

Discussion Paper: Assessing impacts arising from public engagement with research

This discussion paper provides context for REF panels that are developing their criteria for assessing impacts arising through public engagement with research. It was prepared by the National Co-ordinating Centre for Public Engagement (NCCPE), whose website¹ contains extensive resources to support university staff to engage effectively with the public. The NCCPE would be delighted to respond to any enquiries prompted by the paper.

The paper synthesises the outcomes from three workshops, held between March and May 2011². The ideas contained within it have been contributed to and commented on by REF panel representatives, the REF team, a range of academic staff and a number of evaluation and public engagement specialists, whom we would like to thank for their input.

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¹ www.publicengagement.ac.uk. You can contact the NCCPE at nccpe.enquiries@uwe.ac.uk. The NCCPE is part of the Beacons for Public Engagement project, funded by the UK Funding Councils, Research Councils UK and the Wellcome Trust.

² The first workshop, on March 29th, involved a wide representation of academic staff and public engagement and evaluation specialists. The second workshop, on May 2nd, was hosted by the Royal Geographical Society, and included academic staff from a broad range of related discipline areas. The final workshop, on May 9th, involved a group of Main and Sub-Panel chairs, working alongside public engagement specialists and representatives from the REF team. The NCCPE would also like to thank Dr Maggie Leggett, Head of the University of Bristol's Centre for Public Engagement, for her help in preparing this paper.

1. Introduction

The REF embraces a broad definition of impact, and includes any impacts or benefits outside of academia such as to the economy, society or culture, that are underpinned by excellent research. The REF team wishes to ensure that the impacts or benefits of engaging (sections of) the public with a submitted unit's research should be eligible as impacts to be assessed within the impact element of the REF.

There is potentially a broad range of impacts that might arise from engaging the public with excellent research. Activities could include, for example, raising public awareness or stimulating interest in science and research, engaging the public in informing research directions, informing public opinion or policy, stimulating public debate or discourse, cultural enrichment, and / or connecting the Unit's intellectual resources with the knowledge and experience of groups outside the university to address issues of mutual interest. However, the types of impacts arising from these activities may present specific challenges, both to institutions in preparing their submissions and to REF panels in ensuring consistent assessment. In particular, challenges include ensuring that the impacts from public engagement are underpinned by the submitted unit's research; and in agreeing what counts as appropriate evidence of these impacts.

The NCCPE was asked by the REF team to address the following questions in this briefing paper:

In relation to the **case studies**:

- Impacts must be underpinned by the submitted unit's research. What kinds of links between a submitted unit's research and the engagement activity should count in the REF?
- What are the kinds of impacts that can be realised from engaging the public with research?
- What kinds of *evidence* of these impacts would be both realistic for institutions to produce, and sufficient for panels to make robust judgements?

In relation to the broader '**impact statement**':

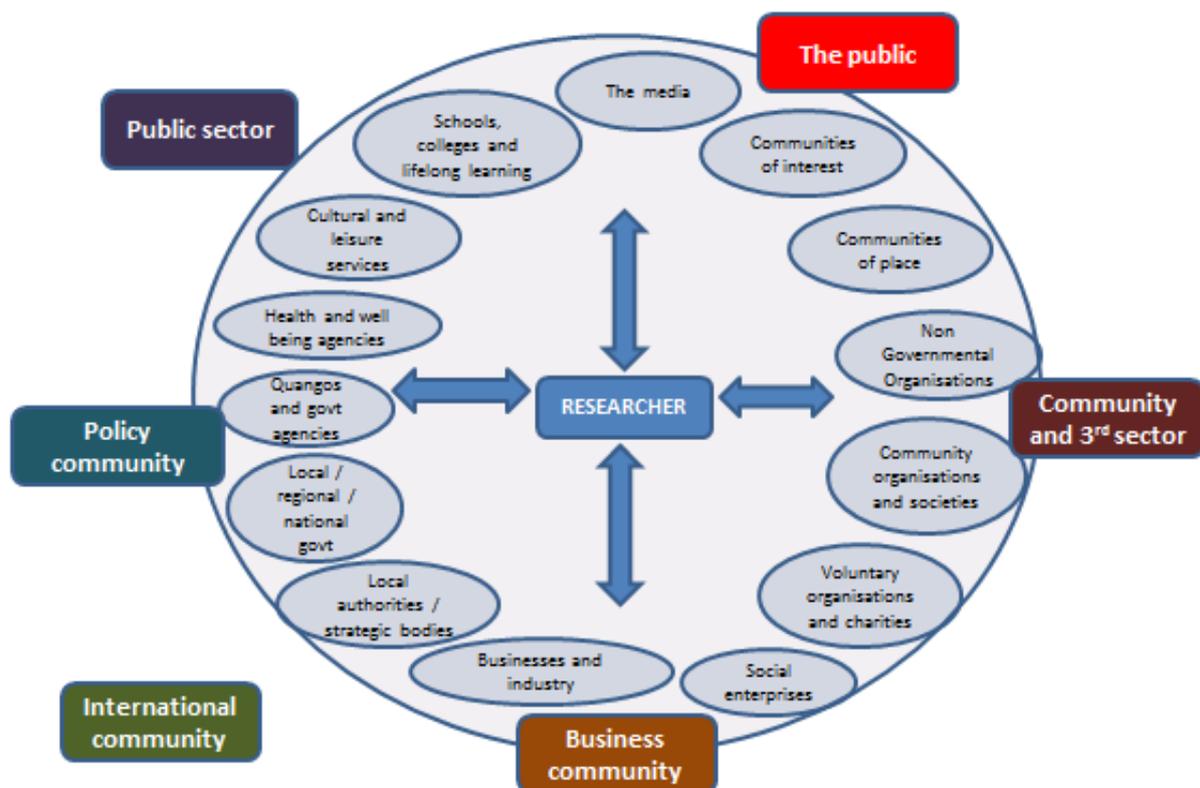
- What kinds of evidence would panels expect to see about a submitted unit's strategy or general approach to engaging the public with its research?

2. What is public engagement in the context of the REF?

Before addressing the specific questions, we need to clarify what is meant by public engagement with research. There are many definitions, which in general boil down to sharing research with non-academics with the aim of generating mutual benefit. The NCCPE's definition is:

“Public engagement describes the many ways in which higher education institutions and their staff and students can connect and share their work with the public. Done well, it generates mutual benefit, with all parties learning from each other through sharing knowledge, expertise and skills. In the process, it can build trust, understanding and collaboration, and increase the sector’s relevance to, and impact on, civil society.” (<http://www.publicengagement.ac.uk/what>)

Researchers routinely engage with a range of professional agencies in different sectors and directly with the public. These interactions can take many forms – from lectures, debates, media appearances, and contact at festivals or performances, through to involving the public as end users, as members of advisory panels or as ‘citizen scientists’ in research, etc. Often, the interaction with the public is through an intermediary, e.g. the media, a school, a community organisation, charity, museum or visitor attraction, or through online engagement and consultation. When thinking about the ‘general public’, it can be helpful to differentiate, e.g. by geography or interest, rather than to view the public as an undifferentiated ‘mass’. This diagram maps the different groups with which researchers might engage:



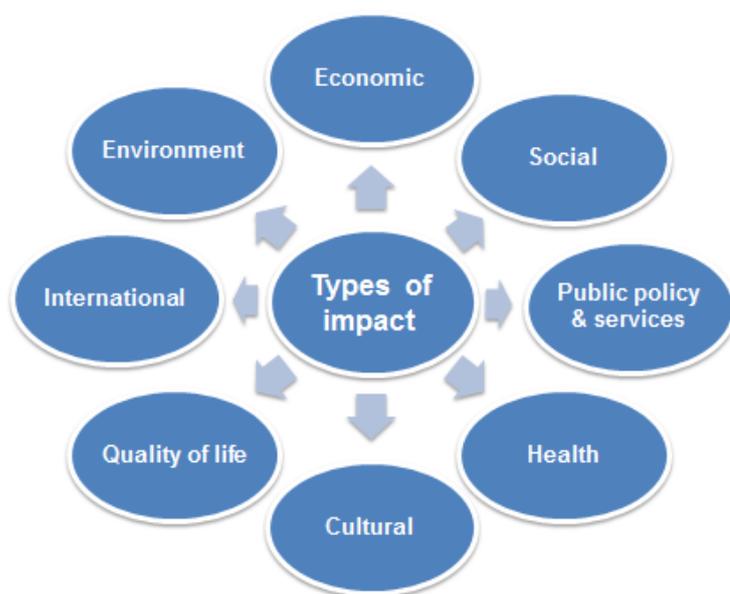
Public engagement can involve any of these groups. Sometimes, researchers may be engaged in three way conversations, for instance with policy makers, members of the public and third sector organisations, brought together for dialogue and debate.

Some public audiences are more difficult to reach than others. So called ‘hard to reach’ audiences generally require more targeted and sustained work – so the number reached may be less, but the significance of the interaction might be considered to be higher. Examples of hard to reach audiences can include: BME (Black and Minority Ethnic) groups, disabled people, young people outside mainstream education etc. For STEM subjects, girls and women are often considered ‘hard to reach’.

For the purposes of the REF, we are interested in the *impact* of engaging the public with research, rather than the process itself – the REF is a research assessment process, and as such will not be assessing how good the public engagement is *per se*; instead it will focus on how the impact of the research is enhanced or extended through engaging the public with it. University staff and students engage with the public in many and varied ways, with a range of valuable impacts. However, only that engagement which is directly connected to specific research outputs is relevant to the REF. Some case studies may describe an extensive programme of public engagement and the impacts thereof. In others, the impact(s) achieved through engaging the public with the research may be one facet of a broader case study. Engaging the public with research is widely understood to be a ‘two-way’ process which also benefits academia, for instance by opening up new research angles or insights. Many of these benefits will be most appropriately captured in the Outputs and Environment sections of the REF.

3. Impacts that can arise from engaging the public with research

This diagram was published by the REF team during the impact pilot, and describes the types of impact that might arise from research:



Engaging the public with research could lead to any of these impacts. It is important to note that impacts do not always occur at the end of the research process; they can often be generated during the research project itself.

Examples might include:

- **In the areas of civil society, policy making and public services:**
 - Dialogue, debate and engagement with the public about the application of new ideas and practices to policy and infrastructure provision (e.g. related to health, environmental behaviours, service provision, social equity or social cohesion)
- **In the area of cultural and economic impact and quality of life:**
 - Enriching public discourse and quality of life by introducing new research-led perspectives and insights into the public domain, through workshops, events, performance, exhibitions or media work (print and broadcast)
 - Stimulating public interest in research and direct engagement in informing research

4. Evidencing impact: reach and significance

Reach and significance are the two dimensions to impact that submissions are expected to evidence. Indicators need to be robust to allow panels to make collective judgements. Equally, the indicators need to be achievable, and not require a second research project to evaluate the impact of the engagement activity. In general, reach is far easier to evidence than significance, but it is important that this exercise is more nuanced than simply comparing numbers of people engaged, and that reach and significance are considered together.

Case studies will need to include a portfolio of evidence to substantiate the claimed impacts of engaging the public with the UoA's research. This should include quantitative and qualitative types where relevant. Details of evidence need to be precise. Some examples of how reach and significance might be assessed include:

Assessing reach

- How many people were involved in the engagement activity (e.g. visitors to an exhibition, participants in a debate or workshop, audience numbers for a broadcast, performance etc.)?
- How diverse or varied were the audiences reached? (e.g. relating to age, ethnicity, gender, location, cultural, social or economic background). Did the reach extend to hard to reach audiences?
- Was there a secondary reach achieved, e.g. from follow up media coverage?
- Is there evidence of sales / downloads of linked resources / publications / access to web content?

Assessing significance : possible evidence types

Significance of the research content

- The social or cultural significance of the research insights that the public had engaged with (a narrative explanation of this can be included in the case study)

Evaluation data

- Evidence of impact on the participants' motivation, attitudes, beliefs or interests
- Evidence of impact on the knowledge, understanding or skills of participants
- Evidence of the types of action people took as a result of the engagement, such as following up to seek further information, or getting involved in further projects etc.

User feedback / testimony

- Illustrative feedback from participants to accompany other evidence (e.g. quotes from letters or emails³)
- Summary results from feedback surveys⁴
- Repeat invitations to events, or to embark on further collaborative projects

Reviews and commentary

- Critical external reviews of the engagement activity (e.g. reviews of performances or exhibitions) which provide evidence of how the underpinning research has been incorporated into the activity and generated impact outside academia
- Feedback from intermediaries / collaborators about how effectively the underpinning research and informed targeting of the chosen audience(s) have been used to generate particular impacts

Third party impact or involvement

- Evidence of how intermediaries or collaborators have modified or improved their practice (e.g. museum practitioners, media etc.)
- Evidence of contribution (in cash or kind) made by third parties to enhance services or support for the public
- Evidence of funds from third parties to extend or enhance the engagement activity

³ Whilst the value of anecdotal feedback is recognised, there are dangers, including the difficulties of verifying the feedback, and the risk of bias (for instance, the feedback might be from individuals or organisations with a vested interest in the project, or in future collaboration with the research team).

⁴ Panels need to be able to judge the reliability of evidence presented. Information about sample size, response rates, question wording, etc. can help.

Evidence of sustainability

- Evidence of significant increases in the numbers usually engaged, or a sustained increase in participation
- Evidence of sustained interest through sales / downloads of linked resources / publications/ feedback from participants / enrolments to events and programmes

5. Contents of a case study

5.1 *The link to the underpinning research*

The case study must make the link to the underpinning research clear. This is critical. There are two dimensions:

1. Providing sufficient evidence to the panel that the body of research on which the claimed impact is based met a high standard of rigour and resulted in original findings.
2. Explaining clearly which particular aspects of this body of research underpinned the engagement activity, and contributed to the claimed impact. Without this specificity it will prove very hard for the panels to assess how the claimed impacts relate to the research. A good example is provided by 'Conservation of Bumblebees' case study⁵ submitted to the Earth Systems and Environmental Sciences pilot panel: 'The research outputs feeding into these measures include detailed knowledge of bumblebee foraging and nesting needs, understanding of their distributions, population density and dispersal abilities, and knowledge on the scale at which habitat manipulations are required to influence bumblebee population size'.

5.2 *Contents of a case study: The narrative*

The pilot exercise demonstrated how helpful the case study narrative can be in the assessment process. It provides a critical 'frame' for assessing the impact. A well constructed narrative will start with underpinning research and then describe the processes of engagement and the impacts, and make clear the 'links in the chain'. The following prompts are useful to interrogate the claims being made about the impacts:

Link to underpinning research. Is the underpinning body of sufficiently high quality? Is the relationship between the underpinning research and the impacts of engaging the public with the research made explicit?

Why was the public engaged with the research? Is there a convincing rationale for undertaking the engagement activities? Does it demonstrate a purposeful and / or reflective approach to generating impact from the research outputs?

⁵ See page 16 of the Pilot Panel's case study compilation:

http://www.hefce.ac.uk/research/ref/impact/EarthSystems_EnvironmentalSciences.pdf

Who was the target audience for the engagement activities? Is it clear with whom they chose to engage and why they were chosen? Is the audience ‘hard to reach’? Were actions taken to maximise the audience and to ensure the engagement activities were appropriate for the chosen audience, to optimise the impact?

When? Depending on the purpose, was the engagement at appropriate points in the research cycle? Did they work to ensure the sustainability of the engagement activities, or was it a one-off?

How? Are the engagement activities that they describe consistent with their rationale and appropriate for the chosen audience? Do the activities appear to be a credible trigger for the impacts they claim to have achieved? Did the public have a meaningful and purposeful interaction with the research process / outputs?

With what impact? Are the impacts arising from the engagement clearly defined? Are they consistent with the REF criteria? How convincing is the evidence of reach, and of significance?

5.3 Contents of a case study: some issues to consider

Challenge	Description
‘breadth’ vs ‘depth’	Some case studies will demonstrate a very broad reach, with a large number of people engaged in the project. Assessing this against a case study where a much smaller number of people have been engaged, but in a more meaningful and profound way through a well-targeted engagement activity, will inevitably demand careful consideration. It may be that an engagement activity with a smaller targeted audience generates greater impact.
‘hard to reach’ vs ‘easy wins’	Likewise, some audiences are much ‘harder to reach’ than others. Panels may chose to give credit to a case study which evidences how a ‘hard to reach’ group has been successfully engaged in the process of generating impact from the underpinning research.
‘popular’ vs ‘niche’	Some research topics are inherently more appealing to the public than others. It will be important to weigh up the ‘advantage’ afforded to those researchers who have ‘popular’ activity to share, compared with others who are working in less accessible areas. A sustained and strategic programme of engaging the public with research, particularly in the ‘hard to sell’ areas, might be recognised here.

'accessible' vs 'specialist'	To communicate more specialist areas of research, audiences may well need help with the context: launching straight into the detail may inhibit people's understanding. A well crafted engagement activity should take into account the needs of the audience so careful bridge building is essential. Credit could be given for carefully crafted engagement events that take care to bring the audience to an understanding of the underpinning research, however difficult.
'one off' vs 'sustained'	It is important to consider the sustainability of impacts arising from engaging the public with research: having generated interest or involvement, how can that be built upon? Sustainability is not always possible (or desirable) but projects which demonstrate a proactive and thoughtful approach to the sustainability of the impacts could be graded more positively than those that don't.
'serendipitous' vs 'planned'	Some researchers will have luck on their side, and through serendipity may achieve a significant impact (through sudden media interest, for example). Others may have to 'work' much harder to achieve a comparable level of impact. Panels will need to consider how they should weigh two such cases against each other.
'Researcher-led' vs 'mediated by another'	As the REF is assessing the impact of excellent research, not the process of engagement, theoretically there is no reason why the individual researchers should be involved in the impact generation. However, it is critical that whoever is involved on behalf of the UoA (e.g. an expert engager) has an in depth understanding of the underpinning research. Credit could be given where the research team maintain ongoing involvement with the impact generation, as the benefits of this, both to the public and to the researchers themselves, are significant.

6. The impact statement

The impact statement will describe the environment within the UoA that enables and maximises impact, including how impact activities are supported and encouraged within UoAs, as well as the context for the selection of the submitted case studies. Support may be available at institution level: it is expected that the UoAs will detail how they make effective use of any such institutional provision as well as describing the specific strategies to maximise impact in place at UoA level. In terms of what is expected for a supportive environment for public engagement, it might be helpful to consider the 'Concordat for Engaging the Public with Research'⁶ to which all the main UK research funders are signatories. The Concordat describes four key expectations of those they fund, listed below. Institutions may wish to consider how they would evidence each of these.

⁶ <http://www.rcuk.ac.uk/per/Pages/Concordat.aspx>

1. UK research organisations have a strategic commitment to public engagement
Evidence might include a clear strategy for public engagement, evidence of how the strategy is implemented, the resources deployed to support it and the ways in which the institution measures success. E.g. do they have clear objectives; have they committed staff to support engagement at UoA or institutional level?
2. Researchers are recognised and valued for their involvement with public engagement activities
Evidence might include how researchers are recognised for engagement work, through workload models, inclusion in promotion criteria, inclusion in performance review, prizes etc.
3. Researchers are enabled to participate in public engagement activities through appropriate training, support and opportunities
Evidence might include how training / development opportunities are highlighted / provided and what support is provided for the sharing of best practice
4. The signatories and supporters of this Concordat will undertake regular reviews of their and the wider research sector's progress in fostering public engagement across the UK

UoAs should be encouraged to be honest and reflective in their submissions. A quote from a sub panel chair is instructive: 'We would like to see a self-critical and realistic assessment, rather than a parroting of boilerplate text about strategies, service units etc.'

The NCCPE's website contains extensive resources describing practical ways in which universities can provide support for public engagement, drawing on the experiences of the Beacons for Public Engagement and other institutions. It also includes self assessment tools to help departments review (for instance) how effectively public engagement is recognised and supported through training and development: <http://www.publicengagement.ac.uk/support>