The NCCPE is launching a research study to explore the impact of COVID-19 on public engagement professionals and the engagement work of universities.

Over the past few months, the NCCPE has been involved in a range of initiatives to respond to the current pandemic, and its impact on all of our lives. In all of this we have sought to respond to the present and emerging context, offer support to all those involved in the public engagement ecosystem, and work with funders to explore how to ensure that engagement is embedded into our collective responses.

Specifically, our work to engage with PEPs has included:

- The PEPtogethers, an opportunity for people to come together, at first weekly, now fortnightly, to share responses, experiences, stories and ideas, and to work collectively to make sense of life in a global pandemic
- The PEP Network – which is now free to all those who want to engage with other public engagement professionals.
- PEP Network events – which have offered the opportunity to access training, support, and collective problem solving.
- Creating quick access guides and training, including engaging online, hyperlocal engagement, and community engagement during covid-19 context.

This current context has provided a real opportunity to step back, and reflect, and to plan differently for the future. It has also shone a light on inequalities, and how these have and will be exacerbated by the pandemic.

The research project aims to understand better the experiences of PEPs and their institutions, researchers and partners within this context, and consider the opportunities and challenges raised. The research will build on the insights and intelligence gained through a consultation process run by the NCCPE and UCL in 2019, which sought to take stock of the current ‘state of play’ in supporting public engagement in higher education. We want to explore how far COVID-19 has transformed the landscape. How have the pre-COVID challenges around resourcing, leading and delivering public engagement been impacted by the pandemic?
Therefore, we are inviting you to join us to do a piece of peer research. There are four ways to be involved:

- **Volunteer to be a peer researcher:** Peer researchers will have the opportunity to participate in online training, to develop and enhance your research skills. You will be part of a small team who will conduct the research, and help us to make sense of it through a two-day analysis workshop.
- **Volunteer to be interviewed:** We are looking for a group of PEPs who are prepared to be interviewed for 35 minutes, about their experiences of our current context, and their hopes and fears for the future.
- **Volunteer to participate in a focus group:** We are planning to run online focus groups to share our views with others, and promote discussion and exchange.
- **Do our survey:** We will also be running an online questionnaire, which we hope you will be prepared to complete.

**Peer Researchers**

We hope to recruit a team with

- A range of experiences of undertaking research – from those who are just getting started, to those with more substantial experience
- A range of experiences of being in PEP roles – from those who started in the last 12 months, to those who have been working in PEP related roles for a long time
- Experience working across the UK in a variety of settings and roles

**Research: experience and approach**

We will provide training and support in research methods, so prior experience of research is not essential. We want to recruit a team who are really curious about the current situation and about how best to gather robust evidence to help make sense of it, and communicate that understanding to others. We are looking for people who are determined to ‘dig deeper’, reflective about their own experience, analytical, open-minded and excellent at listening.

**Ideas**

We are keen to recruit people who want to contribute ideas to the research project, including shaping the research questions, the research approach, the analysis and dissemination of results.

**Facilitation and interviewing**

We will be interested in you experience of facilitating discussion and conducting interviews and other kinds of ‘listening’ activity.

**Availability**

We anticipate that the project will require 5 days of your time between now and November. We expect to pay co-researchers for their time. We need to know that you will be able to dedicate this
amount of time to the activity, and also to understand what we need to do to facilitate your involvement. If you are offering to do this work as part of your current role, we will expect you to clear this with your line manager before starting.

Sharing results

The results of this piece of research will be:

- Shared with PEPs, to inform their own leadership and advocacy within their own contexts.
- Used to inform funders to consider how they can best support the engagement ecosystem which is so critical to the future.
- Used to inform the NCCPE’s work – to ensure we offer appropriate support to the sector, including PEPs, university leaders, partner organisations etc.

The process

- **Recruit researchers**
  - Recruit 8 PEPs to act as research team
  - Training webinar - equipping people with relevant skills to conduct research

- **Design research**
  - Researchers and NCCPE finalise research design and approach
  - Design online survey, focus group, and interview prompts
  - Agree potential dissemination plan for sharing results/ including outputs needed

- **Conduct research**
  - Survey is open for 6 weeks
  - Interviews and focus groups conducted with PEPs across UK (and internationally)

- **Analysis**
  - Analysis done by NCCPE and research team in 2 online workshops
  - Review of outputs and dissemination plan in light of emergent findings

- **Write up**
  - Initial write up by NCCPE, with input from research team
  - Final report, including blog summary, and actions for NCCPE; funders; sector; PEPs

- **Dissemination and action**
  - Report shared across networks, with funders, etc following agreed dissemination plan
  - Actions taken forward by NCCPE
The timeline

Research phase: end of August/ September

Analysis: October

Final report: November

Links to The Engaged University: Turning Words into Action

In this project we invited a sample of universities working in the UK and beyond to share how they are tackling three challenges:

1. How are universities making and stating the case for public engagement and articulating its value?

2. How are universities turning strategy into practice – galvanising excellence in the design and delivery of public engagement and embedding it into their institutional infrastructure?

3. How are universities resourcing public engagement – both people and programmes?

The final project provides a fascinating snapshot of ‘cutting edge’ practice pre-COVID-19. This new research project will allow us to test how a number of the findings have been impacted by the pandemic. In particular:

Factors which help embed a strategic approach to public engagement:

The research revealed that societal engagement (however framed) comes to life in certain conditions. In particular, when:

- It is a separate pillar within the institutional strategy, with clear links to research and teaching strategies
- Governance structures are aligned with the strategy (e.g. senior boards for each of the different pillars of the institutional strategy)
- Senior staff are appointed to oversee and guide the implementation – academic and professional
- The strategic narrative draws on the institutional history and culture
- It draws on what matters to its staff, students and communities
- There is an integrated and systems-wide approach to evaluation.
How have these factors featured in how your HEI has responded?

**Common challenges in supporting public engagement**

The research revealed three challenges which HEIs are grappling with in developing their engagement strategies.

1. Experiences and perceptions of the university do not live up to the strategy
2. Building trust and addressing equality, equity and inclusion
3. Nurturing leadership & developing capability and talent

**How significant have these challenges proved in the context of COVID-19? What new challenges have emerged?**

**Resourcing public engagement**

The research revealed some common characteristics of university support for PE:

- **Central teams were generally small.** Often <10 staff working horizontally across the institution.
- **Teams are currently sustained on relatively small budgets.** Often designed to broker resources and support and mobilise activity across the institution.
- **Roles focus on institutional culture change.** There is a growing cadre of ‘Public Engagement Professionals’ with significant expertise in both the design of excellent engagement AND skills in organisational development.

Some key resourcing lessons learned included:

- **Senior backing for the team is vital.** Having a direct line to the top circumvents bureaucracy and helps the institution take a coordinated strategic approach.

- **Successful teams will create more work for themselves and risk burnout.** Engagement professionals have a ‘can do’ attitude – this is a key factor in their success but can lead to burn out if not carefully managed.

- **Invest in talent.** Engagement requires specialist skills – finding and developing the right people is crucial and valuing their expertise.
We identified five areas where decisions / judgements about resourcing need to be made (please see next page):

What new light has Covid-19 cast on this characteristics and findings? How have the choices made by your HEI impacted on your ability to navigate COVID-19 and sustain your activity?
Looking forward
The report closed five fundamental strategic challenges for university public engagement:

1. How effectively do we embrace perspectives, expertise and needs from outside our university?

2. How well do systems and processes enable us to work efficiently and responsively with our partners and publics, and with each other?

3. Are we capturing the data and intelligence we need to tell us if we are being successful and where we are failing or falling short?

4. Do we have the talent and creativity to navigate this new landscape – and if not, what do we need to do about it?

5. Do our leaders grasp the significance of the changes we need to implement, and are they committed to that change?

How useful are these in explaining the challenges we now face, and where we need to focus attention in response?