

Planning for school-university engagement with research

Richard Holliman¹, Gareth Davies¹, Victoria Pearson¹, Trevor Collins¹, Simon Sheridan¹, Helen Brown², Jenny Hallam² and Mark Russell²

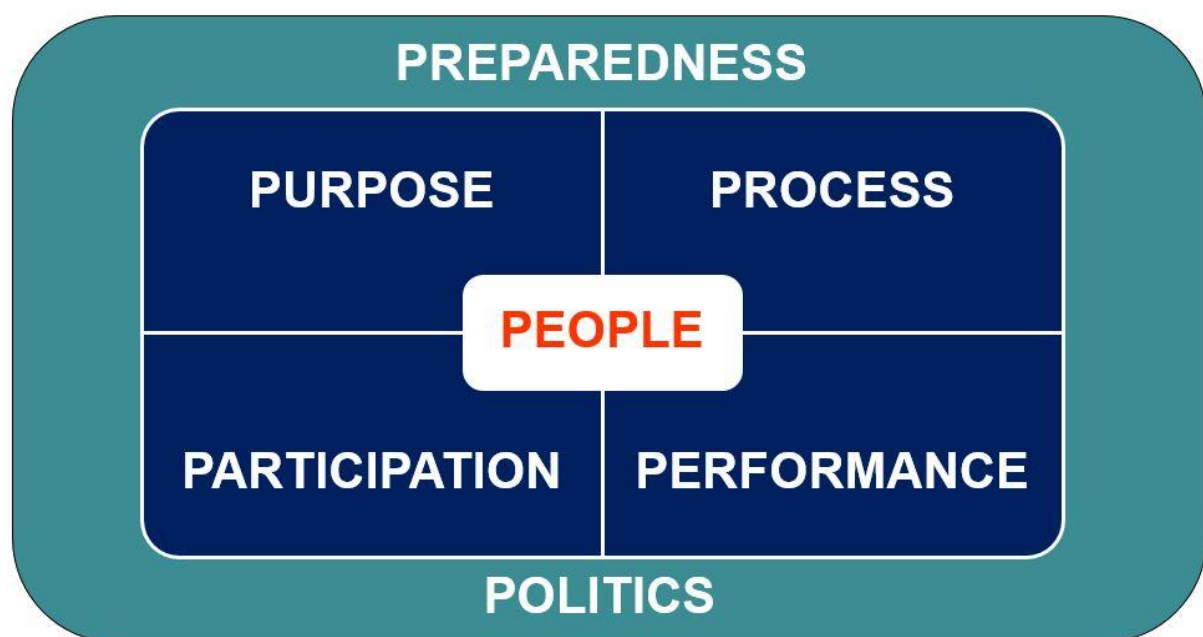
1. The Open University; 2. Denbigh School

The Engaging Opportunities Project was a four-year, RCUK-funded school-university partnership between the Open University and the Denbigh Teaching School Alliance in Milton Keynes (Holliman *et al.*, 2017, in press). Building on the findings of an earlier project (Holliman *et al.* 2015), the Engaging Opportunities team identified six dimensions that support effective planning for effective school-university engagement: preparedness; politics; people; purposes; processes; and performance.

In our contribution to a new book called the *Digitally Agile Researcher* we draw on an example from the Engaging Opportunities Project. As part of this project a team comprising university researchers and local teachers documented how this six dimensions were applied in practice to develop, deliver and evaluate a 'Labcast' for sixth-form students at Denbigh School in Milton Keynes.

Planning for school-university engagement with research

We applied six dimensions as guiding principles through which school-university engagement with research can be planned. Each dimension or principle is informed by a series of questions. In providing collaboratively-derived answers to these questions the 'Labcast' activity was planned, enacted and evaluated.



Preparedness

How can people plan effectively for school-university engagement with research? Why should researchers, school students and teachers engage with research? What levels of information are required to engage? What skills and competencies are required to engage?

Politics

What are the conditions required to facilitate school-university engagement with research? Do the participants—in this instance, researchers, school students and teachers—see genuine value in engaging, or do they feel they 'have to' engage? What is the wider context for school-university engagement with research?

People

Who could participate? Who should participate? What forms of expertise are necessary to participate? How will the contributions of different participants be attributed as the engagement progresses?

Processes

How, when, where and through what media will the engagement take place? Have the processes been discussed and agreed with the participants? What are the rules of engagement? Are they fair to all participants? Who governs the processes of engagement? At what points in the research cycle should participants engage? In what ways should engagement take place for particular publics, at particular points in the cycle of responsible research and innovation?

Purposes

Why engage? What are the expectations of the various participants—in this instance, researchers, school students and teachers—to the processes of engagement? Can the purposes be characterised as: Specific; Measurable; Achievable; Relevant; and Time-bound (SMART)?

Performance

Who should assess the performance of the school-university engagement with research? Did the engagement work? What types of knowledge, data, methods of data collection and techniques of analysis could be used to evaluate the potential impacts of the engaged research? How can the findings from evaluation research be shared effectively with participants to improve future processes of engagement?

Pragmatism vs. morality

We argue that these guiding principles should not be set in stone. Rather, they provide a framework through which engagement can be enacted in ways that are meaningful and relevant to participants. In effect, this is a principlist approach.

One of the critiques of a principlist approach is that it lacks an underlying moral theory. To that end, our approach to school-university engagement with research can be seen to draw on Fricker's (2007) concept of 'epistemic justice'.

The moral theory, one of social justice, has underpinned our approach to school-university engagement with research within the Engaging Opportunities project. Our approach has been informed by the following ethical tenets: Knowledge for all; Mutual Respect; Openness in Process; Collaboration over competition; Balance in validity and accuracy; Do no damage; and Power with responsibility.

Together, these tenets combine in our pupil-centred approach. We argue that such an approach is important because children and young people are key 'publics' for engaged research. They are the pool of talent from which the next generation of expertise will develop. They are also prospective citizens with a stake in how research agendas are framed and prioritised. And they will have some responsibility for managing the benefits and challenges that arise from the social and economic impact of these studies.

References

- Fricker, M. (2007). *Epistemic injustice: Power and the ethics of knowing*. Oxford, University Press, Oxford.
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