communicating with an internal, weekly newsletter.
○ Creating questionnaires to find out what researchers are doing; who can still work, and who can’t? It’s important to check availability and find out who is able to engage.
○ Training for staff at how to move online and should you move online.
○ People are working outside their remit, providing social spaces to bring others together.
○ Responses to the crisis have been varied. Some people are taking time to reflect and assess, while others are pushing their online engagement programmes. There are many resources and activities being provided- perhaps too many. How do we avoid adding to the noise?
For those starting a new role in PE, there may be difficulties in getting the organisation on board with working with greater emotional availability.

For one member, the crisis has allowed her the time to work more with community groups than working for the university – while still employed by her organisation, she has capacity to volunteer for charities.

Is this the right time to be trying to engage people with research?

Current news has been relevant to the work one member does with Wellcome Centre for Cell Biology, on vaccines etc. The centre wants to be embedded in local community, but is finding it hard to imagine what that looks like at the moment when community organisations they normally work with are supporting people on a more fundamental level (e.g. supplying food), rather than running festivals etc.

If people are in basic survival mode, how can we expect them to engage? Better to get to people through the middle man? People don’t like to engage with things that don’t matter to them typically. How do we catch that traffic, rather than the usual audience?

Tip: think about what people are interested in. Art, creativity, music? Use those mediums to engage them.

For some, their projects are engagement focused rather than output orientated; finding community champions who could be their own community-based researchers in collaboration with them. Community engagement projects may have more freedom than research based ones.

Some top tips for working with community organisations / lessons learned

Working across a large organisation can be complex, but finding key contacts within sub-groups of the large organisation can be helpful.

Online engagement is often more one-sided than face to face.

Going online isn’t always the solution.

‘I’m a scientist, get me out of here’ platform is very useful and adaptable (and now ‘I’m a scientist, stay at home’)

It’s difficult to engage audiences based in the countryside.

The perception of universities can differ from internal and external perspectives. Publics may assume you represent something that you don’t, as not everyone understands how university departments work internally.

If we want to research the impact Covid had on communities, we don’t want to go somewhere where we haven’t built up relationships; post-crisis, certain publics may be wondering where the university was when it really mattered, and what they were doing with their money.

Arts and artists have lost all their income. Though they may not be a priority, we usually work with them and want to be able to support them where we can.

Many community organisations are currently focused on surviving and keeping their head above water; important to remember this.

Listening to communities is key. Don’t project; ask them specifically what they want!

Establishing an immediate network, both in an organisation and out of it. Ask yourself; who am I currently working with, and who should I be checking in with on a personal level, as well as offering help to?
Some partners don’t even know that they can ask for more money, or that they have the option to ask for help!

Charities are among the best sources of knowledge with regard to their respective communities. In terms of mobilising people to respond, this is their talent (for example, Citizens UK); they are in a better state to know what people need.

Universities need better ways of responding to charities and community organisations, and to be receptive to what they say.

Letter writing can be a nice way to make connections, as it is personal and slow - people are thoughtful in their responses. That slow pace is important (e.g. ‘slow engagement’).

There is an emotional reality of engaging existing communities and the reality of their current context. Engaging with local businesses; many of whom may not be able to survive.

One challenge is related to the unrealistic timeframes that people expect for the crisis to last. There is a reluctance to create new activities, as people think it will be over very soon.

No solution is perfect, and all solutions exclude something- so how can we find a balance to create accessible online content, while engaging in person too? This would be great for part time workers, carers, or those who only have small amount of time to spare.

Build on these new ideas when things get back to “normal”. There’s a real possibility for us to explore community-rooted and creative public engagement as a vehicle for more wellbeing in and of itself.

Real opportunity to listen and build relationships: crucial to any engagement and valued in the future.

The opportunity to have 1000 delegates at a conference, all submitting questions – as well as the increase in reach and ability for people to interact - is amazing.

We shouldn’t be rushing to go online-- sometimes it isn't appropriate, especially if you’ve designed/developed something and tested it to be face-to-face. We also need to be aware that online, we’re bringing some things into the domestic space which could bring issues for participants. We need to broaden our understandings of safeguarding online and give just as much support (if not more) for those engaging with us online.

Final plenary reflections

Lewis; ‘Many organisations are already working with communities. Focus on finding them and adding extra support/resources. It’s important to manage expectations and be honest about the level of flexibility possible. I think there’s a conversation here for institutions and funders too - e.g. arts funders have been incredibly supportive of guaranteeing and/or reusing funds, and providing emergency funds for the most economically disadvantaged/freelancers.’

Pippa; ‘The best way forward is in working with people that are already there. If we’re not frontline, think about the post-crisis recovery. Work with trusted organisations. Focus on
the local, across the country they have a huge impact on community development, as well as national groups.

- Lewis: ‘This is the opportunity to not just not widen the gap but challenge the status quo in how knowledge was shared and whose knowledge is valued, which was never equitable to begin with anyway, if we are honest. Start small, listen, come to those who have been doing this for a long time rather than reinventing the wheel. Always have a backup (sorry for the tech issues affecting my involvement today). I will write this up a small blog/tweet series and share, including some more practical points on using Facebook to develop a community of practice for peer training to help support wellbeing, research and connections. Lots of ideas on this topic of offline and online community engagement on our Facebook group - Culture & Wellbeing Community Network Scotland (on Facebook - welcome to join. For this who messaged private, I’ve lost messages so feel free to resend - lewis@scienceceilidh.com’

Resources shared by delegates:

theguardian.com/world/2020/apr/05/germanys-devolved-logic-is-helping-it-win-the-coronavirus-race