

PEP Insights Research

Short Report

The experience of Public Engagement Professionals during Covid-19

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PEPs



National
Co-ordinating
Centre for
Public Engagement



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In December 2019 the first cases of Covid-19 were identified in Wuhan in China, marking the start of a global pandemic that we are still living through at the time of this report, September 2021. The Covid-19 global pandemic exists on an unprecedented scale, and has resulted in a significant loss of life, with many countries being locked down to restrict infection rates. It has impacted all areas of life, freedom, and livelihoods. The pandemic has highlighted social inequalities at the heart of society, and many of its impacts have been unequally distributed.

By the summer 2020 it was obvious that the pandemic was having a major impact on policy and practice across the UK higher education sector. It was also providing a range of opportunities and challenges for how universities approach their engagement with the public.

As a national centre focused on supporting high quality public engagement in the university sector, we were struck by how important it was to understand the impact of the pandemic on Public Engagement Professionals (PEPs). Exploring the stresses that were placed on the public engagement infrastructure and the strategies adapted in response would, we were sure, provide extremely rich intelligence to inform the future shape and vitality of public engagement in higher education.

The PEP Insights research was developed to seize this opportunity, with significant input from across the PEP community. The NCCPE recruited a team of PEPs to undertake this collaborative research study, and the research was undertaken during December 2020 to March 2021 when much was changing in the UK regarding the pandemic, including the associated restrictions, and the launching of the vaccine programme¹. Data collection included a survey attracting 128 responses, focus groups involving 21 participants, and one-to-one semi-structured interviews with 18 people.

The research analysis drew out a number of challenges arising from the pandemic that were not unique to PEPs, not least the move to online ways of working, the loss of informal meeting spaces, challenges and opportunities of working at home, the increase of caring responsibilities, and the impacts on health and wellbeing.

¹ A timeline capturing some of the key UK government announcements relating to Covid-19 at the time of the research can be found [here](https://www.publicengagement.ac.uk/sites/default/files/publication/pep_insight_research_timeline_final.pdf)
https://www.publicengagement.ac.uk/sites/default/files/publication/pep_insight_research_timeline_final.pdf



We therefore sought to explore specific themes relating to PEPs, in order to draw out insights that could illuminate the impacts of the pandemic on this specific group of people, their work, and their institutions. Three themes emerged from the data: Universities' commitment to public engagement; the nature of public engagement (its purposes and practices); and the nature of the PEP role.

1. UNIVERSITIES' COMMITMENT TO PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT

One clear finding related to the level of commitment universities made to public engagement, and if and how this changed in light of the pandemic. Those universities which entered the pandemic with a robust understanding of its value tended to react proactively and positively, deploying their public engagement expertise and assets as a key feature of their response to the pandemic. In institutions that regarded public engagement as a 'nice to have' extra, with engagement purposes that were not clearly defined and where the benefits to publics and university staff and students were minimal or poorly evidenced, this work was not prioritised.

The research also helped to illuminate the factors underpinning institutions' motivations for engagement, which can be summarised using an adaptation of a framework developed by Fiorino² and subsequent work by Stirling³:

- **Instrumental imperatives:** we engage because it makes decisions more legitimate, that engagement supports the incumbent interests of academics and universities.
- **Substantive imperatives:** we engage because non-experts see problems, issues and solutions that experts miss. Participation increases the quality of academic work and the functioning of universities.
- **Normative imperatives:** we engage because democratic ideals call for maximum participation, which counter the power of incumbent interests and allow those who are affected by decisions to have influence.

The initial lockdown saw a lot of institutions adopting normative imperatives (engaging because it was the 'right thing to do'): the urgency of meeting external needs and 'playing their part' made external engagement compelling, and the case for public engagement was strengthened. The data spoke of universities 'going the extra mile' to be a useful resource in their place: opening their

² Fiorino, D. (1989). Environmental risk and democratic process: A critical review. *Columbia Journal of Environmental Law*. Vol. 14(2): pp501-547

³ Stirling, A. (2008). "Opening up" and "Closing Down." Power, participation and pluralism in the Social Appraisal of Technology. *Science, technology and Human values*, Vol. 33(2): pp262-294



campuses for vaccine centres; opening their kitchens to provide hot meals; unlocking their store cupboards to share resources the NHS needed; releasing their staff and students; and deploying their equipment to create PPE⁴, etc. For some PEPs, this sharing extended to the local community organisations that they worked with, moving the focus of their effort to help address the immediate impacts of Covid-19. For others it saw them mobilise their engagement to meet the needs of local people, and for others it directed their efforts towards science engagement to enhance public understanding of Covid-19, vaccines and other preventative measures. The imperative for institutions to ‘play their part’ also had instrumental benefits: it was in universities’ interests to be seen to be stepping up to meet the challenges posed by the pandemic. Universities UK ‘We are Together’ campaign emphasised the role of the sector in supporting the national effort⁵.

Substantive motivations for engagement foreground its contribution to the knowledge building role of universities: for instance, how engaging publics in shaping and conducting research strengthens the relevance and utility of the findings. We saw some evidence of how universities had deployed this kind of approach in response to the pandemic, for example, through capitalising on existing investment in patient involvement and community advisory groups. Research funders also launched rapid response research funding calls to address the pandemic, some of which foregrounded the need for public involvement⁶.

Whilst our respondents focused specifically on public engagement with research, the pandemic encouraged university staff to see these practices as part of a wider relational ecosystem, which highlighted the value and importance of other forms of engagement. Where institutions held narrow or limited understandings of public engagement (for instance, as a mechanism to disseminate research findings) it was much more likely to be marginalised.

Three topics stood out as being particularly important ones for universities to discuss internally and with their partners and publics in developing future work, and applying the learning from the pandemic.

UNIVERSITIES AND SOCIETY: MOVING TO A PEOPLE-CENTRED APPROACH

⁴ PPE: Personal Protective Equipment

⁵ <https://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/what-we-do/creating-voice-our-members/campaigns/our-past-campaigns-0/we-are-together>

⁶ <https://www.ukri.org/find-covid-19-research-and-innovation-supported-by-ukri/>



The pandemic reminded us that universities are part of a complex ecosystem, and whilst they have much to contribute, they can't act alone. There is a balance to be struck between promoting your own work, and recognising the value contributed by others, being humble and realistic about your own contribution, and acting responsively and decisively to meet society's needs. The experience of PEPs has foregrounded the immensely significant role of 'human' contact and connection, and the importance of investing in relationships and acting with empathy and compassion. It will be interesting to see to what extent this becomes the default setting in how universities approach their external engagement.

PERSONIFYING THE ROLE OF THE UNIVERSITY: THE RISK OF 'HERO' NARRATIVES

Universities will need to consider how they embrace effective public engagement, rooted in relationships, alongside needs to communicate their value to government and stakeholders. Tensions can arise, particularly when universities capitalise on the public mood, celebrating their work in ways that neglect the input of others. These hero narratives can undermine the quality of relationships developed with publics. It will be important for universities to consider how they can marry up their marketing and communications work, alongside the reality of their engagement work (a point we return to later).

THE ENGAGEMENT FOOTPRINT: ANIMATING UNIVERSITIES' INTERACTIONS WITH THE WORLD

The NCCPE has long advocated for a holistic understanding of what it means to be an engaged university, considering four areas of activity: student engagement; knowledge exchange; PE with research; and social responsibility⁷. Whilst those working on PE with research have a significant contribution to make to the engaged university, their work can be greatly enhanced when universities bring all of these orientations to engagement together with a robust strategy, well-organised internal systems and excellent internal communication. PEPs lucky enough to work in institutions with this kind of capability were much better able to respond to the challenges of the pandemic. This learning can hopefully be drawn on to help other universities re-consider and re-focus their support for PE.

As we all continue to live alongside Covid-19, those working in the HE sector must develop and build on what has been learnt so far, capturing the promising practices that were developed, and making this commitment to acting quickly and decisively to 'play their part' business as usual.

⁷ <https://www.publicengagement.ac.uk/about-engagement/what-does-engaged-university-look>



2. THE NATURE OF PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT (PURPOSES AND PRACTICES)

The pandemic and associated restrictions threw into sharp focus the many understandings about the purpose and value of PE, and how it was understood by staff within institutions.

The respondents mainly focused on PE with research in their responses, and therefore we have concentrated our analysis around this type of engagement work. We identified a number of different ‘varieties’ of PE implicit in how PEPs described the focal points for their work: science communication, sharing the results of research, and inspiring and informing young people; community engagement, with an emphasis on collaborative research processes; patient involvement, working with patients to meaningfully engage them in the research processes; arts-based engagement; and a range of people who supported practices across all purposes, publics and discipline areas. These diverse practices are all a critical part of the engagement landscape, and all contribute value to publics and to research. However, the impact of the pandemic on working practices was experienced differently by these different groups, and the challenges, opportunities, and future plans illustrated how these differences played out.

For example, those who were working predominantly in science communication roles saw the pandemic raise public interest in research and increase opportunity for initiating conversations about science, whereas those who were looking at community engagement were focused on supporting their local community organisations in light of the impacts of the pandemic, and to provide very practical, hands-on support. These different purposes and ‘flavours’ of engagement can make it hard to pin down what PE is and why it matters. Wellcome⁸ have provided a helpful framing to help differentiate the kinds of contribution PE can make to research, by identifying three types of engagement:

- **Must do:** this was engagement that was essential to the research being undertaken. Particularly relevant to collaborative research methodologies, but not restricted to them. ‘Must do’ engagement was integrated into the research itself.
- **Smart to do:** this engagement brought significant value back to the research and to society. Whilst the research could be done without this engagement, the impact of that research would be significantly less without the engagement. ‘Smart to do’ included engagement that helped bring public perceptions into the research, sensitising researchers to some of

⁸ As detailed in the grant guidelines here: <https://wellcome.org/sites/default/files/Guidance-Provision-PublicEngagement.pdf>



the ethical issues and societal challenges posed by the research, and enabling them to navigate these.

- Wise to do: engagement in this category didn't tend to bring much value back to the research, but was more focused on inspiring and informing people about the research. These forms of engagement clearly have value, but this value is more about raising awareness and widening participation in research.

Whilst our respondents focused specifically on PE with research, the pandemic helped staff see these practices as part of a wider relational ecosystem, which highlighted the value and importance of other forms of external engagement.

The most substantial change in practices related to the move to digital engagement, which changed the face of PE with HE. The pandemic saw PEPs develop confidence and skills in developing online methodologies for engagement. A significant benefit was the opportunity to engage with new audiences, with opportunities no longer defined by geography, physical access, or significant travel time and the associated costs of this. PEPs were keen to ensure that the new audiences were not forgotten when face-to-face engagement was possible once again.

However PEPs were rightly concerned by social inequality issues around who had access, resource, and skills to participate in online engagement, and were sensitive to the exclusionary nature of online engagement for many people. Concerns were also raised about the potential of online engagement to super-serve the already engaged and the challenge of successfully marketing activity online to attract new publics to participate. PEPs recognised this is a key area of development, enhancing knowledge and skills in developing accessible online activities, and the need to complement these with non-digital approaches.

Alongside the predominance of online approaches, hyper-local engagement practices were developed to broaden access to relevant opportunities, for example the distribution of education packs to families via foodbanks.

Given the innovation in engagement practices, there are important considerations for universities wishing to capitalise of this work. We have highlighted four key insights to inform future work.



VALUING LONG TERM ENGAGEMENT

The research revealed that many universities default engagement setting is ‘dissemination’: telling rather than listening and connecting. This, coupled with the trend to use attendee numbers as a proxy for value, could lead universities to invest in this style of activity at the expense of everything else.

However, where universities invested in more open and responsive interactions, there was palpable mutual benefit. The stresses placed on communities by the pandemic brought into the spotlight the need for more responsive modes of engagement. PEPs with expertise in community engagement were able to demonstrate the need and value of such long-term, committed approaches to collaboration and partnership working. The increasing focus on ‘civic’ responsibility provides a useful platform to consolidate the lessons learned during the pandemic, and to ensure these practices are built into future institutional strategy.

THE ROLE OF DIGITAL ENGAGEMENT

There was a clear sense that whilst digital engagement needed to be embraced as a key methodology for engagement, it should not be the only approach. PEPs were keen to cherish the new publics who could now access engagement opportunities, but recognised that online practices were still exclusive in many ways. In addition, PEPs recognised that more could be done to improve digital engagement practices, to embrace more inclusive ways of working.

Hybrid programmes of activity, which wove together the best of digital and the best of face-to-face elements emerged as a potential way forward. This approach was favoured over hybrid events, the distinction being that hybrid programmes would have different elements of a programme of activity done in different ways, whilst hybrid events would try to do online and face to face synchronously.

SKILLS AND RESOURCES

All forms of public engagement require skills and understanding to do well. The emerging field of digital public engagement with research, which was under developed for many universities, requires new learning, new skills, and the use of new platforms and approaches. There is an



opportunity to share current practices within the sector, as well as learn from the substantial expertise outside of the sector and from research into online engagement.

Whilst costs associated with face-to-face events were reduced when moving online, the real costs associated with developing an effective online approach - including the need for skilled facilitation, the importance of marketing, and production skills for online content - need to be taken into account. To embrace both digital and physical engagement, universities will need to consider how they will resource this appropriately, critically reflecting on the purposes of their engagement work and the publics that they seek to engage, and resourcing the necessary staff and infrastructure to deliver their work.

COMMUNICATION AND ENGAGEMENT

The relationship between communications and engagement has not always been straightforward. However, the Covid-19 pandemic has encouraged many institutions to better integrate their communications and engagement work – recognising the importance of both to delivering social outcomes, and navigating through the challenges posed by the pandemic. This resulted in a more nuanced approach to building understanding and appreciation of their work. PEPs were often in a position to emphasise the need to open up conversations, rather than just promote the work of the university; to champion listening and encourage responsiveness to community concerns; to demonstrate sensitivity to the experiences and needs of their institution’s communities; and to balance a celebration of the role of science and research with considerations of the social and ethical context. Whilst the purposes of university communications are distinct from the purposes of public engagement, there are clear overlaps that could be better mobilised for social good.

3. THE NATURE OF THE PEP ROLE

The research tells a compelling story about the nature of the PEP role, which was heavily ‘stress-tested’ during the pandemic. It illuminates the quality of expertise and creativity of PEPs working across the sector, the challenges based on how these roles are funded and valued, the institutional contexts where engagement happens, and the inside-outside nature of being at the interface of the communities and the institution. All of these were thrown into sharp relief by the impact of Covid-19. Of those able to take part in the research: some were furloughed; some had contracts that were not renewed; and others were either moved to new roles, or objectives were



changed in light of the pandemic. However many were able to use their specific skills and expertise in supporting their institution to work effectively during the pandemic.

Four specific themes arose out of the data, which illuminate the experiences of PEPs, and the tensions they have needed to navigate. Each of these intersect with the themes already explored, concerning the nature of engagement, and universities' commitment to public engagement. PEPs reflections on their experiences during lockdown repeatedly returned to these four topics.

RESPONSIBILITY AND RELATIONSHIPS

PEPs typically work with many different collaborators and contacts inside and outside their HEIs. The pandemic caused many PEPs to reflect that their key relationships were with external partners, researchers and senior HE leaders. PEPs experienced very different levels of access to these three groups during the pandemic, significantly impacting on the effectiveness of their work. Some PEPs felt the burden of responsibility towards researchers and community groups, often without the authority to help.

WELLBEING

Sitting at the interface between communities and colleagues, all of whom were being impacted by the pandemic, had an impact on the wellbeing of PEPs. Engagement, done well, requires empathy and understanding, but for many PEPs these emotional antennae, so critical to their effectiveness, were overwhelmed with what was happening.

VISIBILITY AND VALUE

The extent to which PEPs were recognised for the skills and experiences they had, and the value placed on these roles during the pandemic, had a profound impact. Whilst the majority of PEPs involved in the research were able to redesign their approach to their work, participants reflected that their skills were not always recognised or valued by their institution.

PEP ROLES IN PRACTICE

The data speaks of the importance of informal conversations and ad-hoc meetings to the ways that PEPs work. The pandemic closed down these informal spaces, and it could be difficult to find



alternative opportunities for engagement with colleagues, with more formal internal meetings often not providing the space needed for these necessary conversations. The data suggests more needs to be done to formalise engagement into the official processes of the institution, rather than to rely on informal networking.

The pandemic has brought these four topics into stark relief and have confirmed the very significant evidence base that had already been established concerning the role of so called ‘third space’ professionals in university settings, and their relatively precarious status⁹. The implications for PEP wellbeing are profound, and echo many of the worrying trends identified in recent work, by Wellcome and others¹⁰, to surface the more challenging aspects of research culture. To date, the work on research culture has not fully acknowledged the very particular stresses placed upon professional staff. The findings of the PEP Insights research can hopefully be used to inform how future policies to improve research culture take fuller account of the challenges faced by staff in PEP roles, and other professional services staff in similar roles.

4. FUTURE PRIORITIES

We wanted the PEP Insights research to help inform a future agenda for public engagement. There were three areas where PEPs were most committed to seeing action taken:

INCLUSION

The desire for a more inclusive higher education sector, and more inclusive engagement practices, was repeatedly referenced by PEPs involved in the research. There was a clear sense that this needed to go beyond treating inclusive engagement practices as ‘magic bullets’: and to encouraging HEIs and funders to develop more systemic, collaborative and sustained approaches to identifying and tackling the causes of exclusion.

⁹ Whitchurch, C. (2015). The Rise of Third Space Professionals: Paradoxes and Dilemmas. In U. Teichler and W. C. Cummings. Recruiting and Managing the Academic Profession. Dordrecht Springer

¹⁰ For example: <https://wellcome.org/reports/what-researchers-think-about-research-culture>
<https://www.ukri.org/our-work/supporting-healthy-research-and-innovation-culture/research-and-innovation-culture/>



ONLINE ENGAGEMENT

Whilst inclusion was seen to be the top priority, there was also a desire to see practices of online engagement, learnt through the pandemic, be more effectively utilised as we emerged from lockdown. There was a concern that in returning to face-to-face practices, we would lose some of the people who had found these forms of engagement more effective for their needs. Whilst issues relating to digital exclusion were also important to tackle head on, PEPs were keen to see the practices of online engagement refined and improved, and integrated into broader programmes of work.

SUPPORT FOR ENGAGEMENT FROM FUNDERS AND HE LEADERS

The pandemic also 'stress tested' public engagement infrastructure, and exposed significant challenges in how this is resourced. Whilst recognising that these things are seldom simple, there was a desire to see more effective funding mechanisms that enable the engaged research work that is known to work well. PEPs were also keen to see university leaders take more strategic oversight of the engagement footprint of their institution, and commit funding to support this in a sustained way.

5. IDEAS FOR CHANGE

On reflecting on this research, and in order to realise the potential of public engagement within the context of higher education, the research team has set out four areas of potential work, and recommended actions to address them.

SCALE UP AND CONSOLIDATE PROMISING PRACTICES TO ADDRESS EXCLUSION

The pandemic has highlighted the huge impact of inequality, and the potential of universities to play their part in addressing this. The research revealed a range of promising engagement practices (such as co-produced research, community led engagement, and community listening projects to inform strategic direction) which urgently need scaling up, alongside a range of systemic issues that need collective action.



BRING CLARITY TO COMPLEXITY

Many institutions are still tentative about their commitment to public engagement and lack a clear strategy to guide their investment. There is an urgent need for institutions to clarify the scope and focus of their commitments in this area. This would be helped if there was clearer and more robust guidance from funders about their expectations.

MAKE THE INVISIBLE VISIBLE

PEPs – in common with many other professional services staff – are often in marginal roles and their contribution is often not clearly valued or understood. In the context of renewed interest in research culture, it is vital that steps are taken to address the effects of this, and to maximise the impact and influence of PEPs and other ‘third space’ professionals.

RESOURCE EFFECTIVELY

There is no shortage of aspiration about the public role of universities, but resourcing often falls far short of need. The research has revealed how intensely that lack of resource impacts on the quality and scope of the work PEPs can realise, and the strain this places on people and projects. This gap between ambition and actual investment needs to be faced head on.

These four areas will require action from the various stakeholders in the HE engagement ecosystem:

- **Funders** can contribute by ensuring that their funding calls and assessment processes recognise the contributions of both professional services staff (including PEPs) and community organisations, and by ensuring that engagement activity is appropriate to the context, and is resourced appropriately.
- **Senior HE leaders** can collaborate with staff and stakeholders to develop a secure strategic grip on the engagement work being undertaken, clarity about its role within the aims and objectives of the university or research organisation, and to ensure appropriate resources are invested in this area.



- **PEPs** have a key role to play in supporting effective practices, and proactively sharing their experiences and insights to build capacity across the sector.
- **The NCCPE** has a responsibility to collaborate with all of these groups to act on the findings of this research, to ensure that the lessons learned are applied to bring about lasting improvements in how the HE sector engages with the public.

FINAL COMMENTS

This research provides a unique insight into the experiences of PEPs, and their hopes for the future. It has reminded us of the creativity, resilience, and commitment of this specific group of professional staff within the HE landscape.

The research is also very timely. As UKRI begin to enact their vision of a more integrated relationship between research and society, and as universities reflect on all they have learnt and reimagine their relationship with place and people, this research and the expertise of PEPs will have a vital role to play. The findings provide evidence and insight to inform and animate a revitalised and refocused approach to how the HE sector engages with society.

FIND OUT MORE

If you are keen to find out more about the findings, there are two additional reports relating to the findings from the research.

- PEP Insights Report¹¹: which includes the full analysis of the data
- PEP Insights Survey Report¹²: including graphs of the quantitative data, and a summary of the qualitative data

¹¹ https://www.publicengagement.ac.uk/sites/default/files/publication/pep_insight_research_report_final.pdf

¹² https://www.publicengagement.ac.uk/sites/default/files/publication/pep_insight_research_survey_report_final.pdf