

Reviewing public engagement in REF 2014

Reflections for shaping the second REF

Introduction

This briefing paper was created to inform discussion about the role of public engagement in the REF, and was prepared by Kate Miller (Head of Public Engagement, University of Bristol) in collaboration with the NCCPE team. It draws on an extensive programme of review and reflection on REF 2014, led by the NCCPE in consultation with the wider sector, in particular the NCCPE report *Engaging Publics with Research: Reviewing the REF 2014 Impact Case Studies and Templates*¹ which outlines the findings in full and the methodology behind them.

This briefing paper looks at the analysis of data from REF 2014, using the over 6,000 REF impact case studies that have been made publicly available on a searchable web-based database². The data has informed suggestions about how better to incentivise and embed public engagement, in line with Lord Stern's recommendations³. It is aimed at those involved in shaping the second REF, scheduled for 2021, or contributing to the online consultation on the REF⁴. As such, it is of relevance to funders, REF coordinators and those in UK higher education institutions who are providing responses to the consultation.

We hope that it provides useful evidence and a helpful set of frameworks to progress our collective understanding of how best to plan, deliver and describe the process and outcomes of engaging the public with research, by building on the 'best' of REF 2014 and by identifying areas where our collective efforts can be better focused.

We look forward to your feedback and comments.

To obtain a copy of the full NCCPE report, please contact nccpe.enquiries@uwe.ac.uk

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1. <https://www.publicengagement.ac.uk/news/role-public-engagement-ref>

2. <http://impact.ref.ac.uk/CaseStudies/>

3. Building on Success and Learning from Experience An Independent Review of the Research Excellence Framework (2016) www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/541338/ind-16-9-ref-stern-review.pdf

4. <http://www.hefce.ac.uk/rsrch/refconsultation/>

Executive summary

This summary, and the overall briefing paper, aims to highlight insight and evidence, based on our reflections from REF 2014, in order to give us confidence for the role of public engagement in the next REF and how it might be framed.

What do we mean by public engagement?

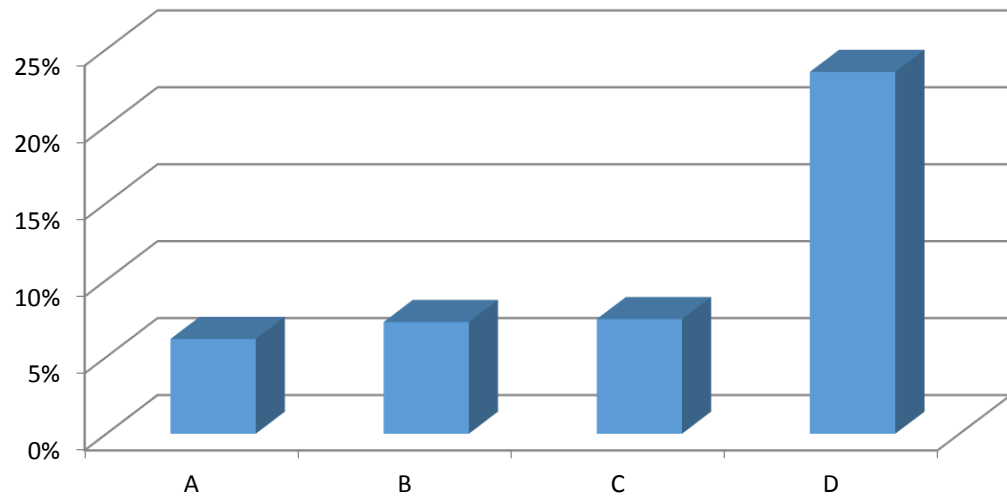
By 'public engagement' we mean interaction with people outside academia, in their capacity as citizens and members of communities of place or interest. We differentiate public engagement from engagement with policy making, business and the professions, but recognise that in practice they often overlap.

- **Public engagement might be considered pervasive:** 3108 of the 6640 case studies (47%) made some reference to engaging with the public. However, a third of these only feature a single search term, suggesting that public engagement may only be articulated as playing a minor role in the pursuit of impact.
- **The extent of public engagement reported across the four main panels differed strikingly.** It appears to be more prevalent in the arts and humanities, with surprisingly little public engagement reported in areas like medicine and public health. There are also differences in how engagement with different publics are described.
- **No significant difference was discovered in the scores awarded to case studies featuring mentions of public engagement compared with those that don't:** anecdotally, there was nervousness in the sector that public engagement would be valued less highly than other types of engagement. This finding challenges that assumption.
- **Public engagement can happen 'alone' but more often is integrated into a blend of external engagement, with policy or the professions and, very occasionally, with business:** This suggests a significant virtuous circle or association: those institutions that engage well with a range of different stakeholders include publics as one of those groups. Public engagement can also often be 'mediated' through the involvement of organisations like schools, broadcasters, charities or museums.
- **Public engagement is nearly always focused on changes to understanding and awareness. Much more rarely is it foregrounded as a route to realising legal, technological or commercial impacts or more instrumental outcomes:** many researchers default to a paradigm of public engagement as dissemination, and in the process limit its potential to contribute at all stages of the research cycle. The public are most often framed as an audience for research findings, rather than as experts in their own right or as active participants in the process.
- **Evidence provided of impact on public understanding and awareness is often weak:** usually, researchers limit their evidence to a list of the outlets they have used and the numbers of people engaged.

How many impact case studies feature engagement with the public?

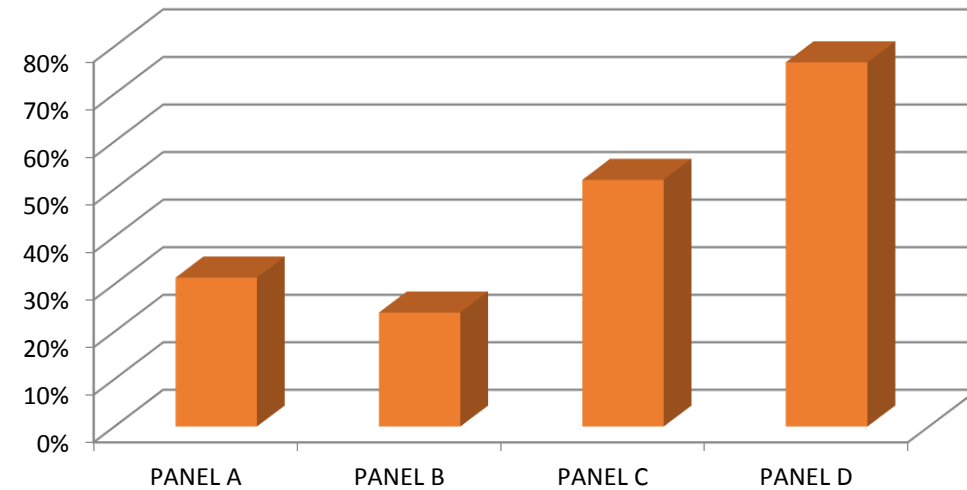
Searching for 'public engagement' returned 731 case studies. When we extended the range of search terms to capture other ways of describing engagement with the public, we identified a further 2377, leading to 3108 case studies – 47% of the total. The distribution of these across the four main panels was quite different.

'PE only' case studies as a percentage of total submitted case studies

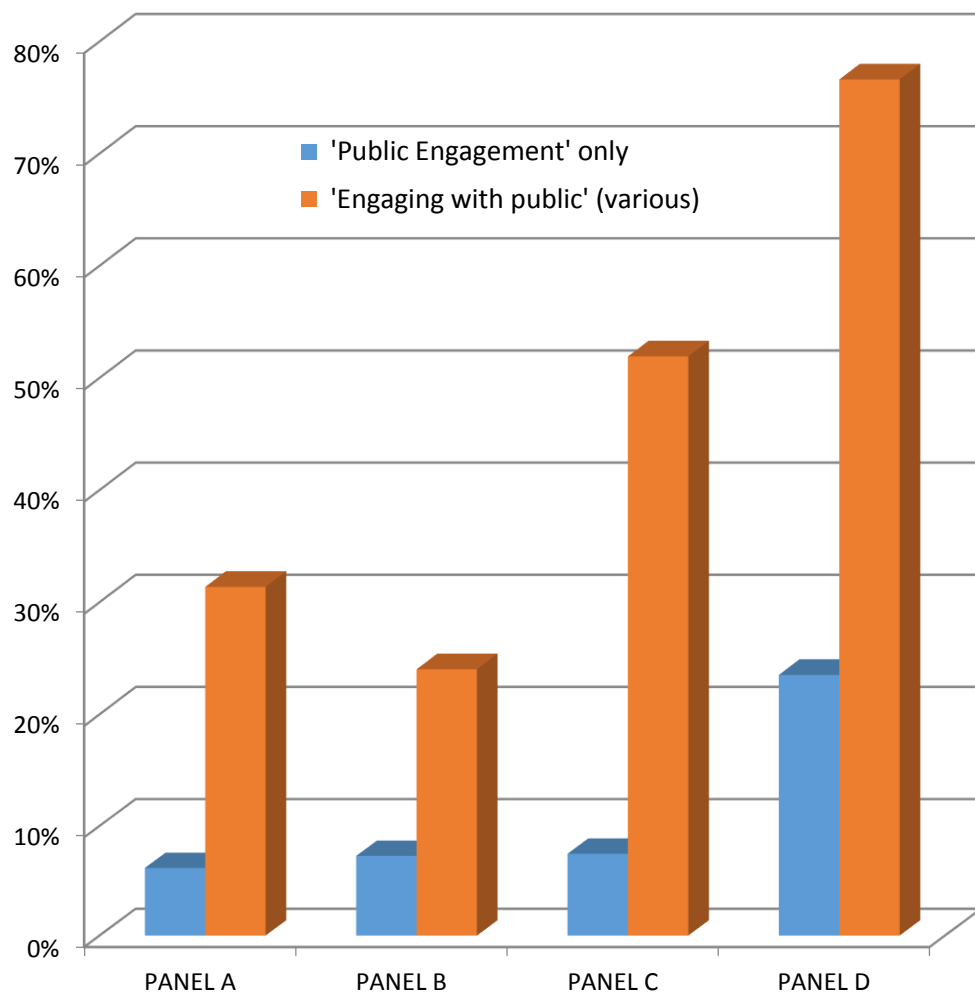


| Panel | Total case studies | Total 'PE only' case studies | % of submitted case studies |
|-------|--------------------|------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| A | 1591 | 98 | 6% |
| B | 1474 | 107 | 7% |
| C | 1959 | 146 | 7% |
| D | 1616 | 380 | 24% |

'Engaging with public' sample as percentage of total



| Panel | Total case studies | Total 'engaging with public' case studies | % of submitted case studies |
|-------|--------------------|---|-----------------------------|
| A | 1591 | 499 | 31% |
| B | 1474 | 354 | 24% |
| C | 1959 | 1017 | 52% |
| D | 1616 | 1238 | 77% |



The findings reveal that the term ‘public engagement’ fails to capture the full breadth of ways in which researchers are interacting with the wider public, or creating some kind of effect or impact in the public sphere.

Several reasons could account for this:

- The case study authors use an alternative description of the activity (e.g. ‘outreach’ or ‘public debate’, rather than ‘public engagement’)
- They have chosen to focus on the outcomes rather than the approach (e.g. ‘public understanding’, rather than ‘public engagement’)
- They have chosen to focus on the medium rather than the method (e.g. ‘media coverage’ rather than ‘public engagement’)

The most common phrases which capture other examples of engagement with the public cluster into four broad areas:

- Terms which capture the ways in which research has stimulated public awareness, understanding and debate
- Terms which describe ways in which media have been used to influence public discourse
- Terms describing other approaches to engagement, including lifelong learning, behaviour change and outreach
- Terms which capture how researchers have worked with intermediary organisations like schools or museums to engage with pupils, audiences, visitors etc

Engagement with the public features in nearly half of the case studies. Viewed holistically, this public engagement activity paints a rich picture of the potential of public engagement to build value in wider society. However, it is important to point out that just under a third of these case studies (1024) only use one of our chosen search terms (for instance, ‘media coverage’ is used on its own 150 times, suggesting a very cursory attempt to disseminate the results). In these case studies, engagement with the public plays a minor role in the pursuit of impact.

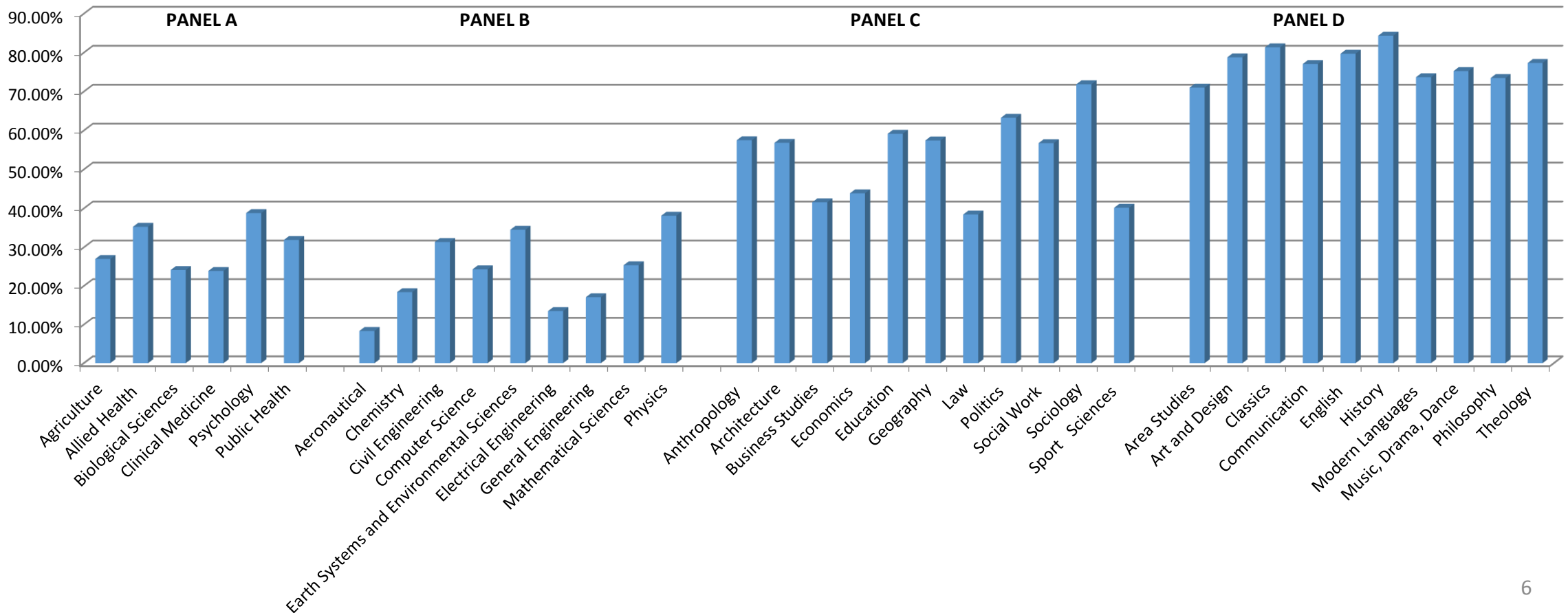
Disciplinary differences

The extent and nature of engagement with the public differs significantly between the four main panels, and within them:

- Panel D dominates the overall sample of 3108 engagement case studies
- There is significant variety of engagement with the public reported in the other panels
- The Units of Assessment in Panel B show the greatest variation in the extent to which they featured PE

Public engagement appears to be more prevalent in the arts and humanities. However there was surprisingly little public engagement reported in areas like medicine and public health, where there has been a long standing expectation that researchers should engage patients. This merits deeper analysis but may be related to REF 2014 encouraging a linear model of impact, which is not consistent with patient and public involvement.

'Engaging the public' case studies as a proportion of total submitted case studies %



The distribution of search terms by panel

Panel A

'Public awareness' and 'Media coverage' feature strongly, where there appears to be an emphasis on getting the word out. 'Behaviour change' is also common, as is patient engagement, although perhaps less so than might have been anticipated, given the panel's focus on health.

Panel B

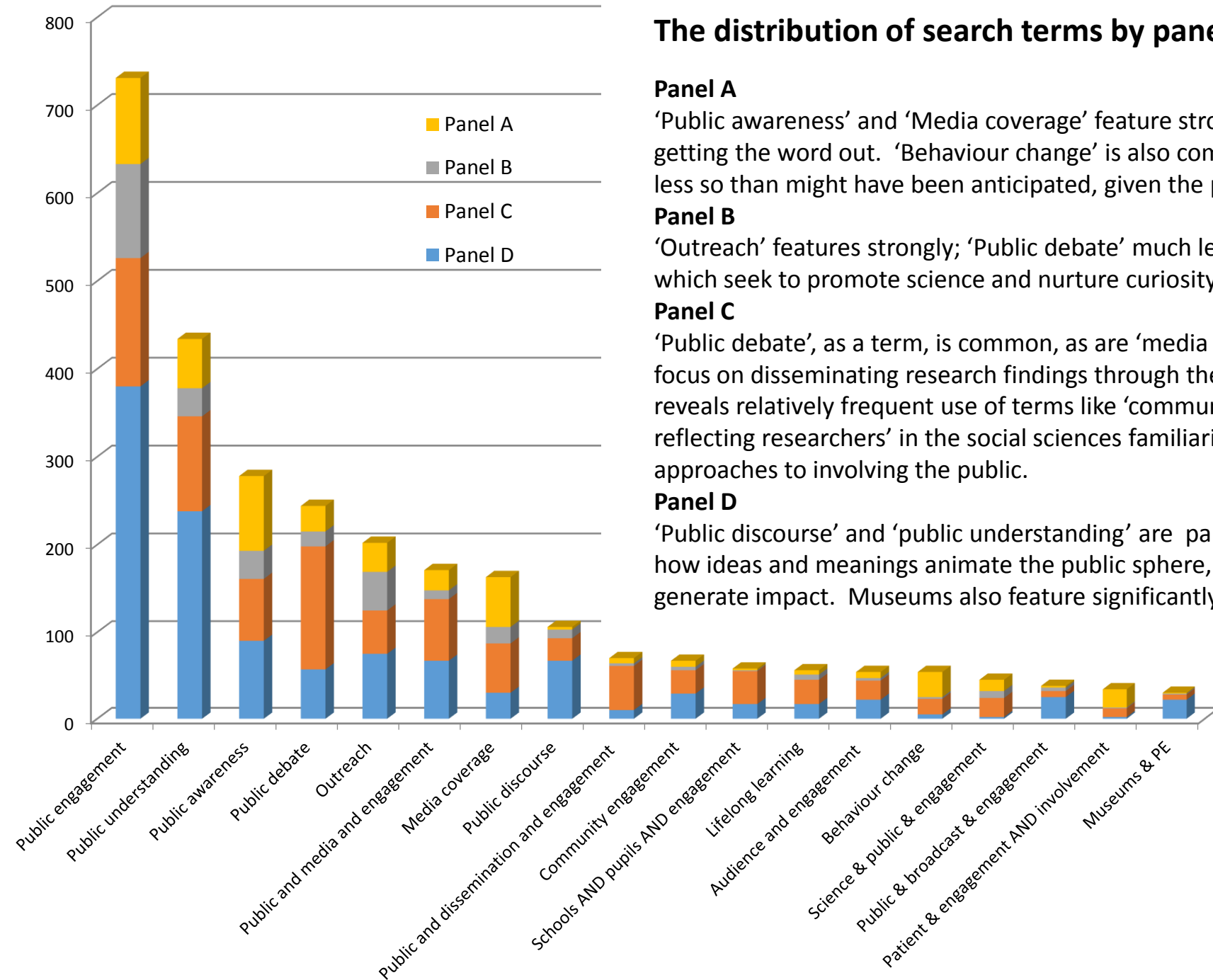
'Outreach' features strongly; 'Public debate' much less so, reflecting perhaps a preference for activities which seek to promote science and nurture curiosity about it.

Panel C

'Public debate', as a term, is common, as are 'media coverage' and 'dissemination', suggesting a strong focus on disseminating research findings through the media, to stimulate public discussion. Panel C also reveals relatively frequent use of terms like 'community engagement' and 'lifelong learning', perhaps reflecting researchers' in the social sciences familiarity and commitment to these long standing approaches to involving the public.

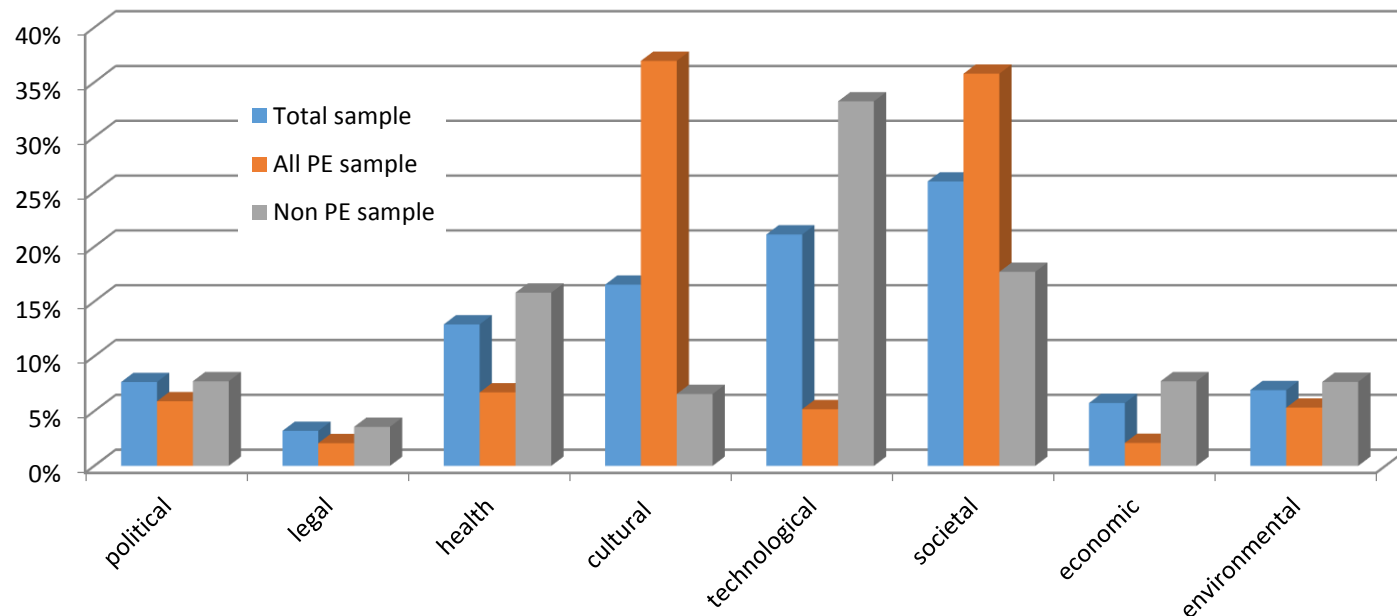
Panel D

'Public discourse' and 'public understanding' are particularly common, reflecting a strong interest in how ideas and meanings animate the public sphere, and a distinctive way of framing how research can generate impact. Museums also feature significantly.



Different 'flavours' of public engagement feature in different discipline areas. As such, guidance should take into account these varied forms, and articulation, of impact.

Comparing frequency of impact types



The contribution of public engagement to political, legal, economic and environmental case studies is less extensive than might be expected, given the critical role of publics in these domains (as citizens, service users, customers, clients etc.). Whilst this may be due to the limitation to one type of impact, it highlights an opportunity for the next REF: encouraging researchers to think more expansively about how public engagement might contribute to societal change.

- The team who were commissioned to build the database chose to categorise all of the case studies into one of eight impact types, represented in the graph. Each case study was allocated to just one impact type.
- It is striking how frequently the 'all PE' sample case studies (orange) were categorised as delivering cultural and societal impacts (remembering that case studies were only allocated one impact type, even if they delivered several).
- Those case studies which did not mention engagement with the public ('non-PE sample', grey) were much more likely to be categorised as realising technological and health impacts.
- It is surprising how relatively few of the 'all PE' sample are categorised as being primarily focused on health impacts: one might have expected a much higher proportion given the trend to involve publics in health research, although this may be related to the potential underrepresentation of public engagement in Panel A.

| Impact types | Total sample | Total sample | PE sample | Non PE sample |
|---------------|--------------|--------------|-----------|---------------|
| Political | 508 | 8% | 6% | 8% |
| Legal | 212 | 3% | 2% | 4% |
| Health | 857 | 13% | 7% | 16% |
| Cultural | 1098 | 17% | 37% | 7% |
| Technological | 1402 | 21% | 5% | 33% |
| Societal | 1723 | 26% | 36% | 18% |
| Economic | 381 | 6% | 2% | 8% |
| Environmental | 459 | 7% | 5% | 8% |

How did 'engaging the public' case studies score?

Anecdotally, there was nervousness in the sector that public engagement would be valued less highly than other types of engagement. There were reports of institutions choosing not to submit case studies based on public engagement or downplaying the role that engagement with publics played in the overall case study. We set out to investigate whether there was any evidence to support the value of public engagement.

- 35% of the whole case study sample were assessed as 3* and 4*, and 32% of the case studies featuring at least 3 mentions of engaging with the public. 2.5% of the whole case study sample can be pinpointed as being 2* or below, compared with 2.6% of the 'engaging with the public' case studies.
- This suggests that there is no significant difference in how case studies mentioning public engagement as a route to impact are scored compared with those that don't. Guidance for the next REF should help dispel these assumptions and allay concerns in the research community around impacts arising from public engagement.

Challenges and issues

Our review also identified various challenges or issues, which are explored in the following pages:

- **Impacts arising from public engagement can be hard to capture.** Some case studies make very convincing accounts of the value and significance arising from the engagement, but many are less convincing. Developing a clear narrative for impact case studies would help accelerate good practice.
- While there are many examples of sophisticated engagement approaches, which realise exceptional value on many levels, these are still the exception rather than the rule. Much of the public engagement featured is restricted to rather basic dissemination and **fails to realise the potential of deeper involvement** and therefore deeper impact.
- The public engagement featured often happens after the research has been completed. Examining **the timing and different purposes** served by public engagement would provide valuable insight.
- The case studies reveal a rich harvest of terms to describe the various roles people beyond academia play in the realisation of impact, including: public; audience; patient; child; parent; family; people; community; victim; visitor; tourist; voter; donor; user; player; women; ethnic; refugee; worker; employee. But in many cases, **the authors fall back on generic and homogenous terms like 'the general public'.**
- Public engagement is often woven or blended with other forms of engagement. We need to better understand the distinctive contribution that public engagement can make to realising the public benefits arising **from complex 'weaves' of policy and practice engagement**, and better support researchers to embed appropriate techniques to do this well.

What does an excellent case study featuring public engagement look like?

The case studies provide a rich data set to address the question: how can excellence in generating impacts from engaging the public with research best be evidenced in a case study? We approached the analysis with some assumptions: that a quality engagement process will typically involve (for instance) clarity about your purpose and sensitivity to the publics you intend to engage. Reading a range of case studies allowed us to finesse these assumptions. We have derived a set of prompts that make explicit our conclusions about what excellent case studies do to 'tell their story' and offer evidence of impact. Excellent case studies typically articulate the following 'links in the chain':

What?

A convincing account of the significance of the research: why it matters beyond academia. Who should care about it? What is distinctive about its potential?

Where?

An explicit, intelligent acknowledgement of the external context, and a clear grasp of the potential contribution of the research to influence thinking, practice and people's capabilities beyond academia

Who with?

A clear articulation of the key publics and partners involved and a rationale for their involvement, with clear insight and knowledge about their interests, motivations and needs in relation to the research

Why?

A confident sense of purpose animating the engagement that underpins the impact claimed

When?

An intelligent sense of timing to maximise the potential impact of the engagement activity, with activities differentiated by the phase of the research

How?

Drawing on appropriate methods, tailored to purpose, context and the publics they are seeking to engage

With what impact?

Able to talk convincingly about the difference it has helped to generate, and make credible claims for the contribution made by the research to that impact

We suggest that the format that case studies will take in the next REF should support this narrative model, with guidance to enable submitting institutions to understand what they are being asked to describe, not just the evidence that needs to be provided. This should recognise that in order to judge the impact we also need to look at the process by which the impact was achieved.

How can the public engage with research?

The case studies reveal a variety of ways in which researchers typically engage the public with research:

Involve public in the design and framing of the research

There are rare examples of the public – for instance in their capacity as service users or volunteers – being involved at the formative stages of a research project.

Co-production or collaborative research are terms often used to describe this approach. Sometimes too the public are involved as members of advisory groups.

There can be significant benefits for the public in playing such active roles in the research process, for instance in terms of their skills, understanding and empowerment.

Engage public in the research process

There are a few compelling examples of the public being involved in the research process itself, actively contributing to the process of investigation. Examples include:

- Citizen science where the public are contributing data
- Co-production where the public are acting as co-investigators and contributing their expertise
- Dialogic approaches where public expertise, attitudes and values are actively sought throughout the process

This approach can also realise powerful personal outcomes for the public involved.

Maximise uptake of the research by the public

The most common way in which the public are engaged is once the research is complete, or nearly complete: researchers actively seek ways to ensure the significance of their research is widely understood and shared ‘beyond academia’.

Typically this activity might involve:

- Dissemination activity that seeks to target people who might benefit from the research and engage them with its findings
- Working with partner organisations to integrate the findings from the research into their public-facing products and services, networks, training or outreach activity.

The proportion of case studies in each of these areas may not represent what is actually happening in universities, but may be a result of the framing of the REF and the types of approach that people felt confident to submit. The REF encourages a view of research as a linear process with impact happening towards the end of that process. This helps explain why so many case studies describe activities focused on translation and uptake.

Although the impact of public involvement in research can be really powerful, through influencing the quality and robustness of the research and ensuring its relevance, the impact component of the REF is not currently focused on how involvement of the public enhances the research.

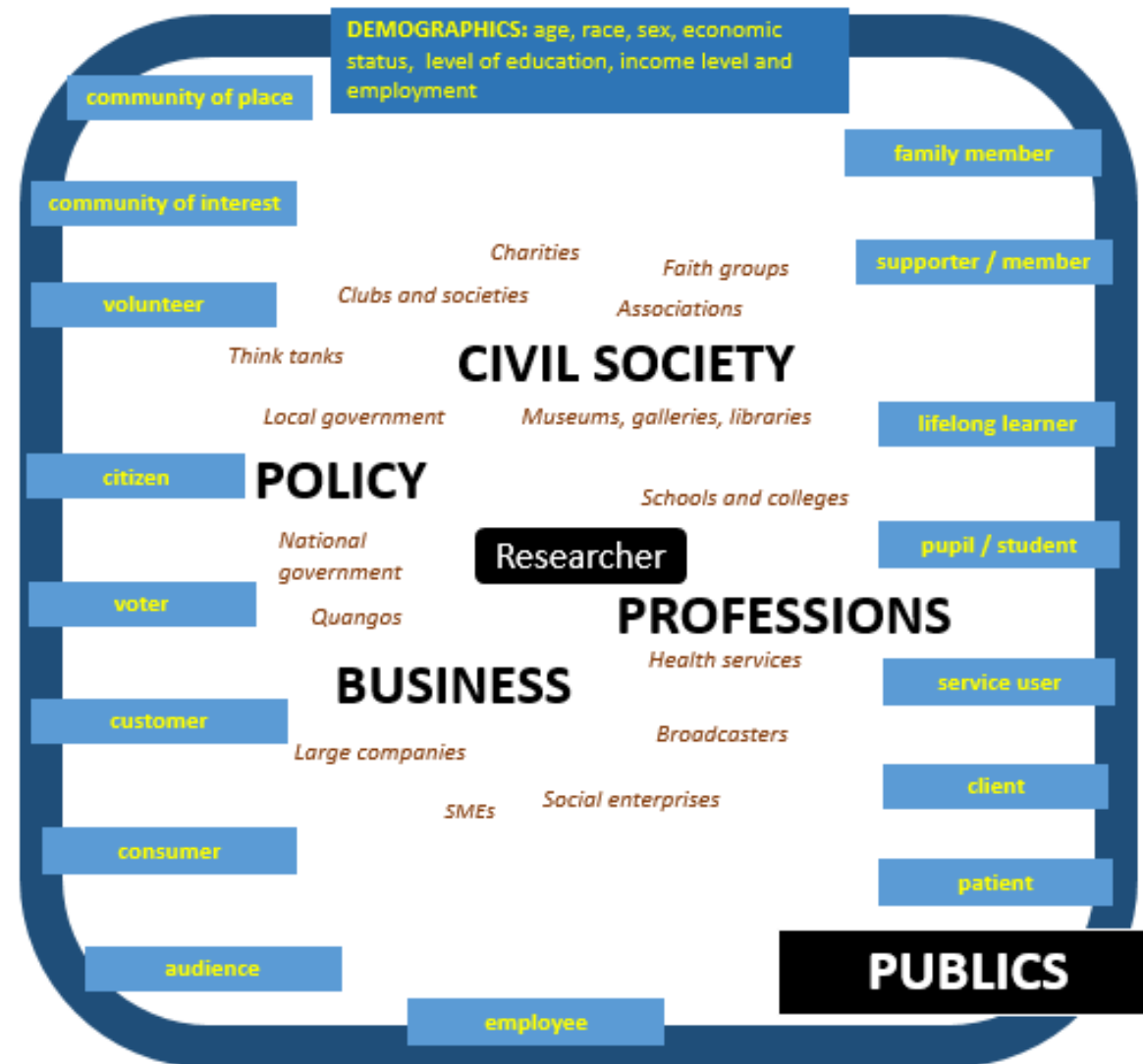
As impact becomes more established, we may see an increase in engagement and impact taking place earlier; as such, we would encourage researchers to think about engagement at the beginning of the research process.

Who are the public?

Making sense of the complex way in which people beyond academia engage with research is important. Many case studies just talk about 'the public' in an undifferentiated way. More clarity and precision about who was engaged is important. We derived the following 'map' from the case studies. It articulates the world 'beyond academia' as a variety of spheres: policy, professional practice, business and civil society.

In each of these spheres, individual members of the public, and collectives of people, play a variety of roles – as citizens, consumers, voters etc. Focusing on the active roles the public can play in the public sphere seems to us to be a helpful way of providing more specificity about the nature of the interaction between researchers and publics.

This diagram shows the varied ways in which publics can be segmented and defined, in particular in relation to other forms of engagement leading to impact. In the next REF, we should expect that case studies authors avoid wherever possible the generic term 'the general public' and provide a more differentiated identification of the publics engaged.



What kinds of public engagement can feature?

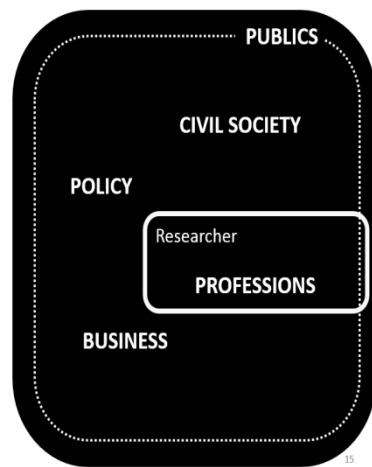
We identified five distinctively different approaches to public engagement

'Classic' public engagement



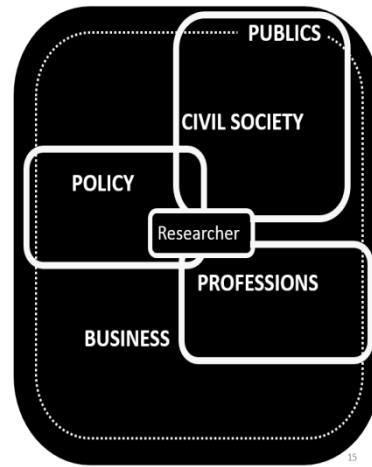
'Classic' public engagement involves researchers engaging directly with a community of place / interest – e.g. with adult learners – with this engagement forming the backbone of the case study.

'Mediated' public engagement



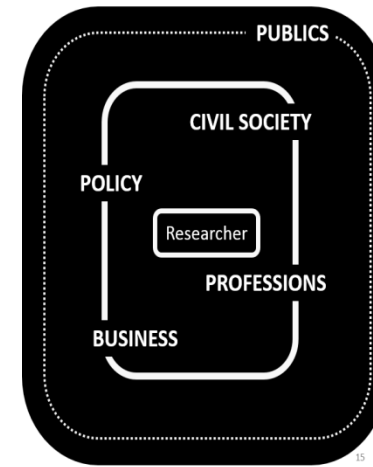
'Mediated' public engagement sees an active collaboration with intermediary organisation(s) like a charity, museum, media or school to reach their audience / public.

'Blended' public engagement



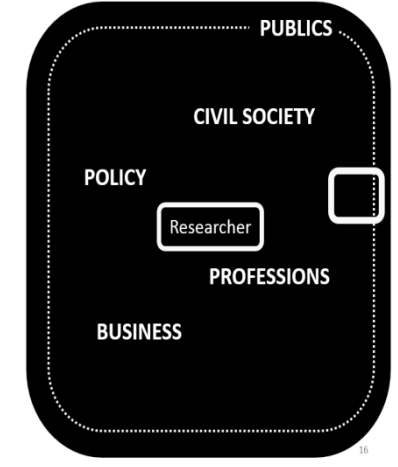
With **'blended' public engagement**, the public engagement forms part of a wider knowledge exchange project – e.g. to engage policy makers, practitioners and service users around a particular health issue.

'Behind the scenes' public engagement



'Behind the scenes' PE sees no direct engagement with publics – all the effort is put into improving the quality of PE undertaken by intermediary organisations, by influencing their practice or making new resources available.

'Bolt on' public engagement



With **'bolt on' public engagement** there is a cursory role for public engagement (for instance, some media coverage was achieved) but it is peripheral to the main engagement activity being undertaken.

These approaches show how public engagement forms part of the wider landscape of impacts arising from knowledge exchange. Whilst all are valid, there is scope for the next REF to encourage more case studies to move away from 'bolt on' engagement to a more integrated model where appropriate.

Clarifying the kinds of impact that arise from public engagement

In many of the 2014 case studies, the evidence of impact provided was often weak, usually limited to a list of the outlets they used and the numbers of people engaged. By adapting the ESRC's categorisation of impacts (conceptual, instrumental and capacity building¹), we identified six broad outcome areas and various indicators of impact which help to capture why engaging the public with research matters, and to describe the types of impact that are typically generated.

| Type of impact | Typical outcomes arising from public engagement | What kinds of impact can be realised? |
|---|--|---|
| <p>Conceptual <i>Ensuring research insights circulate freely and animate the public sphere</i></p> | <p>Enlightenment: inspiring wonder, curiosity and learning; affecting meaning- & sense-making; challenging conventional wisdom</p> <p>Criticism: provoking challenge, scrutiny & debate; holding to account</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Changed understandings • Enhanced learning and reflection • Increased empathy |
| <p>Instrumental <i>Influencing policy and practice to better reflect public interests</i></p> | <p>Innovation: prompting new ways of thinking & acting; creating new products and knowledge; galvanising change</p> <p>Reflexivity: prompting dialogue & deliberation; exploring risk; informing decision making</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Changed standards / regulation • Changed accountability regimes • Products and services are influenced and changed • Changed policies • Changed planning processes • Changed / enhanced public realm and environment |
| <p>Capacity building <i>Changing individual & collective behaviour to realise public benefit & building stronger, better networked professional and public communities</i></p> | <p>Connectivity: building networks; encouraging participation & involvement</p> <p>Capability: building skills; influencing behaviours and practices; empowering; well-being</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increased participation and progression • New skills • Changed behaviours • New or strengthened networks • Enhanced collaboration • Enhanced well-being |

For the next REF, it is important that a more coherent and robust framework is developed for articulating the outcomes and longer term impacts of engaging the public with research. The ESRC's guidance provides an excellent place to start. Significant resource also needs to be invested to support researchers to plan and evaluate their engagement activities using such a framework, to allow more evidence to be provided.

1. <http://www.esrc.ac.uk/research/impact-toolkit/what-is-impact/>

Impact templates - creating a productive environment for public engagement

As well as assessing the excellence of the research and its impact, the REF also seeks to make judgements about the quality of the infrastructure and environment in place within HEIs to support researchers to do excellent work to realise impact. Each submitting unit was invited to provide an impact template to outline its approach to impact, and its strategy.

We chose to review templates from the highest performing units of assessment to see:

- To what extent did PE feature?
- If it did, how was it framed?

What this revealed was that:

- High performing units of assessment typically embed a strategic approach to public engagement in their overarching approach to impact.
- Even if they submitted relatively few case studies featuring public engagement, they still recognised the value and significance of public engagement to their broader work as a department.

The **key features** which consistently appeared, and which reflect critical cornerstones of effective support for PE included:

- Treating public engagement as an integral part of the impact strategy
- Clearly articulating who their 'publics' are
- Expressing an explicit rationale for their public engagement activity
- Having an authentic flavour to their public engagement, sensitive to their discipline, context and values
- Investing in building sustained partnerships and collaborations with external intermediary organisations
- Deploying appropriate methods, and investing in developing their expertise in engagement
- Investing in creating a culture in which researchers are supported and incentivised to engage with the public

Whilst the impact template is likely to be dropped from the next REF, it is possible that the approach to impact will be assessed as an explicit section of the environment element of the assessment. As such, there is an opportunity to articulate how public engagement is embedded and supported within the institution or unit of assessment, with guidance about the key features of effective support, as outlined above.

Judging the excellence of impacts arising from research

Our review of the REF impact case studies has revealed that impact arising from engaging with publics is hard to claim definitively. However, developing a more robust framework to articulate outcomes and impact will help (as will supporting people to evaluate better). While ‘reach and significance’ should be retained as helpful devices to weigh up the claimed impacts, we would also like to see the ‘context’ and the ‘rigour’ of the engagement being acknowledged as crucial dimensions in forming a rounded judgement of the credibility and quality of the impact.

The prompts listed below articulate the questions which we believe need to be asked and answered in the process of judging the excellence of impact case studies featuring engagement with the public:

| CONTEXT | | RIGOUR | | REACH AND SIGNIFICANCE |
|---|---|---|--|---|
| Underpinning research - Is the significance of the research within its social context convincingly explained? | Societal context beyond academia - Is the engagement activity intelligently tuned to its context and stakeholders? - Are the authors aware of and alert to cutting edge thinking and practice? | The purpose and approach - Are they clear about what they are trying to achieve through their engagement, and is their activity animated by a clear sense of purpose? | The methods deployed - Is the engagement being executed in ways that are appropriate to its context and purpose? | The impacts claimed - What difference is it actually making? What changes has it contributed to? How convincingly are these described and evidenced? - How significant is its contribution to the field it works within? |

- We need to be more explicit about the assumptions that we use collectively to weigh up claims of impact. Key to those judgements are considerations of how the context and the rigour of the engagement processes that are described in the case studies inform the credibility of the claims being made for impact.
- In preparing for the next REF, attention should be paid to defining what excellence looks like in the process of engaging the public with research. There is a good knowledge base to draw on, which replicates findings in other areas of knowledge exchange.

The National Co-ordinating Centre for Public Engagement (NCCPE) is internationally recognised for its work supporting and inspiring universities to engage with the public. We work to change perspectives, promote innovation, and nurture and celebrate excellence. We also champion meaningful engagement that makes a real and valued difference to people's lives.

The NCCPE is supported by the UK Higher Education Councils, Research Councils UK and Wellcome, and has been hosted by the University of Bristol and the University of the West of England since it was established in 2008.

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