How to...

...write a business case for your public engagement support programme

Guidance on how to create a compelling investment case
HOW TO WRITE A BUSINESS CASE FOR YOUR SUPPORT PROGRAMME

Getting started

If you are seeking to embed public engagement support and practice in your institution, it is extremely important to involve others in the development of your business case. Our guide ‘Developing a strategy for your support programme’ explains how you can use a logic model to help focus these conversations and define your ambitions and approach.

You will also need to develop a business case to help secure the investment needed to deliver your ambition: for instance, to secure new posts to provide expert support. Your logic model and underpinning theory of change will really help you to frame this case. This guide explains how you can go about framing a compelling investment case.

You will need a senior champion for your business case, who can help you guide it through your institution. They can advise you on the template you might be expected to follow, and the decision making process that your institution typically follows: for instance, which committees might be expected to review your case. There may be several steps you need to follow: for instance, submitting an outline case for approval, followed by a more detailed plan and budget.

It always makes sense to develop such a case iteratively, sharing versions with key decision makers to get their input, and to ensure it aligns with their expectations.

In general, a business case is usually made up of sections similar to the below:

- Current situation
  - Wider PE environment
  - PE in other HEIs
  - PE at your institution
- Project description
- The approach
- Benefits and limitations
- Potential additional opportunities available with investment
- Timeline and Budget

Current situation

It is vital that your plan speaks to your institution’s strategic priorities and values. Make sure that you can evidence how the investment aligns with and will contribute concretely to the institution’s strategic plan.

It is also important to set the context for your business case, giving the reasons for why your project should be considered. You might include a description of the wider public engagement environment at a sector-level, brief information about public engagement in other HEIs (especially those your institution compares itself to), and the current appetite for public engagement within your institution.

Typically, business cases will emphasise some or all of the following external factors:

1. Research and the REF - to achieve and evidence the societal impact of publicly funded research through Impact Case studies within the Research Excellence Framework.
2. KEF – Knowledge Exchange Framework, which includes a perspective focused on Public and Community Engagement.

3. Civic University Agreements – highlighting the demand for universities to play an increasingly dynamic role as ‘anchors’ within their cities and regions to enhance human and social capital.


5. Funders requirements, for example from Wellcome.

6. Researcher Development, with public engagement contributing to researcher motivation and employability.

7. Student experience or student recruitment.

8. Your competitors: provide examples of how they are supporting public engagement.

The NCCPE’s ‘Engaged University: Turning Words into Action’ report and resource pack provide examples of how different HEIs support public engagement, which might provide some useful models to discuss with colleagues.

It can be useful to concentrate on just one or two top institutional priorities to ensure your public engagement work speaks strongly to these priorities and is not diluted by trying to be all things to all people.

**Project description**

Use this space to describe the project or programme of work you are planning and the reasons for the key interventions you are proposing. Refer to the problem you are solving or gaps identified in the ‘current situation’ section. Keep it short and clear: you want to give people a good idea of what the project is but the detail will be in later sections.

**The approach**

How will the resources you are asking for be used?

Use the work you planned out in your logic model to articulate what resources you need, how you will use them and what activities will be accomplished. The activities, outputs and medium-term outcomes from your logic model will be especially useful here: you want to communicate very clearly what will be happening as a result of the investment.

There may be more than one possible approach you want to propose – outline these here and use the ‘benefits and limitations’ section to talk about the relative merits of the different approaches.

**Benefits, limitations and risks**

What will the institution get out of the investment and what is the return on that investment?

Use the impacts and long-term outcomes sections from your theory of change:

- What are the benefits you anticipate?
- What institutional goals will your programme support?

Link back to gaps and opportunities you highlighted in the ‘current situation’ section.

The ‘assumptions’ section of your logic model can help to outline the limitations and allows you to convey what happens if you don’t get the resources or if fewer resources are given.

- What impact will fewer or no resources have on your ability to accomplish the institution’s goals?
- What is the risk if nothing is done?

**Potential additional opportunities available with investment**
This is where you can talk about potential other effects or opportunities that may come available as a result of the project. For example, having a public engagement team may enable you to apply for other funding opportunities in the future. Or perhaps, building effective processes as part of this project will enable these to be scaled up and used for other projects in the future. These are general examples to give you a picture of the types of things you are looking for. Your business case should be as specific as possible. Think about:

- What funding opportunities might open up as a result of your project?
- What collaborations might become available through your project?
- Are there any opportunities for growth or potential future savings likely because of your project?

**Timeline and budget**

Again, your logic model is your friend here; you will already have planned out a basic timeline, and identified the resources you will need. Here is where you outline a specific timeline of activity and costs and how this aligns with the academic year. It can be useful to plan activities around major institutional activities and committees you may need to report into. Using a visual diagram such as a Gantt Chart will help.

Your budget should be as accurate as possible, especially if you are asking for money to pay for new roles. Your HR teams should have all the information you need for this. You can also include staff time, resources given in kind and resources you have already secured, if the project you are proposing is supported by these. Projects which utilise existing resources well will be better received by institutions.

**Other resources**

You might want to look at our ‘staffing your team’ section for more guidance on the kinds of roles, responsibilities and organisational arrangements you could be requesting in your business case.

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