

RESEARCH COMMITTEE

Defining Engaged Research at the OU

A paper from the OU's Public Engagement with Research Catalyst

Key issue: The paper proposes a definition of 'engaged research' for the Open University. This definition is needed to address confusion among OU researchers about the different ways that the 'impact agenda' connects with their research. The definition is designed to capture the variety of ways that OU researchers and research teams are already interacting with various kinds of 'public', and also serves to clarify the rationales and opportunities for broadening and deepening this engagement in the future.

Research Committee is asked to **consider** the paper, to **approve** the OU's definition for 'engaging research', and to endorse its wider discussion and dissemination.

1. The Open University secured funding from Research Councils UK (RCUK)for the project: '[An open research university](#)' (Public Engagement with Research Catalyst (PER); EP/J020087/1). We are one of eight PER Catalysts in the UK, working in research-intensive universities. The aim of the OU's three-year project (Apr 2012-Mar 2015) is to embed public engagement with research within the University's strategic planning for research and the operational practices of researchers at all levels.
2. The purpose of this paper is to make the case for the usefulness of a definition of what 'engaged research' encompasses. This definition is needed to address confusion among OU researchers about the different ways that the 'impact agenda' connects with their research. The definition is designed to capture the variety of ways that OU researchers and research teams are already interacting with various kinds of 'public', and also serves to clarify the rationales and opportunities for broadening and deepening this engagement in the future.
3. It is important to relate ideas of public engagement with research to ideas of research impact, innovation, enterprise, knowledge transfer and knowledge exchange. RCUK and the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) see research impact in terms of the various kinds of benefits that flow from research processes and findings and expect Universities to evaluate research impact in terms of its academic, economic and social aspects. Ideas of innovation, knowledge exchange or knowledge transfer refer to activities where universities work with private sector, public sector or third sector organisations to transform research outputs into economic or social value. They constitute one set of mechanisms for achieving impact. RCUK sees the variety of forms of public engagement with research as another set of mechanisms, linked most strongly to achieving social benefits.
4. The view of the PER Catalyst team¹ is that a conception of engaged research is useful because it provides a basis for exploring the mechanisms by which a wide variety of

¹ The PER Catalyst Team is multi-disciplinary in its composition. In formulating this definition we have drawn on expertise, and connected with research cultures, in different academic domains. We have also consulted widely across the OU, e.g. with Associate Deans for Research, Research Centre Directors and researchers working at different levels (from PGRs to Professors).

economic and academic benefits, as well as social benefits, can be produced throughout the research process. It shifts the focus from assessing the benefits that flow from academic research once it has been completed to considering how the boundaries of academic research practice can become more permeable to participation and partnership working by a variety of kinds of people and agencies who have not traditionally been considered as part of the research community. This participation can be linked to achieving various kinds of impact over time, but can also usefully be considered as providing value in its own right, since it can be assessed more directly than ultimate impact.

5. Based on the research findings and interventions with a range of stakeholders within the OU and externally,² we offer the following definition of engaged research:

Engaged research encompasses the different ways that researchers meaningfully interact with various stakeholders over any or all stages of a research process, from issue formulation, the production or co-creation of new knowledge, to knowledge evaluation and dissemination. Stakeholders may include user communities, and members of the public or groups who come into existence or develop an identity in relationship to the research process. Done well, engaged research will generate benefits, changes and/or effects for all participants as they develop and share knowledge, expertise and skills. Successful engaged research will typically involve a productive interplay between academic knowledge and forms of knowledge or practice held within non-academic communities.

6. This definition is designed to be inclusive and adaptable to research disciplines across the OU. As such, it encompasses a wide variety of forms of engaged research found across various OU research communities. It includes the use of various forms of media for communication and engagement, and the involvement of communities of practice in the research process itself, as for example in citizen inquiry, participatory research or action research. It also includes the generation of research projects and bids through engagement with communities, public or private sector organisations. In all such examples, there is potentially academic, economic or social value generated in the very process of engagement between academics and non-academics, as well as in the research outputs and impacts that may result.
7. The definition further implies that quality and excellence in engaged research will be demonstrated through the reach and significance of the contributions that non-academic participants make alongside academic researchers in knowledge production and exchange. This may be in the shaping of research agendas, the processes of conducting research, or in the evaluation, further development of, contextualization or diffusion of the products of research.
8. The day-to-day significance of this definition for OU researchers and research groups lies in its challenge to them to consider where engagement connects operationally with their research strategy and for what purpose. Mutual benefit can be generated by identifying stakeholders relevant to research and when and where they can be more deeply involved in research, in order to deepen intellectual inquiry, generate more effective flows of knowledge or strengthen social or economic capabilities. The key questions for any research group are therefore:
- a) Which stakeholders are currently engaged with our research, generating which kinds of benefits?

² The definition of engaged research has been discussed at a recent meeting of Deans, ADRs and Directors, and with the Communication Academic Excellence Advisory Group. The definition has also been submitted to the Academic Leads working on the Roadmap 2020.

- b) What further mutual benefits can flow from deepening or extending the nature of engagement?
9. Once an 'engagement agenda' has been identified in response to such questions, the [EDGE Tool](#) provides a mechanism for assessing progress and setting a course. This tool has been produced by the National Coordinating Centre for Public Engagement, in collaboration with the Beacons for Public Engagement, and is nationally recognized within higher education and by RCUK as a means of assessing the progress and capability of a research institution in public engagement. It offers descriptors of four levels of proficiency with public engagement - Embryonic, Developing, Gripping, Eembedding, and applies these to the institution's:
- Purpose (how engagement features in the OU's mission, leadership, and communication)
 - Process (how practices of engagement are supported, how learning about them is encouraged, and how achievements are recognised and rewarded)
 - People (the structured and strategic opportunities for staff, students and publics to engage with OU research)
10. Approval by Research Committee will complete the process of developing a shared vision for engaged research at the OU, and would help to support our ongoing work in embedding this vision in the everyday practices of researchers and research teams. This end, the PER Catalyst team are working in 2014/15 with CAUs to connect their business plans for 2015/16 with the EDGE Tool. We are using the definition of engaged research as part of these negotiations. Furthermore, we routinely use this definition in training events with researchers at all levels, and in supporting researchers developing grant proposals for external funding.
11. One of the key aims of the work of the PER Catalyst over the final 12 months of the project is to discuss and disseminate the definition of engaged research, to share a vision for engaged research at the OU. With this aim in mind we have contributed to Roadmap 2020 process and the Communicating Academic Excellence initiative. We have an opportunity to work with these strategic projects to develop a vision that raises the profile of OU research in the public sphere, e.g. by reviewing and extending the mission of the University beyond the current focus as a world-leader in open learning (<http://www.open.ac.uk/about/main/mission>). We are asking Research Committee for their endorsement to explore whether the OU's mission could be extended to include a vision for engaged research.

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Attachments:

RC-2014-02-12, Appendix 1, NCCPE 'Introducing the EDGE Tool: self-assessing your support for public engagement'



National Co-ordinating Centre
for Public Engagement

Introducing the EDGE tool

self-assessing your support for public engagement

The EDGE tool

The Beacons for Public Engagement initiative was funded to address how universities and research institutes can support public engagement effectively across all subject areas and throughout the full range of their activity.

The goal was demonstrate how universities can 'embed' this support in their systems and processes, and by doing so create a culture that encourages staff and students to engage with the public.

By reflecting on the work of the six beacon projects, and drawing on the experiences of other institutions, projects and research, we have identified nine dimensions which are critical to building such a supportive culture: ranging from communication and leadership to learning and recognition.

To help universities assess their current support for public engagement, and to identify areas where they would like to see change, we have created a simple self assessment tool that maps these dimensions against a scale:

- E Embryonic:** Institutional support for engagement is patchy or non-existent, although some engagement activity is underway
- D Developing:** Some support has been put in place, but in a relatively unsystematic and non-strategic fashion
- G Gripping:** The institution is taking steps to develop more systematic and strategic support
- E Embedding:** The institution has put in place strategic and operational support for engagement

Introducing the EDGE tool

The tool is designed to support discussion and dialogue within your institution and to help you begin to frame a strategy for supporting public engagement. It is primarily intended as a trigger for discussion and reflection. We have divided the nine dimensions into three categories, each describing a critical area to think about: Purpose, Processes and People. You can find more details of our sources in the appendix.

PURPOSE	EMBED A COMMITMENT TO PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT IN YOUR INSTITUTIONAL MISSION AND STRATEGY, AND CHAMPION THAT COMMITMENT AT ALL LEVELS.
<i>MISSION</i>	Create a shared understanding of the purpose, value, meaning and role of public engagement to staff and students and embed this in your strategy and mission.
<i>LEADERSHIP</i>	Support champions across the organisation who embrace public engagement
<i>COMMUNICATION</i>	Communicate consistent, clear messages to validate, support and celebrate it, and ensure open and two-way communication with members of the public and community organisations.
PROCESS	INVEST IN SYSTEMS AND PROCESSES THAT FACILITATE INVOLVEMENT, MAXIMISE IMPACT AND HELP TO ENSURE QUALITY AND VALUE FOR MONEY.
<i>RECOGNITION</i>	Recognise and reward staff involvement within recruitment, promotion, workload plans and performance reviews, and celebrate success with awards or prizes.
<i>SUPPORT</i>	Co-ordinate the delivery of engagement to maximise efficiency, target support, improve quality, foster innovation, join up thinking and monitor involvement and impact.
<i>LEARNING</i>	Provide opportunities for learning and reflection and provide support for continuing professional development and training
PEOPLE	INVOLVE STAFF, STUDENTS AND REPRESENTATIVES OF THE PUBLIC AND UTILISE THEIR ENERGY, EXPERTISE AND FEEDBACK TO SHAPE THE STRATEGY AND ITS DELIVERY.
<i>STAFF</i>	Ensure that all staff – in academic and support roles – have opportunities to get involved in informal and formal ways.
<i>STUDENTS</i>	Proactively include and involve students in shaping the mission and in the delivery of the strategy, and maximise opportunities for their involvement.
<i>PUBLIC</i>	Invest in people, processes and infrastructure to support and nurture the involvement of individuals and organisations external to the HEI

Using the tool

The matrix allows you to consider first of all the level of strategic and practical support your institution offers for public engagement – and then to begin to identify areas where you would like to see change happen.

Elsewhere on our website, in the [Planning for Change](#) section, you can find more in depth resources and guides to help you tackle each of the dimensions, and to draw on the experiences of other institutions who have begun to address them successfully.

Instructions for use

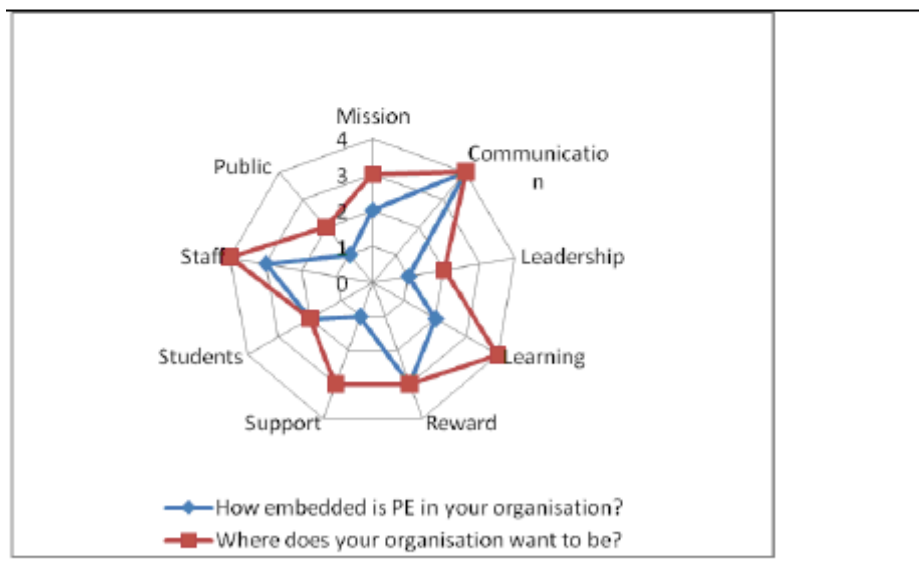
You can use the tool to assess the support for PE at an institutional level – or use it within faculties or departments to explore how engagement is supported there. You can use it in a variety of ways, for example:

- You could fill it in individually, relying on your own knowledge of your institution;
- You could use it as part of a workshop with colleagues and other stakeholders;
- Or you could invite a number of people to fill it in individually and then bring them together to compare their perspectives. Comparing different departments across an institution can be a powerful exercise.

While the levels presented here assume that embedding engagement brings benefits to an institution, some may choose not to seek to 'embed' support in all of the areas identified in the tool. In some instances informal and emergent approaches may be preferred to formalised and embedded ones.

Interpreting the results

You may find it useful to be able to present your results as a spider diagram, similar to the illustration below – indicating where your organisation currently sits; and where you would ideally like it to move to. This visual representation should help you to identify where you need to invest time and resources, and inform your planning process. You can find instructions for how to create such a diagram in Appendix 2.



The EDGE tool: self-assess your support for public engagement

Focus	Embryonic	Developing	Gripping	Embedding
Mission	There is little or no reference to public engagement in the organisational mission or in other institution-wide strategies	PE is referenced sporadically within the institutional mission documents and strategies, but is not considered a priority area	PE is clearly referenced within the institutional mission and strategies and the institution is developing an institution-wide strategic approach	PE is prioritised in the institution's official mission and in other key strategies, with success indicators identified. It is a key consideration in strategic developments in the institution
Leadership	Few (if any) of the most influential leaders in the institution serve as champions for public engagement	Some of the institution's senior team act as informal champions for public engagement	Some of the institution's senior team act as formal champions for public engagement	The VC acts as a champion for PE and a senior leader takes formal responsibility. All senior leaders have an understanding of the importance and value of public engagement to the institution's agenda
Communication	The institution's commitment to public engagement is rarely if ever featured in internal or external communications	Public engagement occasionally features in internal and external communications	Public engagement frequently features in internal communications, but rarely as a high profile item or with an emphasis on its strategic importance	PE appears prominently in the institution's internal communications; its strategic importance is highlighted, and resources and strategic support have been allocated to sustain this
Support	There is no attempt to co-ordinate public engagement activity or to network learning and expertise across the institution	There are some informal attempts being made to co-ordinate PE activities, but there is no strategic plan for this work. Some self-forming networks exist, not supported by the institution	Oversight and co-ordination of PE has been formally allocated (e.g. to a working group or committee) but there is minimal support and resource to invest in activity	The institution has a strategic plan to focus its co-ordination, a body/ies with formal responsibility for oversight of this plan, and resources available to assist the embedding of PE. There are a number of recognised and supported networks
Learning	There is little or no opportunity for staff or students to access professional development to develop their skills & knowledge of engagement	There are some opportunities for staff or students to access professional development and training in PE, but no formal or systematic support	There are some formal opportunities for staff or students to access professional development and training in PE.	Staff and students are encouraged and supported in accessing professional development, training and informal learning to develop their skills and knowledge of engagement
Recognition	Staff are not formally rewarded or recognised for their PE activities	Some departments recognise and reward PE activity on an ad hoc basis.	The university is working towards an institution-wide policy for recognising and rewarding PE activity	The university has reviewed its processes, and developed a policy to ensure PE is rewarded & recognised in formal and informal ways
Staff	Few if any opportunities exist for staff to get involved in public engagement, either informally or as part of their formal duties	There are opportunities for staff in a handful of faculties or departments to get involved in PE, either informally or as part of their formal duties	There are structured opportunities for many staff members to get involved in PE; but not in all faculties or departments. There is a drive to expand opportunities to all	All staff have the opportunity to get involved in public engagement, either informally or as part of their formal duties, and are encouraged and supported to do so
Students	Few opportunities exist for students to get involved in PE, either informally, through volunteering programmes, or as part of the formal curriculum	There are opportunities for students to get involved, but there is no coordinated approach to promoting and supporting these opportunities across the institution	Many (but not all) students have the opportunity to get involved in PE and are encouraged and supported to do so. There is a drive to expand opportunities to all	All students have the opportunity to get involved in PE, and are encouraged and supported to do so. The institution offers both formal and informal ways to recognize and reward their involvement
Public	Little or no attempt has been made to assess community need, or to support 'non traditional' groups in engaging with the institution	Some attempt has been made to analyse community need and interest; and to begin to tackle access issues to open up the institution and its activities to the public	The institution has committed resources to assessing community need and interests, and to using this insight and feedback to inform its strategy and plans	The institution has assessed need & committed resources to supporting a wide range of groups to access its facilities and activities, and to systematically seek their feedback and involvement.

What next?

Having used the EDGE tool to assess your overall support for public engagement, it is likely that you will wish to address your current level of support for some, or possibly all, of the nine challenge areas.

To help with this, we have created 'mini' EDGE tools for each of the nine challenges, which identify for each one three to five 'pressure points' that you can helpfully address to make to make a positive difference. Included below is the mini tool for Mission, to give you an example of the approach:

MISSION				
Focus	Embryonic	Developing	Gripping	Embedding
Embedding a commitment to public engagement in your mission	Public engagement is not addressed explicitly in the institutional mission or in departmental / institution-wide strategies.	There are some passing references to public engagement in the institutional mission and in some departmental / institution-wide strategies.	Work is underway to review the institution's commitment to PE, in order to articulate a set of strategic priorities and embed these in the institutional mission and other relevant strategies.	Public engagement is prioritised in the institution's official mission and in other key departmental / institution-wide strategies, with success indicators identified.
Building a shared understanding of public engagement and its value	The term is used inconsistently and infrequently and very few staff has an understanding or appreciation of what it means or its relevance to their work.	References to public engagement appear in some institutional strategies and plans, but there is no institution-wide definition for public engagement.	Consultation is underway with internal and external stakeholders to share understandings of public engagement and its purpose, and to develop a shared definition.	The institution has consulted widely with internal and external stakeholders to develop a definition for PE and its purpose and value which is used consistently.
Strategic planning	There is no official strategic plan for advancing PE.	Although some short- and long-term goals for PE have been defined, these have not been formalized into an official strategic plan that will guide their implementation.	Work is underway to develop an official strategic plan for PE	The institution has developed an official strategic plan for advancing PE, which includes viable short-range and long-range goals. A senior individual / team has formal responsibility for monitoring progress.
Alignment with other priorities	Public engagement rarely features as a component within larger institutional initiatives	PE occasionally features within larger institutional initiatives, but in a relatively piecemeal way.	Processes are being developed to ensure that PE is routinely considered during strategic planning.	Public engagement is routinely considered during strategic planning and institution-wide developments.

Planning for Change

These resources can all be found in the 'Planning for Change' area of our website:
(www.publicengagement.ac.uk/support/planning-change)

Each of the nine challenge areas has its own dedicated section, containing its own self-assessment tool, and an introduction and/or guide to how each of the key 'pressure points' can be addressed. This guidance builds on their experiences of the Beacons and other universities, and includes a host of practical tips, case studies, and other useful resources which you can draw on in your own institution.

Your feedback

We would very much welcome your feedback on the EDGE tool, and your suggestions for how it might be improved. Please contact us at ncccpe.enquiries@uwe.ac.uk

Appendix One: Our sources

There are many examples of similar tools, which we have drawn on for inspiration, for instance this toolkit and set of standards for people working in the youth sector, 'Hear by Right': <http://hbr.nya.org.uk/>

To create the tool we have reviewed a range of Higher Education sources, as well as seeking to incorporate feedback from the beacons, other HEIs and from UWE and the University of Bristol.

One key source was a matrix produced in the USA by Professor Barbara Holland:

- *Analyzing Institutional Commitment to Service: A Model of Key Organizational Factors*
(<http://www.compact.org/advancedtoolkit/pdf/holland-all.pdf>)

Another was developed by Professor Andrew Furco at the University of California, Berkeley to support the institutionalization of service learning:

- *Self-Assessment Rubric for the Institutionalization of Service Learning in Higher Education*
(http://www.servicelearning.org/filemanager/download/Furco_rubric.pdf)

If you would like to see a full list of our sources, do please contact us.

Appendix Two: Creating a spider diagram

This Spider diagram will require you to have installed Microsoft Word and Excel (or other compatible software)

1. Complete the self assessment exercise
2. Once you have determined where you currently 'fit' on each focal point, you should decide where on the scale you would like your organisation to move to in the future. You may want to move the organisation further on, or you may be content with your current position.
3. Convert both scores into numerical values. Erratic: 1 Developing: 2 Gripping: 3 Embedding: 4

	How embedded is PE in your organisation?	Where does your organisation want to be?
Mission	1	4
Communication	4	4
Leadership	1	2
Learning	2	4
Reward	3	3
Support	1	3
Students	2	2
Staff	3	4
Public	1	2

4. Using a mouse right click on the spider diagram below. Select 'Edit Data'
5. This will open an excel sheet. Input the numerical values into the relevant fields
6. When you have finished inputting both the current and aspirational values close the excel sheet
7. Your diagram should now have been updated to reflect your situation
8. Areas where the red and blue lines diverge are sections where there is a gap between your aspiration and your current activity. These areas are worth exploring further using the online resources.
9. Save the document using a different file name. You may wish to re-do the exercise at a later point to review your progress.

