Towards an open research university: creating the conditions where engaged research can flourish.

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Embracing the values of publics, stakeholders and end-users enriches knowledge generation and exchange, improving the quality of research. For the principles of engaged research to become embedded in university cultures of research, however, fundamental changes are required at strategic and operational levels. **Richard Holliman** *has been leading a programme of organisational change at the Open University to create the conditions where engaged research can flourish across different academic domains. Here, he argues that questions of quality are at the heart of securing a progressive agenda for engaged research.*

The wider context for culture change

In 2008, Research Councils UK (RCUK), the UK Higher Education Funding Councils, and the Wellcome Trust announced a call to fund the Beacons for Public Engagement initiative. Six 'beacon' projects were established under this initiative. Each project coalesced around university-based collaborative centres designed to support, recognise, reward and build capacity for public engagement. The National Co-ordinating Centre for Public Engagement (NCCPE) was also established under the Beacons initiative and continues to co-ordinate and share learning about engagement across UK higher education institutions and research institutes.

In 2011, RCUK issued a further more narrowly focused call to fund eight Public Engagement with Research Catalyst universities. The Catalyst initiative invited universities to draw on and develop the learning from the Beacons initiative with the overarching aim of embedding a culture within universities where public engagement with research is strategically planned, systematically assessed, valued and recognised.

An open research university

The Open University was successful in its application to become a Catalyst university and I was selected to lead the multi-disciplinary project team. Over the three years (2012-2015) of the project our aim was to become 'An Open Research University', developing and implementing strategies that promote structured and equitable mechanisms for effective and sustainable engagement with a range of publics, stakeholders and user communities.

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In order to achieve this ambitious aim we proposed a programme of organisational change, complementing an emergent 'bottom up' model of change with some 'top down' elements, and providing strategies to support the processes of change rather than control outcomes. Informed by action research, we employed rigorous research-based inquiry into how the university functioned with respect to public engagement with research. This initial diagnostic exploration phase mapped practices across the OU's research portfolio. We investigated the processes of innovation that generated activity, and collated resources and practices already in place to support research projects in various kinds of public engagement with research.

Consistency within diversity

Findings from one aspect of the initial diagnostic exploration are documented in an academic paper and the accompanying dataset (Grand, Davies et al. 2015; 2014). To summarise, we had 171 responses; approximately 30% of the OU's researcher population. We found that the researchers offered a relatively limited view of public engagement with research: the most common definitions focussed on the dissemination, communication or presentation of research (Table 1).

Table 1. Researchers' definitions of 'public engagement with research'.

Code	Description	%	n
Dissemination	*Dissemination/communication/presentation*: Through appropriate language and a variety of one-way communications, ensuring wider (e.g. non-academic) audiences can receive information about the process of research and research findings; outreach; talks/lectures; explaining, clarifying, translating, simplifying or educating.	32	54
Collaboration	*Collaboration/participation/consultation*: Involving people in research from the inception of projects; affording people the opportunity to understand, participate and shape research priorities and the design of projects; consulting groups that want to do something with the research.	11	19
Dialogue	*Dialogue/exchange of ideas*: Engaging in dialogue or exchanging ideas with a diverse range of audiences/user groups/ specialist researchers/interested parties/publics; enhancing mutual benefit by listening/participating in ways that help shape/reshape the social demand and understanding of research; influencing policy.	8	14
Useful	*Demonstrating the usefulness/benefits of research*: Demonstrating the importance of research; enhancing people's understanding of how research can affect their community and improve their lives (e.g. offering economic benefits); demonstrate economic value of research.	7	13
Functional	*Functional/strategic/occupational*: Sustaining resources and concrete targets in research projects; training researchers in engagement; offering media support; meeting institutional targets for public engagement; a defined part of the job role.	4	6
Non-participation	Antithetical/negative/dismissive views about public engagement with research.	1	2
Don't know	Responses given as 'don't know' or similar.	2	4
Unclassifiable	Responses that did not include a definition.	8	13
No answer	Respondents left the question blank.	27	46
Total		100	171

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This was repeated in researchers' descriptions of activities they considered to be public engagement; about half of the respondents described such an activity, and the most common descriptions were of research being 'conveyed', 'shown' or 'explained' to the public, although a small number described activities that involved 'collaboration' with non-academic communities (Table 2).

Table 2. Researchers' descriptions of public engagement with research activities.

Code	Description	%	n
Presenting	Presentations/talks/lectures e.g. at festivals, fairs, exhibitions, roadshows, public meetings; radio/television programmes; to national and international audiences, special-interest groups, charitable and volunteer organisations.	19	33
Partnerships	Co-production of research with diverse groups; working with practitioners.	14	23
None	Respondents said they did not carry out any public engagement activities.	8	13
Activities	Workshops with non-academic groups; university events open to the public, practitioners, policy-makers, other researchers (e.g. seminars, open days).	7	12
Schools	Activities involving school students; outreach activities; talks/lectures in schools.	7	12
Digital	Writing research blogs; other social media activities; forums; citizen inquiry projects.	4	6
Writing	Writing for books, newspapers, magazines, policy documents.	2	4
Not possible	Unable to describe, as this would identify the researcher.	1	2
Unclassifiable	Responses that did not include a description of an activity	6	11
No answer	Respondents left this question blank.	32	55
Total		100	171

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Researchers' reasons for engaging included education and communication, collaboration and dialogue and the need to improve the quality of research. The biggest group of responses focussed on the idea that public engagement enabled researchers to influence policy or drive social change.

Based on evidence from the initial diagnostic exploration, we introduced a number of interventions. For example, we collaboratively produced a university-wide definition of engaged research, and mentored researchers as they made

sense of the research impact agenda. We also developed measures of short and long term recognition; the former through an [Award Scheme](#), the latter through revised [promotion criteria](#) that offer Knowledge Exchange Profiles for academics whose careers feature engaged research.

Aspiring to excellence

In our report we argue that our project has extended the Open University's international reputation for open learning. Building on this existing culture of excellence, allied with the university's strengths in collaboration and multi-disciplinary working, we developed and implemented a successful strategy for engaged research that extends our commitment beyond open learning, changing the culture of our research, and aligning this with our [mission](#) to be 'open to people, places, methods and ideas'. However, there is much more to be achieved.

An obvious area for further development is support for researchers in assessing and producing feedback on Pathways to Impact plans as part of grant proposals. Researchers need the confidence to produce ambitious, progressive plans, whilst those conducting peer review need a framework that provides robust and consistent assessments; ones that value all pathways as equal and that do not favour short-term reach over long-term significance.

In summary, funders, universities and researchers need to move beyond the idea that it is acceptable to merely fund an '[acceptable](#)' Pathways to Impact plan. We should strive for excellence in the same way that research is only deemed fundable when it is excellent. It follows that as researchers we have a responsibility to aspire to excellence in engaged research; publics, stakeholders and end-users deserve no less.

This post is based on the final report from the Open University's Public Engagement with Research Catalyst, 'An Open Research University: Final Report' (2015) http://oro.open.ac.uk/44255 *and a related journal article which first appeared in PLOS ONE (2015) doi:* 10.1371/journal.pone.0121874

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the Impact of Social Science blog, nor of the London School of Economics.

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