

PEP Insights Research

The experience of Public Engagement Professionals during Covid-19

September 2021



PEPs



**National
Co-ordinating
Centre for
Public Engagement**



PEP Insights Research

The experience of Public Engagement Professionals during Covid-19

PEP Insights Research Team: Larissa Allwork; Shauni Sanderson; Kim Aumann; Niyah Campbell; Lorraine Coghill; Bentley Crudgington; Natt Day; Stuart Dunbar; Zoe Knowles; Sophie Morris

NCCPE Research Team: Sian Aggett; Sophie Duncan; Maddy Foard; Jack Kerrigan; Paul Manners; Lisa Whittaker

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OTHER RESEARCH OUTPUTS

There are three reports relating to the findings from the research.

1. PEP Insights Research Short Report¹: which provides a summary of the findings
2. PEP Insights Report: which includes the full analysis of the data (this report)
3. PEP Insights Survey Report²: including graphs of the quantitative data, and a summary of the qualitative data

Cover Graphics: Bentley Crudgington

¹ https://www.publicengagement.ac.uk/sites/default/files/publication/pep_insight_research_short_report.pdf

² https://www.publicengagement.ac.uk/sites/default/files/publication/pep_insight_research_survey_report_final.pdf



Introduction and approach

INTRODUCTION

In December 2019 the first cases of Covid-19 were identified in Wuhan in China. This marked the start of a global pandemic that we are still living through at the time of this report in September 2021.

The Covid-19 pandemic exists on an unprecedented scale. It has resulted in a significant loss of life, with many countries being locked down to restrict infection rates, and has impacted all areas of life, freedom, and livelihoods. It has highlighted issues of social inequality, as the spread of the virus and associated restrictions disproportionately affected those living in areas of deprivation. Following the murder of George Floyd in May 2020, the Black Lives Matters movement brought the severity of the issues surrounding systemic racism, including those relating to the pandemic, to the forefront of people's minds, acting as a call to stand against racism in all its forms. The pandemic also opened up a space to consider the significant impacts we are having on our climate, and the need to address this on a global, national and individual scale. It has created opportunities to re-think and re-imagine many aspects of social life, including the role played by universities in their communities

This research captures a specific moment in time during the global pandemic. The main data gathering occurred between December 2020 and March 2021 whilst the global pandemic was impacting every country of the world. The UK was in the middle of a second lockdown, and there was significant uncertainty about the future; science was now in the public eye, as we saw the development of several effective vaccines; and the UK were at the start of a national vaccine programme. A PEP Insights Research Timeline has been provided with key dates of Covid-19 related restrictions in the UK at the time of the research.³

This research focuses on a specific group of people who work as Public Engagement Professionals (PEPs) within the higher education (HE) sector. UK universities have contributed significantly to the national response to the pandemic, and have faced significant challenges including providing effective education to their students, whilst ensuring that they were cared for appropriately. PEPs sit at the interface between the university and those living and working alongside them. Therefore

³ https://www.publicengagement.ac.uk/sites/default/files/publication/pep_insight_research_timeline_final.pdf



they have unique perspectives and insights as to the impacts of the pandemic on them, their teams, and the public engagement (PE) work they have been involved in.

SUMMARY OF METHODOLOGY

RESEARCH AIM & QUESTIONS

Research Aim

To explore the impact of Covid-19 on PEPs and the engagement work of universities in order to inform future decision-making; to build effective support for PEPs; to raise awareness of specific issues relating to PE in the HE context; to support culture change; and to negotiate the future together.

Our Primary Research Questions

1. What are the experiences of PEPs in terms of how Covid-19 has impacted them professionally; the challenges faced, and the new opportunities and approaches they have taken?
2. In what ways has the pandemic affected their host universities'/ institutions' commitment to public engagement?
3. How might this current context help us vision new futures for engagement?

WHO WERE WE RESEARCHING?

PEPs working in or with higher education institutions, including research institutes (HEIs) who have a specific remit to support or co-ordinate PE.

The term PEP includes a range of role types, including those roles dedicated to engagement, those with engagement as part of a portfolio of work, or those in hybrid roles. In addition, those working in these roles are usually employed as HE staff, but also involve freelancers. Typically these roles will include:

- Outreach officers
- Impact officers
- Public Engagement leads



- Community Engagement leads
- Research associates

Individuals with these roles may or may not identify with the term PEPs, and therefore in our communications we tried to be clear that we were looking for anyone whose role involved supporting PE with research, or co-ordinating PE with research.

PEPs are only one part of the complex ecosystem enabling PE within an HE context. There were discussions around if and how to involve others, including researchers, senior HE leaders, and most importantly, organisations who work alongside universities e.g. community organisations, schools, patient groups etc. Given the resource available, the specific challenges inherent in opening up the research to focus on the wider ecosystem, and the specific interest in understanding PEP perspectives, we decided the narrow focus was appropriate to this research. We see this as a first phase of research that can contribute to wider studies on the whole system, accepting the limitations that this approach has. We also sought to draw on other evidence about the impacts of the pandemic on the wider engagement ecosystem, to contextualise our work.

RESEARCH TEAM

The research was commissioned by the NCCPE. The research team was made up of three members of the core NCCPE team, two NCCPE associates, and ten peer researchers who fed into all aspects of the research, and who were recruited through a competitive process. We also recruited a team of eight ‘friends of the research’, who provided advice as and when required by the team.

COLLABORATIVE INSIDER RESEARCH

We describe our approach as collaborative, insider research. Commissioned by the NCCPE, and developed collaboratively with a group of peer researchers, the research design draws on the expertise of researchers who are part of the system being investigated. We chose this approach as a pragmatic way of achieving our purpose, which is to rapidly and robustly identify the key impacts of Covid-19 on the professional practice of engagement in the UK HE sector, and how new futures are being enacted and imagined.

There are pros and cons to this approach. Pros include: deeper insight into the specific contexts of research participants; broadening the reach and the depth of the research undertaken; opportunities for researchers and research participants to act on the research to effect change.



Cons include concerns that the findings may be skewed by the insiders to support a particular agenda, and to reflect an ‘insider’ mind-set.

Part of this research sought to explore some of what ordinarily remains unseen or ‘tacit’ knowledge. Insiders are better placed to access this through identification with research subjects and the increased empathy and rapport they are likely to have with their respondents. In addition, the research sought to uncover some of the underlying factors influencing how universities are thinking about engagement in a Covid-19 context, and their plans for the future.

This research has a constructivist epistemology. Constructivist approaches allow for loose and movable question frames, allow us to construct meaning from our data that brings our own insights from our personal knowledge and allow for a blurred line between researcher and research subject.

In order to mitigate against some of the challenges of insider collaborative research, we sought to recruit a diverse group of peer researchers and invited our ‘friends of research group’ to reflect on our approach and findings. We encouraged a critical mind-set and culture by inviting inside and external reflections on our initial analysis of the data.

We divided the work into six workstreams:

- **Ethics** – establishing an ethical approach to the research and being responsive to this throughout the course of the research.
- **Survey** – designing and testing the survey.
- **Interviews** – designing the interview guide, piloting it, and conducting the interviews.
- **Focus groups** – designing and facilitating three focus groups.
- **Data analysis** – contributing to the overall data analysis.
- **Communications** – developing a communications plan to raise awareness of the research, and share the findings.

Roles and responsibilities were shared across the peer research team, with each team member contributing their skills and expertise into two of the workstreams. Each peer researcher took part in a workstream where they had specific professional expertise, and a workstream where they were seeking to develop their professional skills, enabling the team to work together to build capacity for effective research. The full team came together for meetings to discuss the approach, share ideas, practice, insights and concerns, and build a shared approach. The NCCPE oversaw the research, and led on the analysis of the data and reporting. All peer researchers were paid an



equivalent rate for their contribution to the research. We also invited a group of people to be our 'Friends of PEP Insights Research' group, to ensure that the outputs would be relevant to key stakeholders, through advising on all aspects of the research.

RESEARCH DESIGN

The research design was informed by the PEP Insights Research team in collaboration with the NCCPE Research team. This collaborative research approach involved the NCCPE research team conducting the wider research design and the data analysis (which was based around an iterative inductive and deductive thematic analysis⁴) with the peer researchers informing rather than playing a formative role at these stages; and the peer researchers working with the NCCPE team to design the research tools; develop the ethical framework underpinning the approach; and to develop the research communications approach. The whole project, including data collection, was conducted online. Interviews and focus groups were conducted using Zoom and transcribed using Otter.ai before being corrected by the PEP Insights Research team, and the survey was run through the NCCPE survey tool.

Three data collection methodologies were chosen in undertaking the research:

1. **Survey:** the survey was run between 17th December 2020 and 20th January 2021 and attracted 128 responses from PEPs from across the UK. It was made up of 22 quantitative and 13 qualitative questions. The survey was shared across the PEP Network⁵, and other communication channels, and accessible versions were available for those unable to complete an online survey.
2. **Semi-structured interviews.** These 45-60 minute interviews were conducted by members of the peer research team. PEPs volunteered to be involved in the research, and 18 people were interviewed. The interviews took place between 7th and 11th December 2020.
3. **Focus groups.** Three two-hour online focus groups were held, each facilitated by two of the peer researchers. The first focus group provided an opportunity to pilot the approach, and was held on 4th December 2020, and the others were in March 2021, following the survey and interviews, and enabling us to drill down into areas of specific interest. 21 PEPs who volunteered to be involved in the research were involved in the focus groups.

⁴ Braun and Clarke

⁵ The PEP network is an NCCPE hosted network, serving PEPs based in the UK. It has over 500 members.



Participants in the research were recruited through an open invitation that was shared through the NCCPE PEP network of 500+ members⁶, and on a range of other fora relevant to PEPs. We created a film detailing the opportunity to get involved in the research, and also ensured that participation in all three data collection methods was accessible to all who wanted to participate.

We encouraged all participants to complete the survey and selected interviewees and focus group participants to cover people new to engagement, and those with more experience of PEP roles; different types of institution; and different types of role.

WHO GOT INVOLVED

We were delighted to attract responses from a range of PEPs, as detailed in the table below.

	SURVEY	INTERVIEWS	FOCUS GROUPS
	128 people 100 female 20 male 1 non binary 7 other/prefer not to say	18 interviews 14 female 4 male	3 focus groups 21 people 19 female 2 male
	54 Russell Group 17 Post-92 16 Research Institutes 18 HEIs (other) 10 non-HE 7 freelance 6 other	11 Russell Group 2 Post-92 2 HEIs (other) 3 other	16 Russell Group 3 HEIs (other) 1 freelance 1 other
	53% working as PEP for more than 5 years 47% on fixed term contracts 44.5% on ongoing contracts 4.5% working as freelancers	Included people with responsibility for PE, outreach and patient involvement including 17 PEPs 1 associate VC with responsibility for engagement 1 who also worked as a researcher	Included people with responsibility for PE including 3 impact professionals 2 academics 1 patient and public involvement lead



LIMITATIONS

Inevitably there are limitations to the research.

- **Sample biases/ representativeness:** Survey respondents covered the range of types of institution, and types of roles that the research team knew about, as well as a broad range of lengths of time being a PEP. However we also recognise that there are potentially missing voices from the survey, most notably those whose contracts came to an end during the first lockdown, who were put on furlough throughout the pandemic, or whose circumstances did not afford them the luxury of getting involved. Whilst we sought to encourage a wide variety of perspectives in the survey, and defined PEP really broadly, the term PEP may have been a barrier for participation for some.
- **Limit to the quantitative analysis:** We were delighted that 128 people contributed to the survey. However given the diversity of types of roles, it was not possible to do substantial differentiated analysis across the data set. For this reason analysis focuses on themes which were recurrent enough to offer a sense of 'saturation' and from which we felt confident to draw some conclusions and offer further lines of enquiry.
- **Limitations to the data collection approach:** Within the pandemic context face-to-face data collection was not possible. Online interactions have some limitations that can impact on the data collected. Primarily, the impact of digital access and the challenges of interacting with non-verbal cues⁷.
- **Limitations to the study scope:** As mentioned above, the scope did not include community organisations, schools, and other organisations who work alongside PEPs. Given the importance of the PE ecosystem, and the dependencies within it, this limitation meant that reflections on critical relationships were only captured from the perspective of PEPs.

⁷ Allen, M. (2017). The Sage Encyclopaedia of Communication Research Methods (Vols. 1-4). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, Inc doi: 10.4135/9781483381411



RESEARCH ETHICS

A sub-group was tasked with developing the ethical and safeguarding foundation for the research, which is captured by our Code of Ethics, Data Management Plan, and Research Ethics Processes Documents.

Our Code of Ethics⁸ articulated the ethos of our research approach and informed decisions throughout our collaboration, from research design through to dissemination activities. The Academy of Social Sciences' principles for social science research⁹ formed the basis of our ethical code, which we supplemented with advice from two further guides:

- The British Educational Research Association's¹⁰ *Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research* was at the heart of our interactions with stakeholders, respondents and participants; while
- *Community-based participatory research: a guide to ethical principles and practice*¹¹ informed the working practices of the peer research team.

Although we could not predict all ethical considerations, it was important to ensure that the principles were alive in practice as well as in theory and that all peer researchers felt supported in instituting the code. Therefore, the whole peer research team worked together to develop an Ethical Principles in Practice document to demonstrate how we would respond in some scenarios based on our ethical framework. Additionally, the ethics sub-group members were available to support other team members on any matters arising during the course of the project.

Our Data Management Plan¹² summarised how the collected data would remain secure and ensure the confidentiality of our participants. Finally, our Research Ethics Processes Document was a living document that developed alongside the project. This paper, based on an existing higher education institution ethics form, allowed us to record our initial decisions and highlight

⁸ PEP Insights Research Code of Ethics | NCCPE (publicengagement.ac.uk)

⁹ Academy of Social Sciences (2015) *Five Ethics Principles for Social Science Research*, UK. <https://www.acss.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/5-Ethics-Principles-for-Social-Science-Research-Flyer.pdf>

¹⁰ British Educational Research Association [BERA] (2018) *Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research*, fourth edition, London. <https://www.bera.ac.uk/researchers-resources/publications/ethical-guidelines-for-educational-research-2018>

¹¹ Centre for Social Justice and Community Action, Durham University and the National Co-ordinating Centre for Public Engagement (2012) *Community-based participatory research: a guide to ethical principles and practice*, Bristol / Durham.

https://www.publicengagement.ac.uk/sites/default/files/publication/cbpr_ethics_guide_web_november_2012.pdf ¹²

PEP Insights Research Data Management Plan | NCCPE (publicengagement.ac.uk)



later revisions (e.g. not naming individual respondents/participants in our final reporting) in a clear and transparent way as the project developed further. After a familiarisation session led by the sub group members, each peer research team member signed a declaration form to confirm their personal responsibility to abide by the project's ethical foundations.

Overall, whilst we did not seek approval from a formal ethics committee, our approach ensured that we met the requirements of ethical review within a higher education institution.

COMMUNICATIONS AND DISSEMINATION

A sub group was tasked with managing the communication of the opportunities to participate in the research, and to share the findings. This group was supported by the NCCPE Communications lead. A section dedicated to the research was created on the NCCPE website¹³, and a range of marketing tools for use on social media were created, to promote opportunities to participate in the research. A blog was launched on the NCCPE website, and key networks were encouraged to promote the opportunity to their members.

The group produced a short film to capture the essence of the research, which can be viewed on the NCCPE website. In addition, the team presented on the work at two PEP Network meetings and at the Engage Conference, an international online conference for those working in PE within an HE context.

The initial findings of the research were presented at a PEP Network meeting on the 14th April 21 which was attended by 84 people. This meeting provided the team with an opportunity to assess interest in, and hear reflections on what was emerging from the data, and the report is available on the PEP Insights Research website.

Following the publication of this report, three briefing documents will be created for the three main stakeholders identified by the PEP Insights Research team, including recommendations from the findings: Funders and policy makers; University senior leaders; and Public Engagement Professionals.

We anticipate these documents being generated with input from these stakeholders, and others interested in building on the research to effect change. This will be supported by a range of activities to support stakeholders to act on the findings from the research.

¹³ <https://www.publicengagement.ac.uk/pep-insights-research>



Research Findings

INTRODUCTION

The research reveals a rich picture of the contributions of PEPs during the pandemic, and the specific opportunities and challenges they faced. The pandemic brought to the fore issues relating to the status of PE within higher education, the need to adapt practices quickly and effectively; and the pinch points for professionals working at the boundaries of research and society.

The research findings are grouped into key thematic areas that were reflected on in the survey, focus groups and interviews. This report captures the main themes arising from the data, illustrated in the diagram below and detailed in table form appendix 1.



The qualitative data from the survey, interviews and focus groups were coded using an inductive coding of three **main themes** – opportunities, challenges, and the future. These themes explore the broad parameters of the PEPs' experience of the pandemic. We used deductive coding to identify **sub-themes**, which often related to more than one main theme, so we grouped these using a Venn diagram to illustrate these overlaps.

Sub-themes were included when they were cited consistently enough for us to feel a sense of 'saturation' and confidence in our ability to draw meaning from them. Three such sub-themes emerged when considering the opportunities, challenges and future, and sit at the centre of the diagram:

- The commitment of universities to PE.
- The nature of PE within a higher education context (purposes and practices).
- The nature of being a PEP.

Unlike many of the subthemes, which echo experiences from across the HE sector (detailed below), these three themes are distinct to PEPs, and therefore form the basis of our analysis.

THE PEP EXPERIENCE IN CONTEXT

The experience of PEPs during the pandemic were, of course, not unique: the pressures bearing down on them were playing out across the HE sector and impacting on all groups of staff. We surveyed relevant literature to inform and contextualise our analysis. This includes the NCCPE's work to understand the factors affecting institutional culture; sociological analysis of the PEP role; wider analysis of the challenges facing all 'third space'¹⁴ professional staff in universities; and recent surveys and research into the impact of the pandemic on sector staff.

The NCCPE has been at the centre of over ten years of concerted efforts to improve how well universities support PE and adapt their cultures and processes to achieve this. A series of reports and evaluations of 'culture change' initiatives have foregrounded the factors which affect this work, and the concerted strategic 'grip' that is required to move a university to the point where the work is securely embedded. These developments are summarised on the NCCPE website¹⁵.

¹⁴ The term third space professionals typically relates to staff whose role span academic and professional services roles at a university or research institute

¹⁵ <https://www.publicengagement.ac.uk/support-engagement/nccpe-support/culture-change>



The work to date has emphasised three broad challenges faced by universities in supporting PEPs effectively:

- The strategic rationale and leadership of engagement
- The systems and processes that they have put in place to underpin their goals
- The ways in which they involve their staff and stakeholders in developing and delivering their goals

Research into the role of PEPs by Watermeyer and others has framed PEP experiences in a wider sociological analysis of changing managerial approaches and the impact of marketisation upon HE. Watermeyer and Rowe's most recent paper¹⁶ foregrounds PEPs':

'struggle to gain a professional parity of esteem with academics, and how the discrediting of their expertise by the latter forms a challenge to their leadership and thus their displacement within universities as highly stratified organisations.'

They conclude:

'They [PEPs] appear to lack the structure and agency and, analogously, the academic and economic capital necessary for meaningful and affective institutional leadership, which might also provide resistance to what Watermeyer and Olssen (2019) have called the 'dissipating value of public service in UK higher education'. Moreover, as Macfarlane (2011) has noted, while many professional service staff have been upskilled into 'paraacademic roles', the positional ambivalence and confused capital of PEPs in universities causes their deskilling and deprofessionalisation where atomised into numerous explicitly 'administrative' and/or delivery roles.'

The challenges identified by Watermeyer and others are of course not unique to PEPs. There is a broader literature exploring the status of knowledge exchange and 'third space' professionals. Celia Whitchurch's work, for example, illuminates the paradoxes and dilemmas faced by people working in these roles and environments:

*'Such environments do not sit easily in formal organisational structures and can be both ambiguous and uncertain.'*¹⁷

¹⁶ Richard Watermeyer & Gene Rowe (2021): Public engagement professionals in a prestige economy: Ghosts in the machine, *Studies in Higher Education*

¹⁷ Whitchurch, C. (2015). The Rise of Third Space Professionals: Paradoxes and Dilemmas. In U. Teichler and W. C. Cummings. *Recruiting and Managing the Academic Profession*. Dordrecht Springer



These uncertainties and ambiguities can have harmful consequences within research culture, as evidenced in the recently published ARMA Survey of Research Culture 2020¹⁸:

‘The survey indicated a “them and us culture between academic/researchers and professional services/research support” and was seemingly reinforced by an undervaluing of non-academic roles and contributions; “the skills, expertise and experience of PSS and/or non-academic staff are often valued less than those of academic staff, even where the expertise of the former is more relevant than the latter...”. Many respondents said they felt “very valued by my direct team but not by the university, which places little value on non-academic staff”, signalling an institutionalised culture of disparity between the academic and support job families’.

Whilst there are clearly significant challenges posed by this, we are also sensitive to the specific challenges faced by academics, as evidenced by a recent article in *The Conversation*¹⁹. The broader issues about research culture and its impact on all types of staff and students is brought into focus by Wellcome’s recent work²⁰, and there are now significant efforts by Wellcome and UKRI²¹ to address this.

We contextualised the research and our analysis by reviewing other recent surveys and reviews of how the pandemic has impacted on all staff groups within higher education, academic and professional: The Women in Higher Education Network’s report, *Sharing the Caring*²²; Advance HE’s Gender differences in UK HE experiences of remote working²³; Leadership insights from surveying 12 000 university staff during Covid-19²⁴; and Shankar et al’s (2021)²⁵ paper relating to experiences in Ireland, part of a project commissioned by the Worldwide University Network into a Global Study on the pandemic’s impact on the wellbeing of staff and students²⁶, which is currently underway.

¹⁸ <https://arma.ac.uk/arma-research-culture-survey-report/>

¹⁹ <https://theconversation.com/survey-of-academics-finds-widespread-feelings-of-stress-and-overwork-130715>

²⁰ <https://wellcome.org/reports/what-researchers-think-about-research-culture>

²¹ <https://www.ukri.org/our-work/supporting-healthy-research-and-innovation-culture/research-and-innovation-culture/>

²² https://s3.amazonaws.com/kajabi-storefronts-production/sites/45828/themes/2439331/downloads/vdBOifYHSSmJEzZMBiHA_Sharing_the_Caring.pdf

²³ <https://www.advance-he.ac.uk/knowledge-hub/gender-differences-uk-he-staff-experiences-remote-working>

²⁴ <https://voiceproject.com/articles/university-staff-during-covid-19>

²⁵ ‘The Covid-19 crisis is not the core problem’: experiences, challenges, and concerns of Irish academia during the pandemic. Kalpana Shankar, Dean Phelan, Venkata Ratnadeep Suri, Richard Watermeyer, Cathryn Knight & Tom Crick. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03323315.2021.1932550>

²⁶ <https://wun.ac.uk/article/global-study-on-the-pandemics-impact-on-university-staff-and-student-wellbeing/>



Not surprisingly, many of the themes that emerged from our analysis echo themes from across the HE sector: PEPs experiences were typical of wider ‘stresses and strains’ on the whole HE system, specifically the move to online working; the pressures of balancing work and caring responsibilities; and access to technologies and skills to effectively engage.

- Women were disproportionately affected by the pandemic and associated lockdowns²⁷. These issues relating to caring and responsibilities were reflected in our data, where the large majority of respondents were women (which is reflective of the PEP sector as a whole).
- The reliance on informal face-to-face interaction was also particularly hard-hit in the pandemic. Our data reflects on how much of the work of PEPs is done in these ad-hoc interactions, and therefore this had a significant impact for our respondents.
- Funding challenges, and lack of certainty about funding, was a key challenge faced by the sector. The fact that PEP work is often short-term funded therefore made it especially vulnerable in face of budget cuts, or uncertainty relating to student funding.

This broader context has illuminated our analysis. Unsurprisingly, PEPs’ experiences were very dependent on how their institutions valued their work, and how embedded and ‘hard wired’ the strategy and support for PE was when the pandemic started. When institutions had made a strategic and resourced commitment to engagement, the data speaks convincingly of how they were able to respond to the challenges raised by the global pandemic. These organisations were able to build on the work that they had been doing to make a positive contribution in their place, as well as to contribute to the national conversations about science related to the context. Where that institutional commitment was not in place, PEPs were much more likely to experience significant additional professional and personal challenges. In effect, the pandemic ‘stress tested’ universities’ commitment to PE and brought into focus long standing fault lines in internal institutional culture. PEPs were very much at the frontline, but often with very little agency or influence.

²⁷ <https://www.advance-he.ac.uk/membership/member-events/February>



Chapter 1: Universities' commitment to public engagement

FRAMING REMARKS: MOTIVATIONS TO ENGAGE WITH THE PUBLIC

PEPs work in institutions which are at different stages in their adoption of PE, with different levels of institutional commitment. The pressures of the pandemic inevitably led to HEIs having to re-prioritise activity. We were interested to explore how PEPs were impacted by this, and their perspectives on how their organisations managed this.

At the heart of these decisions was understanding the HEI's motivations to engage. A framework developed by Fiorino²⁸ and subsequent work by Stirling²⁹, suggests three imperatives for engagement which are helpful to our analysis:

- **Instrumental imperatives:** we engage because it makes decisions more legitimate, that engagement supports the incumbent interests of academics and universities.
- **Substantive imperatives:** we engage because non-experts see problems, issues and solutions that experts miss. Participation increases the quality of academic work and the functioning of universities.
- **Normative imperatives:** we engage because democratic ideals call for maximum participation, which counter the power of incumbent interests and allow those who are affected by decisions to have influence.

Normative imperatives were often cited by PEPs in our study. There was a strong sense that engagement is the 'right thing to do', which was underlined in the context of a pandemic that was disproportionately affecting some groups of people, particularly those living in deprived areas of the UK. These normative imperatives were sometimes shared by university leaders, keen to ensure that the institution played a role in supporting local people.

²⁸ Fiorino, D. (1989). Environmental risk and democratic process: A critical review. *Columbia Journal of Environmental Law*. Vol. 14(2): pp501-547

²⁹ Stirling, A. (2008). "Opening up" and "Closing Down." Power, participation and pluralism in the Social Appraisal of Technology. *Science, technology and Human values*, Vol. 33(2): pp262-294



Substantive imperatives were also referenced in the data, particularly relating to health-related research into Covid-19. Patient engagement was cited as enriching the quality of the research undertaken and ensuring that it was relevant and useful.

Instrumental imperatives were reflected when referencing moves from engagement to communications, when universities were keen to legitimise their role and value in their place, to garner public support, and demonstrate the contributions they were making. Institutions were facing a host of challenges linked to the pandemic, including the concerns relating to students travelling to study; ensuring the quality of learning offered online was effective; opening up safely for research and learning; and financial issues relating to unpredictable income streams, most particularly from students and international students. As a consequence there was pressure to raise the profile of the value of universities to the public.

For some of the PEPs there was a mismatch between the normative imperatives animating their work, and the instrumental imperatives that were driving university behaviour. This mismatch caused tensions that were not fully resolved at the time of the study.

HOW WAS UNIVERSITIES' COMMITMENT TO PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT AFFECTED BY THE PANDEMIC?

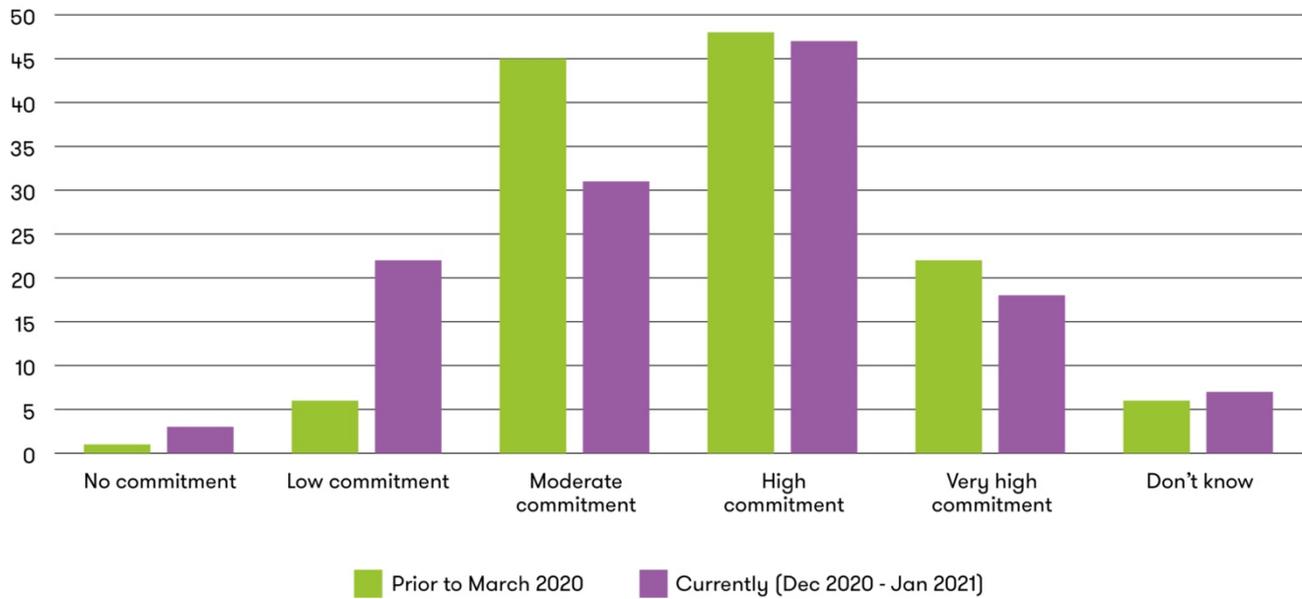
PE has risen up the HE policy agenda over the last 10 years and universities are increasingly recognising the value of engagement and investing in it, in particular by recruiting professional staff with expertise in supporting and enabling high quality PE.

We wanted to see how Covid-19 impacted on this institutional commitment, and so we invited survey respondents to rate their organisation's commitment to PE prior to March 2020. 70 respondents viewed their institution's commitment to engagement being high or very high, with 45 respondents citing moderate commitment.

We also asked our respondents to rate their organisation's commitment to PE at the time of the survey (Dec-Jan 2021). The results for both questions are displayed below.



Organisation's commitment to public engagement

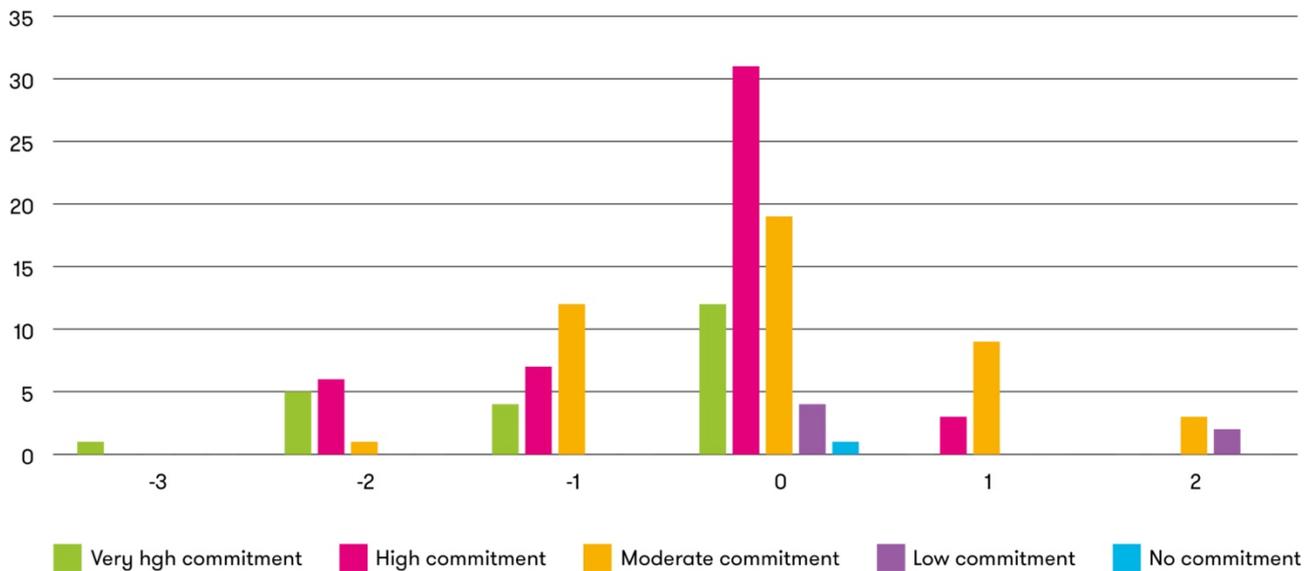


There was a clear change between the two data sets, indicating that some PEPs believed that the Covid-19 pandemic and associated restrictions had impacted their institution's commitment to PE. The biggest changes appeared to be for those institutions who had moderate commitment to PE, whilst many of those with a high commitment appeared to remain committed.

Drilling down into the texture of the data, we explored to what extent individual institutions had been seen to change their commitment to PE. The following graph illustrates the perceived change in commitment by institutions, where 0 = no change, +1 = increase by one step on the scale e.g. from moderate to high etc. The colours represent the commitment before March 2020.



Perceived change in commitment



67 respondents rated their institution’s commitment pre-March 2020 to Dec/Jan 21 as being the same. 17 rated their institution as being more committed, and 36 less committed. 8 chose don’t know for at least one of their answers, and therefore have not been included here.

MORE COMMITTED TO ENGAGEMENT

Of those who rated their institution as being more committed: 9 suggested their institution’s commitment had moved from moderate to high; 3 moderate to very high; 2 low to high; and 3 high to very high. In explaining these shifts, respondents cited their institution’s interest in meeting specific community needs; the fact that PE had become more visible to staff and publics in the context of the pandemic; and, for a couple, that more money had become available to support engagement:

My organisation has made a huge commitment to tackling health inequalities in a way that will affect actual change. This was not previously the case. (Survey, High to Very High)

I feel we've done a lot to support our community throughout Covid. PE is being recognised as a priority and steps are being taken to level up our university's PE contributions. (Survey, Moderate to Very High)



There were also some more instrumental reasons cited:

The institution has a renewed focus on external and internal profile and reputation and the role engagement plays in that. (Survey, Moderate to High)

A few referenced that the change of institutional commitment was not Covid-19 specific, with references to the Black Lives Matter movement and to Research England's Knowledge Exchange Framework (KEF), which includes Public and Community Engagement (PCE) as one of the seven dimensions for assessment:

My organisation's commitment to PE has been affected more by the Black Lives Matter protests than it has the Covid-19 pandemic, as we now have a strengthened commitment to engaging with young people from BAME background about careers. In general, there is a feeling that effective science communication is more important than ever, as the pandemic has highlighted. This has only had a minor, nonspecific effect on the organisation's commitment to public engagement though. (Survey, Moderate to High)

In the last couple of months (driven mainly by the KEF [...]) there has been a shift within senior management towards making a larger commitment to PE. Discussions are currently taking place about creating a centralised PE team and more explicitly referring to PE within strategies. (Survey, Moderate to High)

The KEF PCE Narrative was a great consolidator of PCE ideas and efforts centrally within our University. The fact that I could bring examples and evidence of the great PCE work happening in my Faculty to central committees raised our visibility and value within the institution. I feel that our University's new strategy has also recognised the value of PCE in remaining relevant and therefore the need to properly support, evaluate and record activity. I am now able to participate in a University working group to develop a PCE strategy and I don't think that would have happened if I hadn't been able to do my research during lockdown and employ language and ideas which "rang the right bells" centrally. (Survey, Moderate to High)

LESS COMMITTED TO ENGAGEMENT

Of those who rated their institution as being less committed: 4 suggested their institution's commitment had moved from very high to high; 7 high to moderate; 12 moderate to low; 5 very high to moderate; 6 high to low; 1 moderate to no commitment; and 1 very high to low



commitment. The majority of these respondents referenced that engagement was no longer prioritised against other institutional priorities:

Many strategies from my organisation for the 2020 period have been delayed and this delay continues which included Public Engagement. The overarching strategy and focus of the organisation in terms of core goals is a commitment to Public Engagement [...] however the detail of this commitment or planning for 2021 look to still be being discussed with other aspects currently a priority. Many involved in similar activity to me took voluntary severance and have not been replaced. (Survey, Very High to Moderate)

As an organisation we have recently been instructed to shift our focus to critically important, time-sensitive projects and tasks that are most crucial to the success of our teaching, research and financial stability; and to push back lower priority work to later in the year. Feel this could be used by some to down prioritise public engagement. (Survey, Moderate to Low)

Several referenced the fact that the commitment seemed the same, but there were no longer resources to support it, therefore the reality was that the commitment had decreased:

Whilst I still believe we are firmly committed to PE, the methodology and timelines are effectively 'pausing' much activity that would ordinarily take place. (Survey, Very High to Moderate)

I think commitment to the principles hasn't shifted but the willingness to actively support and resource the work has massively reduced as staff are so overwhelmed with work and / or childcare issues. (Survey, Very High to Moderate)

Others cited issues related to staff being placed on furlough, or being made redundant:

I think with so many [of the] central team furloughed there was a lack of leadership there to help the other PEP's achieve their goals. No one took over the furloughed jobs and therefore PE was left sitting waiting for them to come back. There was a lack of energy and inspiration from people to do PE. (Survey, Very High to High)



CONSISTENT COMMITMENT TO ENGAGEMENT

The majority rated their institution's commitment as being consistent during this period:

We have proved that we can continue to deliver as a team in difficult circumstances; we've created spaces for staff that are enjoyable during this stressful time; we've created events that have increased our regional reach, that made it possible for people to participate who previously missed out. Our institution has recognised the human cost of the pandemic and sees PE as one way to address culture, community and impact in a positive way. There is certainly no waning support for PE with research from our organisation because of Covid-19. Once the spending freeze is lifted, we can even recruit a new member of staff. (Survey, High)

Some respondents referenced there was a change of focus; and for a small number, that the work had become fragmented:

Our commitment to PE has continued - mainly through PPI in research. We've also co-produced more research with patients and staff, involved more patients and carers in shaping research, and worked with embedded peer researchers in teams. This has all been intensive engagement with very small groups of people in order to improve research. However, I think our time and capacity available for what I would term 'broader' public engagement (aimed at engaging wider groups with research because it's relevant to them) has decreased - it's not seen as a priority. (Survey, High)

A survey respondent who worked with several institutions reflected:

The organisations for the main roles I have identified have made every effort to sustain and even improve engagement since March 2020. Some health orgs have suspended training and development or engagement forums while operational demands from Covid impact have increased. However, research has increased its engagement activity. (Survey, Very High)

Whilst exploring university commitment was not an explicit focus of the interviews and focus groups, they also bore witness to different institutional responses to the pandemic with reference to PE.



On the whole participants reflected on a continued commitment from their institutions, with several referencing a shift in priority and attitude to engagement. For example, some referenced that the focus was now internal, most specifically around how to support researchers:

I think looking at our strategy it was what do my researchers need now not really what the public need – sounds harsh but that was the priority in the institution. I introduced a new training programme with Academics about how to think about their audiences digitally, to short films. So we thought about things differently and it was about driving the researchers to continue to think about public engagement and make it easy for them to keep going. (Focus Group, 9)

However, there was also a sense that for some, the shift was mainly towards communications:

Our institution moved from an engaged to communication model. A lot of our research was towards the Covid efforts, but we also did a lot in providing PPE and social and education research around schools being closed and letting people know about what the university was doing so that was a shift from physical engagement to high-profile, communication and brand awareness and profile raising effort. (Focus Group, 12)

BARRIERS TO PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT

There is a significant evidence base about the barriers to PE in HE. The Factors Affecting Science Communication survey, run first in 2006³⁰, identified a set of factors which negatively impacted on researchers' participation. The survey was re-run in 2015³¹. Survey respondents were invited to consider how barriers to PE³² had changed as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic for their organisation. The results are shown in the figure below.

Those that became more of a barrier in the context of Covid-19 for the majority of respondents were: competing pressures on time; lack of opportunities/ difficulties finding relevant audiences; and limited access to opportunities to communicate across the organisation due to remote working.

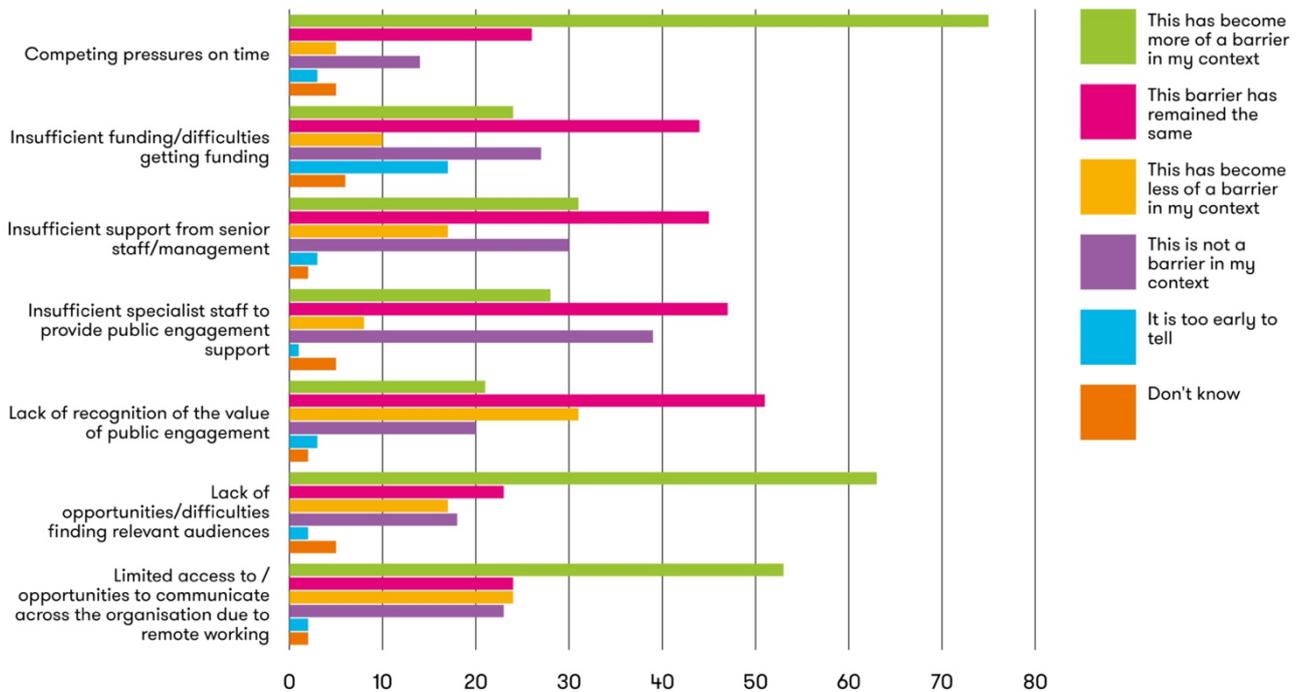
³⁰ <https://royalsociety.org/topics-policy/publications/2006/science-communication/>

³¹ <https://wellcome.org/news/what-are-barriers-uk-researchers-engaging-public>

³² https://wellcome.org/sites/default/files/wtp060033_0.pdf



How do you think the barriers to PE within the organisation you work with/for have changed as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic?



It is not surprising to see competing pressures on time becoming more of a barrier in the context of Covid-19 and associated restrictions. The need to juggle caring responsibilities alongside work, learning new skills needed to be effective, the difficulty of contacting partners and colleagues, and the stress of living through a pandemic meant that, for many people, there were competing pressures on their time.

Many of the PEPs reflected that engaging with new audiences could be challenging, given the move to online working and the lack of opportunities to take engagement into populated places. Communication difficulties with dispersed teams was a commonly cited challenge for those working in large organisations.

For the other suggested barriers, the most frequent answer was ‘this barrier has remained the same’. It is interesting to note that ‘Lack of recognition of the value of PE’ had become less of a barrier for more of the respondents (31) than those for whom it had become more of a barrier (21). Several factors could account for this, not least the focus on science engagement linked to the pandemic, the increase of interest in science communication, and the desire for universities to



contribute meaningfully within their places, which led to an increase in support for community engagement in some institutions.

REFLECTIONS

This analysis opens up a number of interesting questions about what commitment to PE could or should look like within a pandemic, and the specific contribution universities can make in times of great change. Clearly the immediate impacts of the pandemic and associated restrictions should not be underestimated. Given the scale at which universities operate, as major employers with large student bodies, they clearly needed to adapt rapidly and take responsibility for their staff and students. However, there is a distinct difference between those for whom public engagement was also prioritised, and those institutions whose framings of and understanding of engagement meant it could be side-lined. Fundamental to this difference are understandings of the purpose and practices of PE, which we pick up in chapter 2.

The three imperatives for engagement saw institutions behaving differently in terms of where they prioritised engagement efforts. The initial lockdown saw many institutions adopting normative imperatives: the urgency of meeting external needs and ‘playing their part’ made external engagement compelling, and the case for PE was strengthened. The data spoke of universities ‘going the extra mile’ to be a useful resource in their place: opening their campuses for vaccine centres; opening their kitchens to provide hot meals; unlocking their store cupboards to share resources the NHS needed; releasing their staff and students; and deploying their equipment to create PPE³³, etc. For some PEPs, this sharing extended to the local community organisations that they worked with, moving the focus of their effort to help address the immediate impacts of Covid-19, for others it saw them mobilise their engagement to meet the needs of local people, and for others it directed their efforts towards science engagement to enhance public understanding of Covid-19, vaccines and other preventative measures. This work was considered critical to the institution, and was seen to be the ‘right thing to do’. The imperative for institutions to ‘play their part’ also had instrumental benefits: it was in universities’ interests to be seen to be stepping up to meet the challenges posed by the pandemic. Universities UK ‘We are Together’ campaign emphasised the role of the sector in supporting the national effort³⁴.

³³ PPE: Personal protective equipment

³⁴ <https://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/what-we-do/creating-voice-our-members/campaigns/our-past-campaigns-0/we-are-together>



However, the underpinning ethos and motivation for this work sometimes betrayed an unhelpful return to deficit thinking. PEP's grappled valiantly with this challenge, trying to model a different ethos where knowledge hierarchies are challenged and great care is taken to 'open up' conversations and make engagement inclusive and people-centred. We explore the challenge of balancing 'promotion' and 'engagement' and how this played out in different settings in chapter 2.

Substantive motivations for engagement foreground its contribution to the knowledge building role of universities: for instance, how engaging publics in shaping and conducting research strengthens the relevance and utility of the findings. We saw some evidence of how universities had deployed this kind of approach in response to the pandemic, for instance through capitalising on existing investment in patient involvement and community advisory groups. Research funders also launched rapid response research funding calls to address the pandemic, some of which foregrounded the need for public involvement³⁵.

All three of these motivations have a role to play in the future of public engagement, with staff across the institution recognising its strategic value in their work.

The extent to which there is a shared, coherent and widely understood institutional grasp of the significance and role of public engagement is a clear driver for embedding engagement within the institution, e.g. as evidenced in the work of the NCCPE³⁶. Without this, it is relatively easy for senior leaders to dismiss its value, without engaging intellectually with the potential value of engagement to the work of their institution. Three topics stood out as being important for universities to discuss internally and with their partners and publics in developing future work.

UNIVERSITIES AND SOCIETY: MOVING TO A PEOPLE-CENTRED APPROACH

The pandemic reminded us that universities are part of a complex ecosystem, and whilst they have much to contribute, they can't act alone. There is a balance to be struck between promoting your own work, and recognising the value contributed by others, being humble and realistic about your own contribution, and acting responsively and decisively to meet society's needs. The experience of PEPs has foregrounded the immensely significant role of 'human' contact and connection, and the importance of investing in relationships and acting with empathy and compassion which we

³⁵ <https://www.ukri.org/find-covid-19-research-and-innovation-supported-by-ukri/>

³⁶ <https://www.publicengagement.ac.uk/support-engagement/strategy-and-planning/edge-tool>



explore in chapter 3. It will be interesting to see how far this starts to become the default setting in how universities approach their external engagement.

PERSONIFYING THE ROLE OF THE UNIVERSITY: THE RISK OF 'HERO' NARRATIVES

Universities will need to consider how they embrace effective public engagement, rooted in relationship, alongside needs to communicate their value to government and stakeholders. Explored in chapter 2, this tension arises particularly when universities capitalise on the public mood, promoting their work in ways that neglect the input of others. These hero narratives, can undermine the quality of relationships developed with publics. It will be important for universities to consider how they can marry up their marketing and communications work, alongside the reality of their engagement work.

THE ENGAGEMENT FOOTPRINT: ANIMATING UNIVERSITIES' INTERACTIONS WITH THE WORLD

The NCCPE has long advocated for a holistic understanding of what it means to be an engaged university – considering four areas of activity: student engagement; knowledge exchange; PE with research; and social responsibility³⁷. Whilst those working on PE with research have a significant contribution to make to the engaged university, their work can be greatly enhanced when universities bring all of these orientations to engagement together, with a robust strategy, well-organised internal systems and excellent internal communication. PEPs lucky enough to work in institutions with this kind of capability were much better able to respond to the challenges of the pandemic. This learning can hopefully be drawn on to help other universities re-consider and re-focus their support for PE.

As we all continue to live alongside Covid-19, those working in the HE sector must develop and build on what has been learnt so far, capturing the promising practices that were developed, and to make this commitment to acting quickly and decisively to 'play their part' business as usual.

³⁷ <https://www.publicengagement.ac.uk/about-engagement/what-does-engaged-university-look>



Chapter 2: The nature of public engagement

The pandemic and associated restrictions threw into sharp focus the many understandings about the purpose and value of PE, and how it was understood by staff within institutions. It also saw innovation in the practices of PE.

Respondents mainly focused on PE with research in their responses, and therefore we have concentrated our analysis on this type of engagement work. We identified a number of different ‘varieties’ of PE implicit in how PEPs described the focal points for their work: science communication, sharing the results of research, and inspiring and informing young people; community engagement, with an emphasis on collaborative research processes; patient involvement, working with patients to meaningfully engage them in the research processes; arts-based engagement; and a range of people who supported practices across all purposes, publics and discipline areas. These diverse practices are all a critical part of the engagement landscape, and all contribute value to publics and to research. However, the impact of the pandemic on working practices was experienced differently by these different groups, and the challenges, opportunities, and future plans illustrated how these differences played out.

For example, those who were working predominantly in science communication roles saw the pandemic raise public interest in research, and increase opportunity for initiating conversations about science, whereas those who were looking at community engagement were focused on supporting their local community organisations in light of the impacts of the pandemic, and to provide very practical, hands-on support. These different purposes and ‘flavours’ of engagement can make it hard to pin down what PE is and why it matters. Wellcome³⁸ have provided a helpful framing to help differentiate the kinds of contribution PE can make to research, by identifying three types of engagement:

- **Must do:** this was engagement that was essential to the research being undertaken. Particularly relevant to collaborative research methodologies, but not restricted to them. ‘Must do’ engagement was integrated into the research itself.
- **Smart to do:** this engagement brought significant value back to the research and to society. Whilst the research could be done without this engagement, the impact of that research would be significantly less without the engagement. ‘Smart to do’ included engagement that helped bring public perceptions into the research, sensitising researchers to some of

³⁸ As detailed in the grant guidelines here: <https://wellcome.org/sites/default/files/Guidance-Provision-PublicEngagement.pdf>



the ethical issues and societal challenges posed by the research, and enabling them to navigate these.

- **Wise to do:** engagement in this category tended to not bring much value back to the research, but was more focused on inspiring and informing people about the research. These forms of engagement clearly have value, but this value is more about raising awareness, and widening participation in research.

Whilst our respondents focused specifically on PE with research, the pandemic helped staff see these practices as part of a wider relational ecosystem, which highlighted the value and importance of other forms of external engagement.

The Covid-19 pandemic also encouraged some institutions to better integrate their communications and engagement work, and as a result to develop a more nuanced approach to building understanding and appreciation of their work. PEPs were often in a position to emphasise the need to open up conversations, rather than just promote the work of the university; to champion listening and encourage responsiveness to community concerns; to demonstrate sensitivity to the experiences and needs of their institution's communities; and to balance a celebration of the role of science and research with considerations of the social and ethical context.

The most substantial change related to the move to digital engagement brought about by lockdown, which changed the face of PE with HE. Many PEPs developed confidence and skills in developing online methodologies for engagement. However, at a time when good news was in short supply, senior leaders could be seduced by large number of attendees at online events, and for some leaders attendee numbers unhelpfully became a proxy for value.

PEPs recognised that a significant benefit of online engagement was the opportunity to engage with new audiences, with opportunities no longer defined by geography, physical access, or significant travel time and the associated costs of this. PEPs were keen to ensure that the new audiences were not forgotten when face-to-face engagement was possible once again.

However PEPs were rightly concerned by social inequalities in who had access, resource, and skills to participate in online engagement, and were sensitive to the exclusionary nature of online engagement for many people. Concerns were also raised about the potential of online engagement to super-serve the already engaged and the challenge of successfully marketing activity online to attract new publics to participate. PEPs saw digital engagement as a key area of



development, enhancing knowledge and skills in developing accessible online activities, and the need to complement these with non-digital approaches.

Alongside the predominance of online approaches, hyper-local engagement practices were developed to broaden access to relevant opportunities, for example the distribution of education packs to families via foodbanks.

ENGAGEMENT IN A PANDEMIC

The lockdown restrictions had an immediate practical impact on the types of engagement that PEPs supported. Lockdown meant that face-to-face engagement was not possible, and lots of engagement plans were cancelled or postponed. Some PEPs reflected on the fact that they were quick to put things online, assuming that restrictions would be lifted after a few months.

It was just a case of 'throw stuff at it, and we'll be ok' because we thought it would end in the summer and we'd go back to normal. (Focus Group, 22)

We've put a lot of content hurriedly online and we would like to have had more time to test what works, understand more what we're trying to do, do more research, managing people's expectations on what is achievable in terms of output. (Focus Group, 36)

Some reflected on how this desire to get things online was prompted by a concern for the publics they engaged with.

I think one of the problems is we didn't know how long it was going to be going on for, so initially when we went into lockdown 1, we had a panic because we felt we should be supporting the children we work with. We knew that everyone was at home, and parents like me (and I understood that it was a complete nightmare) were trying to find things for children to do, whilst trying to work. So, one of the things we concentrated on was just getting information out there and sharing our resources and sharing other people's resources, to help children do physics at home. (Focus Group, 22)

Others hung back, wanting to take more time to consider if and how to translate their engagement work into online formats.



But it was definitely kind of a big conversation and I think for a while. I kind of wondered “are we doing the right thing? Should we have done more, put more stuff online?” But I think, in hindsight, I'm glad we did that and we took more time to actually work out strategically what we could do that would have greater impact to help rather than creating lots of extra work that might not have helped anyone. (Int 98)

For the majority of PEPs involved in the research, once it became clear that the restrictions would be in place for a longer time than originally anticipated, plans changed, with a move to doing more considered reflection on how to continue engagement in an online context.

Whilst the survey data illustrated the commitment to develop online programmes, there were significant challenges faced by the PEPs in doing this work. PEPs reflected on the skills they needed to develop to create and sustain effective online engagement, and how these needed to be learnt on the job. Many recognized that the work they undertook initially was not of high quality.

[...] in hindsight I would have said ‘calm, stop!’ When I think about the work I did between March and June, there wasn't much quality or meaningful engagement to it, it was a sense of the 'show must go on'. (Focus Group, 27)

This need to develop skills led to an increased demand for online engagement training. The NCCPE crowd sourced a guide for online engagement, invited responses from those working within the HE sector, and also ran training for a wide range of people based in HE, including PEPs and researchers. It was noted that whilst the majority of participants were looking to develop or enhance skills, for a significant minority the training offered an opportunity to contextualise their own practice, and to check that their approach was sound.

In addition to the skills gap, several reflected on the restrictions universities placed on them, in terms of their access to engagement platforms such as Zoom, whilst others lacked the technology or easy access to a stable internet connection:

They want us to do PE but have been reluctant to provide us with the funding necessary to purchase equipment and software to do what is required of us from home. (Survey)

Just as PEPs faced their own challenges getting online, they were also quick to recognise the issues for many of the publics they were seeking to engage. Digital poverty, lack of reliable and/ or affordable online access, restricted access to the technology to get online, and competition in



homes for what little access there was, required PEPs to develop different approaches. These included hyperlocal³⁹ projects where researchers took their engagement onto the pavements; telephone engagement; and sending packs out to people by post, or through food banks or other services:

One of my colleagues is putting packs together to go to food banks and the food banks will choose which families the packs go to, so we're not imposing anything, but we're still providing something for those who probably can't get online. (Focus Group, 36)

Even when it was technically possible to get the engagement to work online, there were other challenges, not least the home contexts within which the PEPs and the online collaborators were based, which is explored later.

Despite these challenges, the majority of respondents reflected that they had managed to support and/ or deliver effective engagement programmes over the lockdown.

It's still been a very fulfilling role in the sense that we've still been able to do quite a lot of good, meaningful projects throughout this time. (Int 23)

For many PEPs, reimagining engagement as an online activity was experienced as an opportunity for professional development. PEPs were forced to reconsider the purposes of the engagement that they had been doing, and the publics that they sought to engage with, causing them to reflect on the practices of engagement pre-pandemic, and what they would seek to change once restrictions allowed them to go back to face-to-face interaction.

PEPs reflected on the time spent to develop effective online engagement formats, and the hidden cost of working in these ways. An easy assumption for HEI senior managers was that online engagement was not as time consuming as other face-to-face formats, and although there was some practical truth in this, the additional preparation time needed to ensure that the online engagement was appropriate, met the needs of the target participants, and ran well was often not recognised.

³⁹ Hyperlocal Engagement is described in this NCCPE Blog. <https://www.publicengagement.ac.uk/whats-new/blog/hyperlocal-engagement-during-time-lockdown>



That is a big part of PEP's role anyway in that you're always trying to think how you can do things and, I suppose, to be more visible in this time because you would be doing these activities and no one would really see these activities as such, or they wouldn't see the level of planning and detail that went into it. (Int 34)

I agree there's a lot of work to do to ensure we're not creating a divide particularly with digitally excluded people. At the moment there's a clash between in a sense doing things properly and the way that institutes view the work to justify budgets. If we work with community groups for a year to train them and help them completely use and access our content then run a programme that's great for them and for us to use. At that point the other teams would be 'shut down' because for that year, it would seem that nothing else was being done that you were recording. (Focus Group, 23)

PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT, COMMUNICATIONS AND DISSEMINATION

The move to online caused a shift in the nature of the types of engagement undertaken. These played out against a long-running tension within the PE community concerning the scope of PE, and its relationship with activities designed to communicate and disseminate research.

The NCCPE's definition of PE is broad, and emphasises mutual benefit and responsiveness:

Public engagement describes the myriad of ways in which the activity and benefits of higher education and research can be shared with the public. Engagement is by definition a two-way process, involving interaction and listening, with the goal of generating mutual benefit.

Within this definition we recognise a range of purposes for engagement, including inspiring and informing, consulting, and collaborating. Online formats lent themselves particularly well to 'inspiring and informing' or dissemination-style engagement. To be considered part of the PE 'family', it is widely accepted that the activities should emphasise interactivity, be very responsive to participants' interests, and be a learning experience for both participants and organisers which was key to developing quality activity.



THE ROLE OF SCIENCE COMMUNICATION

The pandemic brought science communication into the spotlight, because of the heightened public interest in the science behind Covid-19. This opened up opportunities to raise the profile of research, and use that to engage with a range of publics in responsive ways:

The importance of science has never been more clear, thanks to a lot of excellent academic colleagues communicating clearly. This followed by a range of programmes locally targeting specific audiences. We have also seen clearly communicated that science is not always certain, and that it is challenging to make policy based on science when the evidence may not be clear at the same time weighing up different conflicting priorities in society. Finally we have seen that the public needs to be engaged in order to understand and follow guidance. (Survey)

Science and Technology Studies has identified a set of tensions around science communication⁴⁰. These tensions were intensified during the pandemic and often featured in the responses of those PEPs whose work focused on science communication and outreach. Their responses highlighted concerns relating to the quality of the engagement undertaken during the pandemic, in particular the resurgence of ‘deficit’ thinking, which positions the public as lacking in understanding, to be fixed by communication; the framing of science as an unproblematic good, particularly tempting in light of the swift development of effective vaccines; and the difficulty with which people were able to hone their practices of mutually beneficial, two-way engagement in a time of uncertainty.

Whilst the pandemic generated significant public interest in science, it also highlighted the problematic and charged relationship between science and society. Going ‘public’ with research created a host of challenges for researchers and PEPs to navigate. As PEPs supported researchers to engage the public they needed to navigate some of these tensions, and opportunities needed to be matched with an awareness of the context, ethical ways of working, and the politics of science. It raised the importance of researchers being equipped to engage well, rather than just share their knowledge. PEPs reflected on the challenges they faced in equipping researchers to get involved in discussions about science in the public sphere:

That's the main challenge, walking that really fine line between marketing what we're doing and, you know, being that voice for virology and wanting to be that kind of voice of...

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like where people come to for information, without, you know, waving a big virus flag. [...] Some of the researchers don't think that they're being celebrated enough and that their work isn't being shown and it's difficult because like with pre-prints and things like that, we've had difficulties earlier on in the pandemic with pre-prints being jumped on and being annihilated and some of our researchers being viciously attacked on Twitter and we don't want that to happen either. But equally, we need to put our research out, so that's, yeah, been really difficult. (Int 45)

Whilst there were challenges, some saw this as a perfect time to make an instrumental case for engagement within their institutions, appealing to many scientists' motivation to gain public support for science, and influence government funding in the future; and to increase participation in science for young people.

If there's anything good to come out of Covid, it's the increased trust and advocacy for science and the truth in it. So we think we'll be pushing on an open door, the status of STEM advocacy has never been higher. (Focus Group, 12)

And there was a sense that this new interest in science could be short lived, and that it was an important opportunity to be built on.

This move to more disseminative, or communications-based engagement, also exacerbated a historic challenge about the value of PE and how this is measured. For some researchers and senior leaders, attendee numbers became a proxy for the value of work, without consideration of the value experienced by delegates or contributors. Events with global reach perhaps provided a tonic to those exhausted by bad news, but there was little sense of how these global events moved beyond dissemination, and into more engaged forms of working.

[...] compared to an in-person lecture to 70 people, the online version had 200 attendees then 250 so we're building the numbers, (Focus Group, 22)

A lot of our engagement has been more science communication and transmitting information rather than working in an engaging way. (Focus Group, 29)

The challenge of numbers as proxy for value was reflected on in one of the focus groups.

[...] make it clear why we are doing some things online, because it led to confusion especially with researchers around what PE is. It's one of those of those things I feel we've



moved two steps back, getting a good dialogue around PE but a lot of researchers see the online PE as comms and ultimately it ends up falling into that category. So we get a resource and they think PE should just be sending it out to a million people, when we would prefer them to have a dialogue with 5 people rather than upload an infographic that is lost in all the digital information out there. (Focus Group, 23)

Many celebrated the more inclusive opportunities afforded by being online.

Online events have been more inclusive - i.e. the catchment area for participants has increased to become Scotland or UK wide and many participants who wouldn't normally speak will contribute via the chat function etc so the level of engagement (questions asked etc.) increased noticeably. (Survey)

There are spaces where we have been able to do more - engaging with groups that are online and creating digital versions of projects that have a bigger reach. (Survey)

However, this was held in tension with the fact that whilst using online approaches to engagement improved access for some, it removed access for others.

Although it has been possible to keep good contact with patients and the public virtually, and give them the chance to get their voices heard, it is not as easy to reach all groups in society and work towards providing equality of access. It is much easier to engage the members of the public with who you already have a relationship. There is also concern about engaging with people who aren't able to use computers and other devices, either because they don't have them or because they don't want to use them. (Survey)

Finally, whilst the dissemination of science was a key part of responses to the pandemic, this was against the backdrop of huge public voluntarism, as many sought to help out during the pandemic. There was a significant shift in participation in research in relation to science and public health, seen in the vaccine trials and mass volunteer participation at the NHS ⁴¹Covid-19 vaccine centres which opened from 11 January 2021 (and were just getting going at the time of this survey).

⁴¹ <https://www.england.nhs.uk/2021/01/new-nhs-vaccination-centres/>



PARTNERS, COLLABORATORS AND PUBLICS

Critical to all engagement are the people you seek to engage with and alongside. Therefore, effective PE is dependent on the relationships built with organisations outside of the institution. The pandemic led to interesting shifts in the dynamics of partnership working. Those committed to collaborative working invested considerable time and energy to build and sustain relationships:

For me, it was a lot of time spent talking to collaborators and brainstorming what was the best way forward. Discussing ideas, what are we taking forward, so really having conversations and reaching out to see what would work best for me and them and being really patient between the parties. (Focus Group, 37)

Our university has a Civic Mission strategy so looked at the deliverables of that and linked into this, and also looked at major funders, particularly those we work with who represent under-represented groups and during this isolated time, we continued to keep engaging with them even if we weren't going to deliver what we had intended to deliver just to keep that momentum going and build trust in the collaborations. (Focus Group, 24)

PEPs referenced how online engagement had opened up some new possibilities for collaborative working and for more effective engagement with publics:

From an audience point of view, we've been able via Zoom to get some of lived-experience mental health people to appear anonymously, which we can't really do at in-person events. They can change their name on the account, leave their camera off and we've had some interesting conversations. We did one event with researchers and people with lived experience and the honesty that came out there, we're probably going to continue that. (Focus Group, 37)

For example, we've been working on an 'operative birth group' with parents for ages, requires working with a very broad range of people, and practical issues such as childcare to be factored [in, which] made it hard. The first time we did this last year we had 8 people come, now we're online it's 40 because it's easier and we've found the same thing with a few patient groups. It has enabled us to focus on the type of stuff I wanted to move towards and thinking about how we do that in an innovative way. (Focus Group, 8)



However the move to online working removed some of the essential aspects of the engagement some PEPs had previously enjoyed:

We have done some Zoom sessions around 'care for carers', but because it's online they tend to come with the person they care for, but the activity is tailored for the carer not 'caree'. Although they have enjoyed and participated in the Zoom sessions, I think getting out of the house was a large part of what they enjoyed about the pre-Covid offer and so online doesn't replicate that at all. (Focus Group, 36)

There were also changes as to the publics that could be engaged through the pandemic. Pre-pandemic, one of the key approaches to large-scale PE for many PEPs was to take the activity to an environment where publics already were. This was motivated by a variety of reasons: reaching an audience who would be unlikely to come into the university; the unsuitability of university places; and the implicit issues relating to power, belonging and knowledge that need to be navigated when hosting in a university building. PEPs had a range of approaches to this. For the large scale activity, this could be researchers engaging with publics at music or other cultural festivals; in shopping centres; or, a more recent phenomena, pop-up shops, where universities take over a vacant shop and run engagement opportunities there.

PEPs whose work was centred on these approaches reflected that there was not an online equivalent to this:

Something we've lacked this past year are those chance encounters you get at outdoor festivals. Online, you have to pick who you're talking to or you get people who are enthusiastic and will talk anyway. (Focus Group, 8)

Whilst numbers of participants in online events could be increased, PEPs reflected that the publics were more likely to be those who are already interested, or who actively seek out engagement opportunities.

However there were also practices where PEPs were working on a smaller scale, but perhaps with deeper engagement, in community contexts where it was easier to engage the intended publics. These approaches were more easily replicated online, as the contact with the community organisation helped engage with key individuals. Many PEPs working alongside community organisations were invited to support the transition to online working, which strengthened the relationships.



Online engagement also had a personal and professional impact on the PEPs. Being in a home environment to deliver or support engagement meant that, as with the participants, there was a lack of the normal spaces associated with face-to-face activity – the set down of the event, the journey home, etc., which provide necessary space to reflect: It brought to the fore issues around the emotional labour of PEPs, and the isolation many experienced within their roles.

In my role I discuss health inequalities and 'race'. As a Black heritage women the transition to working from home has meant that the challenging discussions I must have in my job are now in my home. It has given me no space to recover. (Survey)

The data illustrates how those institutions who had already been committed to working alongside community organisations were more able to develop and enhance their work together during the pandemic, whereas those who were at the stage of developing those relationships were less able to build the foundations during the pandemic (in part due to the altered priorities of community organisations at the start of the pandemic, and also because it was less possible to go to meet people within their contexts). This speaks to the long-term nature of engagement, particularly with groups who traditionally have not been involved with universities:

Where there were strong existing relationships the work has mostly successfully migrated to online meetings, but our public involvement team's capacity to reach out and link with new people and groups has been limited. For some members of the public online meetings are actually more accessible, and a colleague's work with young people has flourished online. However, responding to the need to reach out to more diverse groups and communities is more limited. (Survey)

I think unless you have really established relationships with groups, then I think it's a hard time to start building relationships. (Int 98)

Reflecting on the impact of the pandemic, some respondents noted a significant shift in how their institution understood and approached relationships with the community. It will be interesting to see how long lasting this shift in mind-set proves to be:

I think that's something that a few people have reported that they've been able to really handover a bit of control and the university has recognised much more how important that



is that we are responsive to community needs rather than sort of projects coming from us and trying to bring in partners. (Int 12)

REFLECTIONS

The Covid-19 pandemic has opened up opportunities for innovation – most notably in the role of digital engagement but also in hyper-local approaches, both opening up new ways of reaching and interacting with publics. These practices have much to contribute to PE with research practice. However there are important considerations for universities wishing to capitalise on this work. We have highlighted four key insights to inform future work.

VALUING LONG TERM ENGAGEMENT

The research revealed that many universities default engagement setting is ‘dissemination’: telling rather than listening and connecting. This coupled with the trend to use attendee numbers as a proxy for value, could lead universities to invest in this style of activity at the expense of everything else.

However, where universities invested in more open and responsive interactions, there was palpable mutual benefit. The stresses placed on communities by the pandemic brought into the spotlight the need for more responsive modes of engagement. PEPs with expertise in community engagement were able to demonstrate the value of such long-term, committed approaches to collaboration and partnership working. The increasing focus on ‘civic’ responsibility provides a useful platform to consolidate the lessons learned during the pandemic, and to ensure these practices are built into future institutional strategy.

THE ROLE OF DIGITAL ENGAGEMENT

There was a clear sense that whilst digital engagement needed to be embraced as a key methodology for engagement, it should not be the only approach. PEPs were keen to cherish the new publics who could now access engagement opportunities, but recognised that online practices were still exclusive in many ways. In addition, PEPs recognised that more could be done to improve digital engagement practices, to embrace more inclusive ways of working.



Hybrid programmes of activity, which wove together the best of digital and the best of face-to-face elements emerged as a potential way forward. This approach was favoured over hybrid events, the distinction being that hybrid programmes would have different elements of a programme of activity done in different ways, whilst hybrid events would try to do online and face to face synchronously.

SKILLS AND RESOURCES

All forms of PE require skills and understanding to do well. The emerging field of digital PE with research, which was under-developed for many universities, requires new learning, new skills, and the use of new platforms and approaches. There is an opportunity to share current practices within the sector, as well as learn from the substantial expertise outside of the sector and research into online engagement.

While costs associated with face-to-face events were reduced when moving online, the real costs associated with developing an effective online approach, including the need for skilled facilitation, the importance of marketing, and production skills for online content, need to be taken into account. Given the necessity of embracing both digital and physical engagement, there is a need for universities to consider how they will resource this appropriately, critically reflecting on the purposes of their engagement work and the publics that they seek to engage, and resourcing the necessary staff and infrastructure to deliver their work.

COMMUNICATION AND ENGAGEMENT

The relationship between communications and engagement has not always been straight forward. Many PEPs work within Marketing and Communications departments; some have responsibility for both communications and engagement; and others have little relationship with communications teams.

The Covid-19 pandemic has encouraged many institutions to better integrate their communications and engagement work – recognising the importance of both to delivering social outcomes, and navigating through the challenges posed by the pandemic. Whilst the purposes of university communications are distinct from the purposes of public engagement, there are clear overlaps that could be better mobilised for social good, as explored in the reflections in chapter 1.



Chapter 3: The Nature of PEP roles

The data tells a compelling story about the nature of the PEP role. It illuminates the quality of expertise, and creativity of PEPs working across the sector, the challenges based on how these roles are funded and valued, the institutional contexts where engagement happens, and the inside-outside nature of being at the interface of community and institution. All of these were thrown into sharp relief by the impact of Covid-19.

FRAMING REMARKS: THE LIVED EXPERIENCE OF PEPS DURING LOCKDOWN

This chapter explores several specific themes that arose out of the data, which illuminate the experiences of PEPs, and the tensions they have needed to navigate. Each of these intersect with the themes already explored, concerning the nature of engagement, and universities' commitment to PE. PEPs reflections on their experiences during lockdown repeatedly returned to these four topics:

- **Responsibility and relationships:** PEP's typically work with many different collaborators and contacts inside and outside their HEIs, but the pandemic caused many PEPs to reflect that their key relationships were with external partners, researchers and senior leaders. PEPs experienced very different levels of access to these three groups during the pandemic, significantly impacting on the effectiveness of their work.
- **Wellbeing:** sitting at the interface between communities and colleagues, all of whom were being impacted by the pandemic, had an impact on the wellbeing of PEPs. Engagement, done well, requires empathy and understanding, but for many PEPs these emotional antennae, so critical to their effectiveness, were overwhelmed with what was happening.
- **Visibility and value:** the extent to which PEPs were recognised for the skills and experiences they had, and the value placed on these roles during the pandemic.
- **PEP roles in practice:** the data speaks of the importance of informal conversations and ad-hoc meetings to the ways that PEPs work within their institutions. The pandemic closed down these informal spaces, and it could be difficult to find alternative opportunities for engagement with colleagues, with more formal internal meetings often not providing the space needed for these necessary conversations.

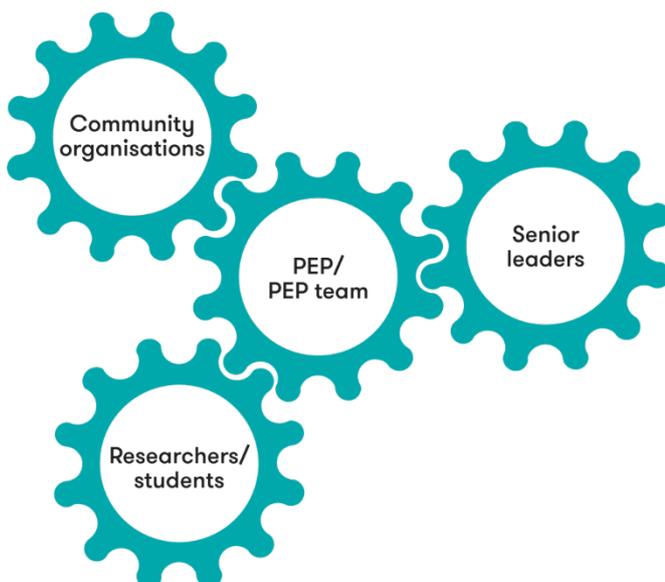


CRITICAL RELATIONSHIPS

Within the data, three types of relationships for PEPs were consistently mentioned, the health of which were critical in developing effective work during the pandemic:

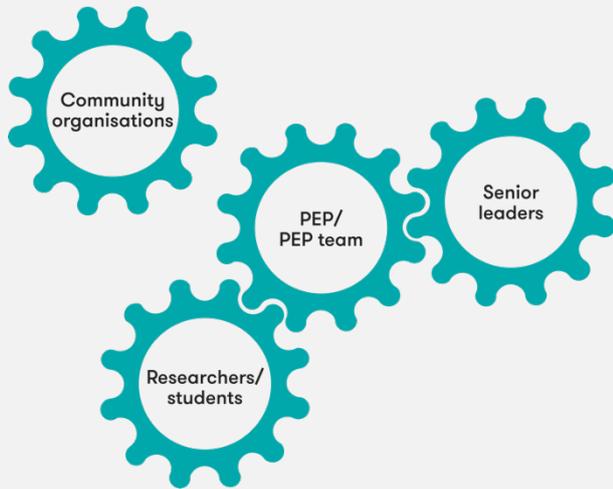
- **Researchers:** most of the PEPs who took part in the research were working with and alongside academics. The challenges faced by academics were often reflected on by PEPs.
- **Community organisations:** For those PEPs whose work saw them broker partnerships with community organisations, cultural organisations, charities, schools, and other groups, the challenges faced by these partners were often cited.
- **Senior HE managers:** There were some heartening reflections on leaders who recognised the value and challenges of engagement during Covid-19, and who were effective at supporting the public engagement staff. However, there were some senior managers for whom engagement was no longer a priority, which had a significant knock-on effect on PEPs.

The schematic below offers a way of thinking about how these tensions and opportunities played out throughout the pandemic. The data spoke convincingly of these three important stakeholder groups for PEPs, and the proximity of these relationships had a significant impact on their effectiveness and mental wellbeing during the pandemic.

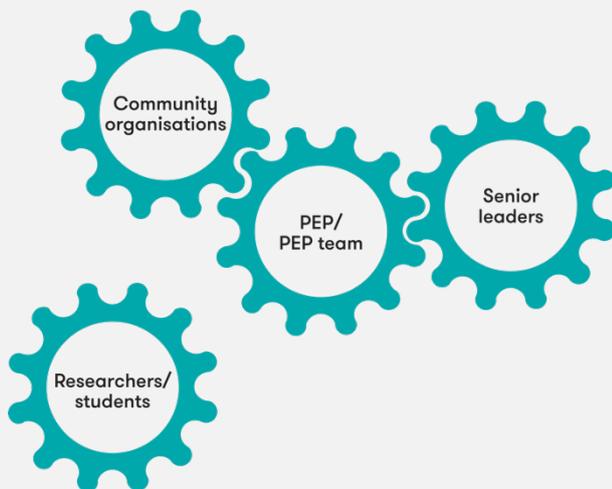


For really effective practice, these three types of relationship needed to be in balance as shown in the diagram. This enabled effective engagement to be mobilised, with the opportunities to tune into the needs of community organisations and researchers to design effective and mutually beneficial programmes, whilst being supported by senior HE leaders. It also enabled the learning from the various interactions to inform the institution's response to the pandemic within their place.

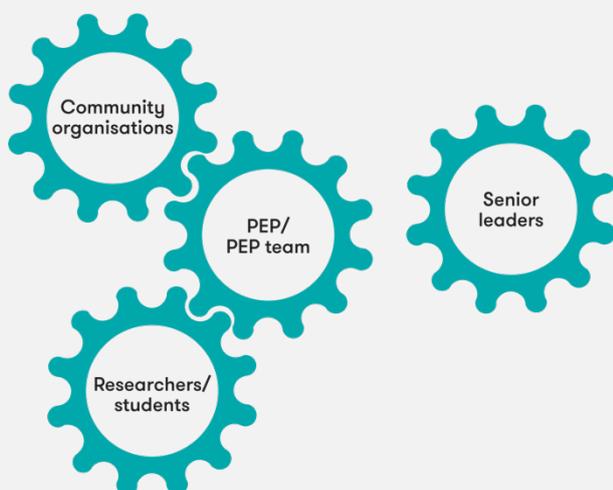
An unequal balance across the three stakeholder groups could lead to some very specific tensions, detailed in the following table.



PEPs at institutions where no strategic relationships with community organisations and other partners existed discovered that developing such partnerships difficult was difficult during the pandemic. Many organisations had moved to online working, and often had different priorities. Taking time to develop new approaches was not always possible.



For PEPs who had less close contact with their researchers, mainly due to the fact most of this contact was usually in the informal ad-hoc meetings, developing these relationships during lockdown could prove challenging. Whilst some experienced a flux of early career researchers keen to get involved, others found it difficult to engage researchers at all.



A lack of proximity to decision making within the institution could cause some significant challenges for PEPs. When close relationships with the community led to insights that could not be acted on, because of a lack of engagement with the institution's senior staff, PEPs felt compromised in their ability to do their roles, but also carried the responsibility of the institution in not supporting local people effectively.



The following sections explore the challenges that PEPs perceived from these groups, and their role in navigating this complexity.

RESEARCHERS

The most frequently mentioned group was researchers and research students. There were repeated references to the pressure on academics and students, the workload issues, and the humanity of providing people with space to prioritise juggling work and family commitments in a time of great change. What is clear is that the pandemic offered up opportunities to engage for some researchers, but this was highly dependent on the relevance of their research to the rapidly evolving context; workload; availability of partners to engage; and the availability of resources.

Researchers are crucial to much of the engagement work supported by PEPs, and therefore their availability and capacity had a significant impact.

We didn't know which Academics were able to do engagement online, or wherever, because they had loads of other pressures on them, like; teaching was suddenly completely different, exams were all completely different. So, I felt like I didn't want to pressure researchers and academics to do stuff for me, as I felt I wasn't as important as the other things they were doing. (Focus Group, 22)

It was like getting blood out of stone to get anyone involved, which is understandable because people are, you know, just really worried that they're very behind [in] their research. So that's understandable. (Int 9)

[...] the realities are that good public involvement requires commitment by research staff and some degree of cultural change, depending on the aspiration of involvement. The pandemic has increased pressure on already stretched researchers and added a lot of additional Covid related work, plus a lot of additional hurdles to progressing with a range of health and social care research. This means that there is even less capacity for other staff, researchers/clinicians etc., to work with us - and in general we get the best results when researchers are fully engaged. (Survey)

And several referenced that there had been a significant change of priorities for researchers:



PE is always down the pecking order for some of our researchers, but the most notable difference has been that our more committed group of engaged researchers appears to have vanished! Access to the lab, and changes in our funding (we now know that our funding will not be extended beyond March 2023) have had a serious impact. Researchers have bigger fish to fry, and I can't blame them for prioritising other things. (Survey)

Before the pandemic there were already challenges for academics making time for PE, and the fact it was often seen as a 'nice to have', rather than an essential part of academic practice. PE can therefore be a practice reliant on labour at the edge of capacity. The pandemic exacerbated this.

The academics are so busy with online teaching and preparation as well as research, it is difficult to make demands on their time for engagement. (Survey)

Whilst many referenced their concern for academic workloads, others reflected that there was an increase in appetite for engagement from some groups. Indeed, throughout the pandemic, researchers' appetite and interest in engagement varied, depending on time available to think and plan, to train, and to participate. This often enabled researchers to develop a better understanding of the value of PE to their work. In part this was because some had more time available, and were able to take the opportunity to develop their engagement thinking. For others, it was the chance to reflect on the engagement work that they participated in; and for others, it related to the nature of their research and the need to involve publics in it.

[It is now] more obvious to researchers and public of how PE with diverse audiences can improve the quality of research (Survey).

The experience of researchers was clearly very different depending on their areas of work, and the ability to research under the constraints of lockdowns. Some researchers' work was thrown into the spotlight, with significant media and public attention, whilst others' work seemed less relevant in a time of a pandemic.

It's clear that during the Covid-19 crisis, health and safety considerations were more important than the commitment to educate the public about the [our work relating to] Climate and about technology to mitigate Climate change. (Survey)

For some colleagues whose work isn't directed related to Covid, it can be frustrating for them as that's where the attention is going. But for Arts colleagues, some of their work is vaguely linked to Covid but it is usually separate. (Focus Group, 26)



PhD students' studies were interrupted, and many took the opportunity to train in PE and participate in engagement opportunities. However, for some this enthusiasm was curtailed once their studies resumed, and the renewed focus was on completing the PhD within the time left, reflecting the issue that engagement is work often undertaken at the edge of capacity.

Paradoxically, some researchers here had more appetite and time for PE in the first 6 months and as they're getting back in their labs they're trying to play catch up, so they've not got as much time for PE. Especially PhD students who volunteer a lot of their time, are on a fixed timescale to get their PhD work done so already confirmed they're not doing PE once back in the lab. (Focus Group, 37)

The researchers being out of the labs for a while with spare time then took on some PE training that is run centrally. [There were] two camps, some were happy to help but will abandon [PE] once they get back into the lab to finish their PhD, and others coming out with a deep understanding of PE and the wider landscape, and why it matters. (Focus Group, 15)

Finally, PEPs reflected on the impact on the arts sector, and the impact that this had on the engagement work that was possible.

It has been hard to carry on with the arts sector because so many staff have been furloughed and maintaining PE has been difficult. We held a seminar on how museums have converted to online and we had a fantastic uptake and lots of people are looking forward to working with us when they get back. With the mental health aspects, that sits so well with the Arts communities and they have continued adapting and getting involved in loads of community projects so they haven't stopped. (Focus Group, 9)

[Arts researchers]...often have an extra level of resilience, because traditionally, there hasn't been the funding there or the infrastructure to support engagement so they just carried on. I've tried to frame that their work and engagement is really important to support people in a different way right now. It helps people in so many ways. [...] Something we've been trying to do is link funders who have little to do with Covid to the Arts sector and people that have been significantly affected through this time, and that is just as important as explaining what epidemiology is. It's taken time, but I believe it's worked for colleagues and made a difference. (Focus Group, 26)



COMMUNITY ORGANISATIONS (SCHOOLS, PARTNERS, ETC)

Many of the PEPs were working with local community organisations including community groups, schools, patient groups, charities etc. These groups are a critical part of the engagement ecosystem. The impact on community organisations was referenced by some respondents to the survey and was a cause of significant concern⁴². Some made no reference to partners at all, focusing more on the personal and institutional impacts.

Challenges ranged from partner organisations' staff being put on furlough; an increased demand for community organisations' services meaning they did not have time to engage with the university; impacts on normal income streams leading to reductions in funding; and the shared experience of living under lockdown. For some, the expectation of community organisations as to how the university should or could help was challenging:

Most of the community groups we were working with before Covid-19 didn't have the capacity to continue engaging with us during the pandemic. On some occasions we were able to offer them some support, but on those that there wasn't anything we could do we had to keep in touch and wait till they were ready to engage with us again. We did manage to keep working with a couple of groups though either online or through posting them material. (Survey)

Teachers are very busy and have lots of curriculum to catch up on so it has been difficult to engage with them. (Survey)

Working with partners who are on furlough and under stress has made engagement with research more challenging (e.g. with local libraries and projects with teachers). They are dealing with understanding the ever changing rules and battling to keep running this means their ability to continue working on projects is limited (even though they want to continue). People and partners seem extremely stressed and the admin load for everyone has increased (emails, risk assessments, reading of news and interpretation of guidelines). (Survey)

⁴² 23 respondents cited 'challenges faced by the 'as their response to the question 'From the following, what do you feel have been the biggest challenges that you have experienced with your PEP work during the Covid-19 pandemic?' (Maximum 3 responses). You can see the full response to this question in [PEP Insights Research Survey Report](#), which details the outputs from the survey.



Some charities have seen their income streams dry up overnight with the closure of charity shops and cancellation of fun runs etc, and their staff have been furloughed and thus not been contactable - whereas others have seen the needs for their services sky rocket (such as Foodbanks). In either case, the last thing on their minds has been to contact me with their research needs [...]. (Survey)

PEPs reflected, once again, that they needed to be sensitive to the context, and not put undue pressure on partners who had more pressing things to attend to. This reflects a lot of the hidden emotional labour undertaken by PEPs in managing complex relationships:

So, the [PE] strategy is very much based on reaching traditionally underserved audiences, and doing it in a very personal face-to-face way. So automatically they were the kind of partners who work with the extremely clinically vulnerable, or partners who work in communities of areas of high, multiple deprivation. So, we kind of had to let them, to a large extent, let them deal with their really immediate, really life-shattering needs at that time. And we kind of said, we're here to do stuff. (Focus Group, 36)

Despite the challenges, PEPs reflected positively on how they had managed to maintain relationships throughout the pandemic. However, as referenced earlier, there were concerns about who was being served by the university, and who was being left out.

I've seen a lot of people who work with PE, some of the external organisations, community representatives who have struggled during this time and who rely heavily on university time, funding and links who will be affected. Communities affected by this are not receiving the PE we normally put out. It is only the groups we talk to and not the people beyond, and these groups don't search for PE, they may not know they're missing out, but I think they are. (Focus Group, 8)

SENIOR HE LEADERS

For PEPs whose senior leaders were absent from discussions, there were significant challenges to move the work forward. For many the senior leaders were focused on addressing the immediate challenge of the pandemic, and PE became side-lined.



PEPs were concerned that these decisions undermined the importance of the work that they were doing:

But I was concerned about the message that it sent out, so you know, with posts being about culture change and seeing engagement as important and then, you know, the very first thing to happen when times got tough is that they pulled us out as kind of non-essential. So I think that didn't send a great message to people about doing engagement, so I think there will have been longer term consequences. (Int 12)

For some, distance from senior leaders had a detrimental effect on the work that PEPs were doing, and a feeling of disconnect with decisions being made:

I think PE where I am has always been in danger of being side lined as a vanity project. I am concerned senior leaders don't understand the relevance of it. (Focus Group, 26)

[There has been a] change to the narrative about how and what we are funding and supporting - which has come from senior management at an institutional level and has not been informed by those of us working on the ground. PE has become more dispersed as individuals, teams and departments respond to the new context. Lack of consultation with PE staff because of Covid-19 pressures has led many in [the] team to feel disenfranchised and disconnected. (Survey)

Nobody at a higher level has asked me about how different ways of working impact on time. (Survey)

This disconnect is echoed in some of the hopes shared by PEPs, for example a desire to see PEPs integrated into senior management structures:

PE needs to be a core function with proper leadership development. PE managers need to be within senior management structures. Actions need to be supported by evidence to give PE programmes more credibility. PE is seen as a low-status role - this needs to change if any significant institutional change is to occur. (Survey)

Whilst others reflected that it was a challenge to convince senior management about the value of engagement in the context of a pandemic:



I think the third challenge was also convincing senior management that public and community engagement should remain a priority during the pandemic. But actually our senior management realized early on that because we have a lot of health staff moving on to the front line, because our halls of residence were being used for homeless people, which was, you know, viewed extraordinarily positively locally, that actually we were still doing public and community engagement and we needed to recognize that. (Int 54)

For those who were able to engage with their senior leaders, the story is very different. Some found the pandemic had opened up a space to engage more fully with senior leaders, and develop more effective approaches to engagement:

I have had very honest one-to-one conversations with senior leaders about the organisation's understanding and approach to PE which I don't think would have happened otherwise. It seems that the change makers are on the same page, which is good, but we need to work out a way to create the change in approach in an inclusive and positive way. (Survey)

Due to lockdown and a new member of our Senior Management Team (SMT) people have more time for discussion and to offer support, I have made progress in driving the public engagement agenda, and now feel more motivated. (Survey, practice role changed)

Some things have been made easier, such as access to more senior colleagues (they are more available for a quick Zoom than for an in-person meeting and open to being approached) and some things have been made harder, such as keeping track of what researchers are working on and new projects that are coming up, in part due to not having the more informal conversations that arise in an office environment. (Survey)

Others were pleased to see that support translating into enabling the work that PEPs were doing:

[Our academic lead for public engagement] is a very, very engaged researcher herself and is always encouraging us to do whatever we can basically. And then within the Centre itself, the senior management team has been very good at trying to help us get in contact with researchers and encourage researchers to still get engaged over this Covid time. And even just line managers being wonderful people. It's been very helpful to get that encouragement from your higher-up staff. (Int 23)



And the role of leaders in raising the profile of the work PEPs were involved in was referenced by several people:

I have had a new line manager who is approaching it differently from my previous manager as they want to promote what I'm doing higher-up, to get it to the Vice-Chancellor to see what you're doing. (Focus Group, 22)

What was clear from the data was how the access to and support from senior leaders had a material effect on the role that PEPs were able to play within the context of the pandemic, and how they were valued and supported.

WELLBEING

The emotional impact of the pandemic and associated lockdowns is hard to gauge, and the effect on mental wellbeing has been, and will continue to be, significant. The data uncovers that for some, the emotional impact of the pandemic was exacerbated due to the nature of the PEP role. Whilst this was experienced differently by those contributing to the research, it is important to highlight the tensions and pressures that resulted for many PEPs, and to consider the implications for how PEPs are supported. The reflections of PEPs hints at a significant emotional labour of working at the boundaries, of managing the relationships between researchers, senior leaders and community organisations, and of being seen to have responsibility for certain aspects of universities' work, but not having the authority to act. The impact on many PEPs was profound.

MANY PEPS EXPERIENCED FEELINGS OF GUILT

In some cases this was due to the fact that they were the interface between the university and local communities, and were rightly concerned about the impact on their partners; for others it was concern for researchers and other staff who were part of the engagement ecosystem, whose workloads increased dramatically; for others a concern for research students, many of who did not have access to the lab, or their normal support mechanisms, which had impacts on their wellbeing and a lack of support had associated impacts on wellbeing; for others it was the sense that the work they were able to do was not contributing to addressing the crisis:



As soon as lockdown happened my workload dropped dramatically and I felt guilty I wasn't working at 100% so running around looking for things to do. Working more strategically would have made my life easier down the line. (Focus Group, 29)

I felt guilty quite a lot of the time and that PE was not a big priority in the face of a pandemic and could I be using my skills to support others, which I agreed was more of a priority. (Focus Group, 39)

MANY PEPS BECAME ISOLATED

As referenced earlier, engagement work is often done in the informal spaces around meetings, but lockdown meant these spaces rapidly vanished. As universities tried to respond to the pandemic, some PEPs felt there was little opportunity to engage with the wider staff of the university. There was a sense that many PEPs felt really isolated from their colleagues during this time:

[...] public engagement professionals can often live in a very lonely place. (Int 19)

SOME PEPS WERE SIDE-LINED BY THE UNIVERSITY

Some of the survey respondents reflected that their skills were not used by the university in response to the pandemic. There was a sense that there were opportunities to help that were not opened up to the PEPs, which added to their sense of guilt and isolation.

PEPS FELT THE RESPONSIBILITY OF BEING AT THE INTERFACE BETWEEN UNIVERSITY STAFF AND STUDENTS AND COMMUNITIES

It was clear from the research that PEPs often took responsibility for the wellbeing of others. The empathy shown in many of the responses indicates a deep valuing of communities, publics, researchers, and colleagues, and a desire to not add any additional pressure. In some cases this was experienced as a significant burden. Given the connectedness of PEPs across the institution, they often saw the stress playing out in people's lives:

[...] often the public engagement teams mop up people's emotions, you know in crisis, we often get the rants or the, you know, the display of stress that they haven't been able to put anywhere else. But that's always been the case. Just because of the way we work probably.



We're probably more open and collaborative so that people can talk, but that hasn't got worse necessarily, but we certainly see people under great stress, in other areas of [the] institution and elsewhere, and just being very, very tired. (Int 2)

PEPS OFTEN PUT OTHERS FIRST

PEPs reflected on their own mental health issues that were exacerbated through the crisis. The responsibility taken by PEPs to care for others, sometimes meant that they did not care for themselves well:

We're the type of community that is good at supporting others, but not ourselves, and we need to face this. (Focus Group, 28)

VISIBILITY

PEPs reflected on the visibility of their work to colleagues and senior leaders. They reflected on how the work of PEPs is often invisible, in that they act as catalysts and support others to do effective engagement work. In some cases, the more effective PEPs were at their role, the less clear it was to senior leaders and academics the value that they had contributed:

One of the first things I was told when I came into post is 'You don't take credit. Publicly we give credit in this team, but we don't take it outside. Academics and students get credit, but we're under the radar'. It was ok advice back then, but not now. (Focus Group, 17)

In part this is exacerbated by the assumption by PEPs that excellent work would be recognised without prompting. The pandemic helped PEPs realise that they needed to be more prepared to share what they were doing:

I think this whole period has been a bit of a wakeup call in terms of being much more proactive, being much more visible and not just assuming because you do really good work, people will see and know that. (Int 98)

There was a sense from some that their roles and skill set were not understood by others in the university, including those making decisions:



I naively thought 'well someone will ask me to help', but we just got left to get on with it, pretty much what happens normally. There was less oversight, and we dealt with it and worked with our PE officers across the university, went to PEP meetings⁴³, but I feel we could have helped more. It highlighted to me a fundamental lack of understanding about what our jobs entail and what we have to offer. (Focus Group, 39)

Our central comms team wanted people with particular skills and my manager said that's what we do already. So the lack of communication between the teams means they are unaware of how we can help and we were ready to step into the roles. (Focus Group, 6)

This lack of visibility contributed to decisions being made about if and how PEPs' work needed to be continued in the context of a pandemic, with a small number of PEPs reflecting how they had been moved to other roles within their institution. Whilst this was positive experience for the majority of those moved, some found the move really painful:

Post-lockdown, everything shut down and then about a month later, my faculty decided we couldn't do public engagement because we couldn't go to the public, so they asked me to move sideways and do a different job for the year covering maternity leave. In my 18 years with this institution it was the worst 9 months of my professional life. (Focus Group, 12)

14 of the survey respondents were put on furlough. On reflecting on these decisions, some PEPs said it was because their role was not perceived to be possible in the light of the pandemic, others as a practical step to enable them to care for their families:

Placed on furlough for 6 weeks from May - June 2020. Then returned part-time furlough (of a part-time role) 'til September as that is when schools returned. Employer mainly put staff with caring responsibilities on furlough so my team that I manage (who don't have children) were not furloughed. (Survey)

So, I wasn't furloughed at the beginning and I was quite shocked to be asked to be furloughed because when I was asked to be furloughed it was when I had made this massive effort to try and get things working again and to get things online and I had all

⁴³ PEP meetings were held by the NCCPE on a fortnightly basis from April 2021 until September 2021, and then on a monthly basis thereafter.



that activity ready to deliver. I was so shocked because I thought “Now?! When I've built it all up?!” And at first I resisted, I said “Look at all this! I can't go off now”. (Int 34)

However, for the majority, who remained in their roles, many referenced how their work had been made more visible in the context of the pandemic, with senior staff taking more of an interest:

We are in a relatively small centre, it's easier for me to communicate to our Directors what we've been doing, and they appreciate PE more because of how it's adapted to this [situation]. (Focus Group, 8)

And so I think we're much higher profile as a result of this [situation], which is fabulous. And it's come from challenge, you know, from the cancelling of the festival. It's also come from an understanding of the skills we bring and the skills we have as Public Engagement Professionals to work across lots of different groups of people. [...] I've had like, a lot of little successes of PI's coming to me when they're writing their fellowship, because they like, they value my opinion. So I think I've managed to embed myself in the Centre, even though I haven't been there. (Int 98)

Whilst the majority of comments relating to the theme of visibility were related to the PEPs, there were several comments about the visibility of engagement within university systems. The informality of much of the business of PE, and the lack of systems and processes that explicitly support engagement, meant that engagement could become invisible in a time of extreme change:

Also just little things like the institution not having a code for PE so something as administrative as that can stop you accessing money, frustrating. So having the conversation with the researchers, working with them to help them understand PE and cost it into proposals, getting them on board as the advocates as they become more senior, PE will be embedded and we should get more buy-in and support from our organisations. (Focus Group,39)

It raises the importance of embedding engagement into the processes as well as the principles of an institution, to enable effective ways of working.



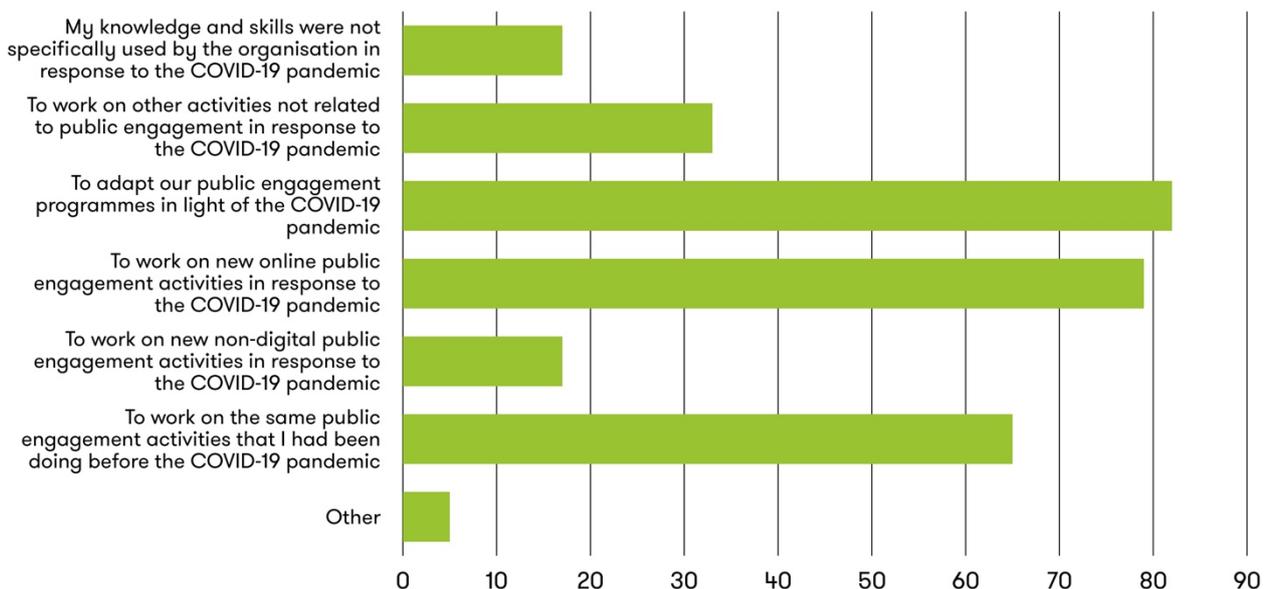
VALUE

Related to visibility is how the expertise of PEPs is valued in their institutions. PEPs reflected that they were keen to see the value of their work being appreciated, and understood:

I hope that there is recognition of the real value that public engagement professionals and our roles have been able to provide to the universities and to our partners and to the communities that need us [...] I hope that we're not seen as being a luxury and that there's not this sort of thinking that in these tough times, we have to focus on the essentials and engagement isn't one of those. I hope that we will be seen as a bit more essential and I keep thinking of like, a quote being written down and saying 'we add value!' (Int 12)

To explore this further, we invited survey respondents to answer the following question: **How were your knowledge and skills used by the organisation you work with/for in response to the Covid-19 pandemic? (Select as many as applicable).** The results are shown in the graph below.

How were your knowledge and skills used by the organisation you work with/for in response to the Covid-19 pandemic?



Of the options given, a significant number said that their skills were used to adapt their engagement programme and/ or to work on new online PE activities in response to the pandemic. Just over half of the respondents indicated they were working on the same PE activities that they

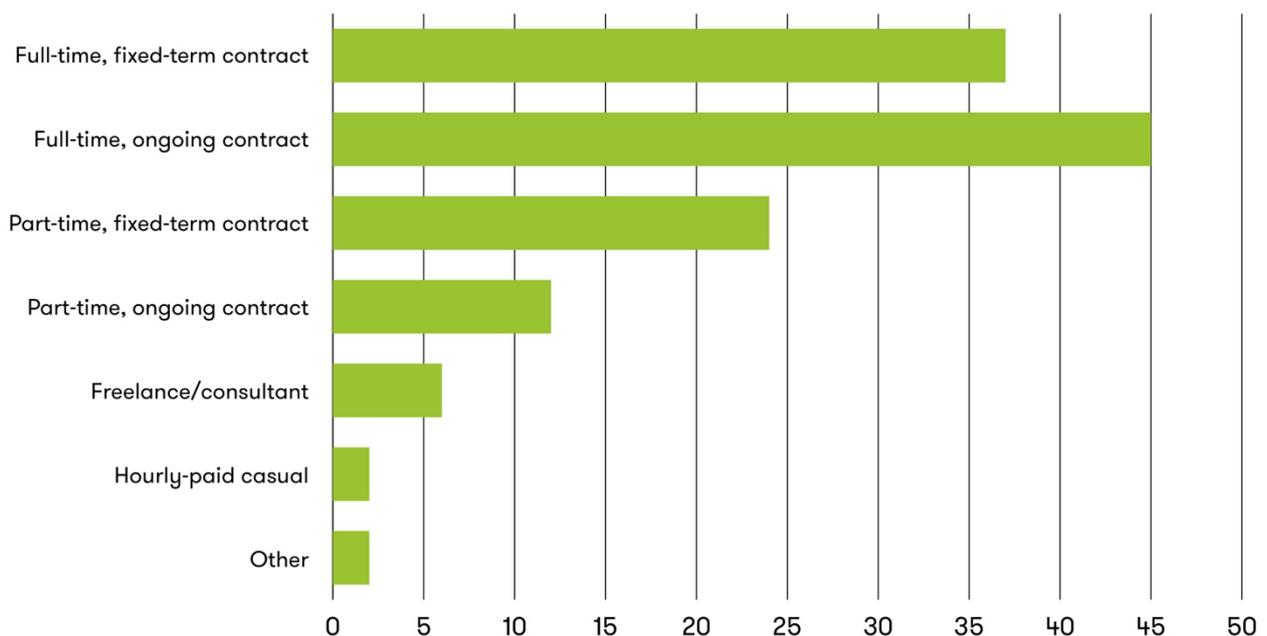


had been doing before the pandemic. 33 of the respondents had also been using their skills to do other activities that were not related to PE, with a further 17 saying that their knowledge and skills had not been specifically used by the organisation during this time.

The data suggests that for the majority of PEPs, their skills and knowledge were usefully employed during the pandemic, and that for many their work became more visible. However, it also illustrates how this is not consistent across the sector, with some PEPs feeling that they were not valued for the work they were doing.

The valuing of PEPs was also linked to the precarity of many PEPs working across the sector. Whilst there are a significant number of permanent contracts, before March 2020 around half of the survey respondents (61) were on fixed-term contracts, often linked to external funding and a further 57 were on continuing contracts.

Please tell us about the nature of your employment in your main PEP role before the UK national lockdown, which started on 23 March 2020



Those working in institutions committed to PE were more often on ongoing contracts, funded by the university. Whilst PEPs in these roles were still having to make the case for funding, the commitment by the organisation meant that they could dedicate time to developing and sustaining partnership working; and evaluating and reflecting on the work that they were doing.



For example, the job where I've had security is when the engagement team is funded directly by the university, they fund the central pot, the team is four people on permanent contracts, they've got awards for their engagement, it's recognised as one of the best universities for it and I don't think that is a coincidence. (Focus Group, 8)

However, there is a critical issue relating to the short-term nature of contracts and funding, which is undermining the quality of the work being undertaken and undermining the value of PEPs to the engagement work of an institution.

Also, short-term contracts and short-term funding of PE is a huge problem and that is something that should be addressed, because I'm not sure we have the resources to commit to meaningful PE, which I don't want to do in a poor way. (Focus Group, 39)

Overall, if the organisations lose these people, they lose this expertise that allowed them to pivot their offer, meet strategic needs, they lose the networks and connections. (Focus Group, 36)

For those who were not on permanent contracts, the additional stress relating to whether contracts might or might not continue was evident:

My husband was immediately made a key worker and disappeared, I had my two primary school age children at home with me all the time and was expected to home school them and work. One week in I was also informally told my job was at risk - a change from about to be being offered a permanent contract, the stress that added to our family was horrendous. (Survey)

27 survey respondents changed roles between March 2020 and January 2021. Many of these changes were the choice of the respondent. However, several referenced that the move was due to contracts ending. One of the respondents reflected that the timing of Covid-19 impacted their role:

I am on a 3-year rolling contract which was due for renewal at the end of July 2020 - bad timing for me, at the point when all universities were having a recruitment freeze! However, I essentially had two part-time jobs, and one of them was externally funded, so I've managed to retain that one. (Survey)



Whilst the value institutions placed on PEPs and their skills was mixed, there were also challenges relating to the agency of some PEPs to engage with their colleagues, and their ability to influence change within their context. Some felt pressurised to justify their value to the institution in terms of funding brought in. Others reflected on the wider funding landscape, where funder decisions played a critical role in how their universities perceived the value of engagement, and the work of PEPs, citing the removal of pathways to impact as a game changer in how engagement with research was perceived.

[...] if I could get external funding, I could prove that what I do is worthy. (Focus Group, 22)

A few months ago when UKRI removed the pathways to impact from grants, because they realized it wasn't working and they wanted to embed it more fully in the process, an academic at our university said 'Well that makes you look irrelevant doesn't it.' (Int 93)

So perhaps UKRI need to consider what it is they actually value. [...] Wellcome have made steps forward, but I think it can't be left to individuals in institutions saying 'please do it' because we don't have the authority to get that across. As well as funders it has to come from the VC, so our current lead still doesn't know what PE is even though we regularly repeat the message. (Focus Group, 29)

Again, this reflects the tensions inherent in what the role requires from a PEP, and if and how they have authority to undertake the necessary steps to be effective. The data again speaks of the mixed experiences of PEPs, with some being more valued in the context of a pandemic, and others feeling undervalued.

PEP ROLES IN PRACTICE

Participants in the research reflected that a lot of the work they did was through ad-hoc meetings, rather than official university structures. The data underlines that the economy of PE is dependent on personal relationships, developed through one-to-one meetings that happened on the boundaries, so called 'water cooler' conversations. The lack of these 'accidental' and 'pop into the office' opportunities undermined some respondent's ability to do their job. It raises questions about how much of the work of engagement is done in borrowed moments of time, rather than embedded into the official structures of the university.



On the downside it is more difficult when those "corridor chats" are no longer possible and you can't just nab someone informally in an important central service for two minutes to check out whether there might for example be on campus space to run a particular initiative next year etc. (Survey)

As much of my work is relational, online changes this e.g. quick opportunistic chats in the corridor to encourage someone to engage with a project & it is much harder to recruit as reliant on others' response/attending a meeting (particularly with UGs [undergraduates]). (Survey)

Whilst universities may be committed to engagement, the reality is that senior managers are not always recognising its value to their work, reinforcing the point made earlier about the vulnerability of PE support which isn't 'hard wired' into systems and processes:

It's showed for me that the communications channels are not great, decisions are being taken by senior management, documents written for funding, but no mention of PE. It happens when we're in the office, but I don't think they appreciate how much of our communication is informal, happening in the lift, queuing for coffee, when you have lunch with different groups to get a feel about what they're doing and you can drop hints about PE. (Focus Group, 39)

The move to more formal communication tools could get in the way of tuning into colleagues, and more efficient ways of working.

It is in some ways more challenging internally too - previously I was working alongside researchers which was extremely helpful for me in knowing the ins and outs of their work, when they are under pressure and being able to plan in engagement with them informally. Now, the communication needs to be direct via email/video call and formalises that relationship. It's much harder to just pick up on things as they happen when people are working in isolation. The admin load within the institution has increased too. Everything takes even longer than it did before. (Survey)

Relationship building is often cited as the main part of the PEP role, and although online provided the opportunity to engage with large numbers of people, the lack of opportunity for personal



relationship building was challenging. This emphasises feelings of isolation brought about by the move to home working:

Still, I think you know as public engagement people, we are friendly, chatty, you know, social people. And I think that suddenly being on our own, it has been quite challenging. You know, during this time we will have spoken to tens of thousands of people [...] it's about us, you know, building those relationships in person across the city, a bit of working with researchers one to one and then training, you know in a small group. So I think it has been out of character. (Int 98)

Another key finding relates to the fact that, for many, the lockdowns provided opportunities to step back and critically reflect on their practice. Some were able to use the time usually dedicated to supporting and delivering events, to do more strategic planning for their work. Whilst this is a positive outcome from the challenging context, it also suggests that the resourcing of PEPs is not adequate to cover all of the necessary aspects of their role.

Since working from home more - and since academic and professional services colleagues have also been working from home more - I have had more space to think strategically and envision what Faculty PCE could and should look like long term. I have also found that academic and PS colleagues who now have similar space to think are coming forward with more PCE ideas related to their research. (Survey)

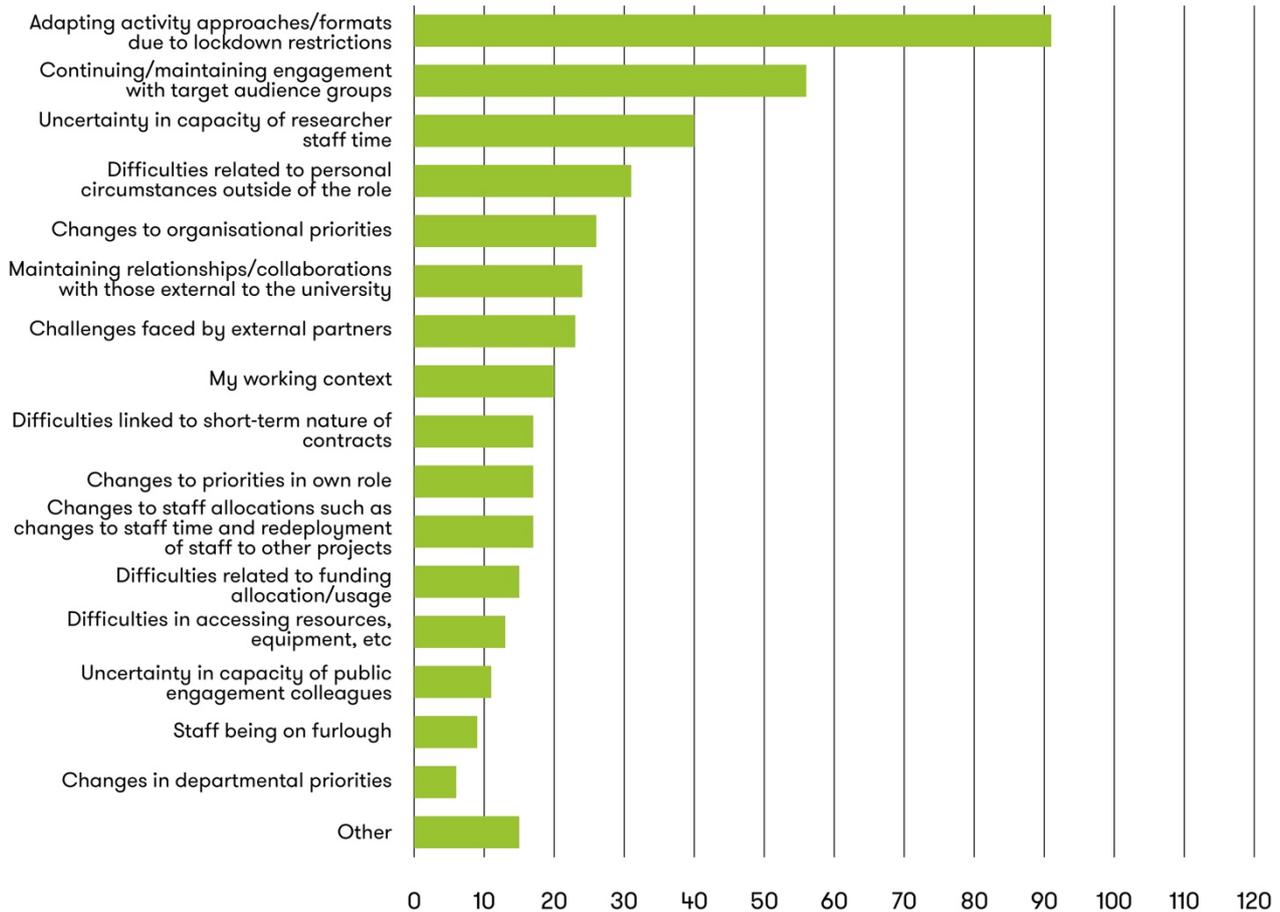
CHALLENGES

PEPs were invited to share what the biggest challenges they faced during the pandemic, and their responses are shown in the graph below.

Biggest challenges related to the need to adapt activities / formats due to lock down restrictions, continuing / maintaining engagement with target audience groups, and uncertainties in capacity of research staff time. These challenges are explored further in the following section of the report.



From the following, what do you feel have been the biggest challenges that you have experienced with your PE work during the COVID-19 pandemic?



REFLECTIONS

PEPs hold a lot of the relationships that are critical to PE. They work at the boundaries. As a consequence they look into the organisation and outside the organisation, in order to broker effective engagement. The specific pressures brought about by the pandemic highlighted some of the key issues faced by this group of professionals. These pressures included:

- Isolation
- Working at the edge of capacity
- Invisibility and hidden labour
- Emotional costs of being a PEP
- Responsibility, but not always with authority
- Sustaining relationships, often with limited resources or time



- A lack of necessary resource, forcing these roles into delivery rather than creating spaces for necessary reflection and planning

The pandemic has brought these pressures into stark relief and have confirmed the very significant evidence base that had already been established concerning the role of so-called ‘third space’ professionals in university settings. The implications for PEP wellbeing are profound, and echo many of the worrying trends identified in recent work, by Wellcome and others⁴⁴, to surface the more challenging aspects of research culture. To date, the work on research culture has not fully acknowledged the very particular stresses placed upon professional services staff. The findings of the PEP Insights research can hopefully be used to inform how future policies to improve research culture take fuller account of the challenges faced by staff in PEP roles.

⁴⁴ <https://wellcome.org/reports/what-researchers-think-about-research-culture>, <https://www.ukri.org/our-work/supporting-healthy-research-and-innovation-culture/research-and-innovation-culture/>



Chapter 4: Looking to the Future

We were keen to explore with PEPs how they understood the implications of the pandemic for future policy and practice. This chapter explores their hopes and suggestions for how these might be realised. Despite the many challenges faced, many respondents identified a number of reasons to be optimistic about the future of PE.

PEPs saw particularly significant opportunities in these three areas:

- **Inclusion:** The research has highlighted the need for universities to address inclusion in how they approach their engagement with the public. There were two issues at the heart of this. The first was digital exclusion, relating to who had the skills and access to participate in online engagement. It is worth noting that whilst inclusion considerations were usually audience facing, there were also challenges for some PEPs who lacked the resources necessary to participate online.

The second was focused on the need to be more thoughtful about approaches to engaging with those who are excluded due to the systemic issues, and the need for longer-term partnership building. PEPs felt that the pandemic had brought these issues much more firmly into focus in their institutions, creating opportunities to invest in new approaches to tackle them. The murder of George Floyd and the protests by the Black Lives Matter movement further emphasised the need for more effective approaches to engagement, and the role engagement could play a role in supporting universities in their work to address systemic racism and Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (ED&I).

- **The value of online approaches to engagement being more fully realised:** During the pandemic, people were developing greater understanding around the potential of online formats for engagement. As understanding and practice developed, and more thoughtful two-way engagement approaches were seen to be effective, PEPs were keen to see online engagement as a key part of their armoury. Many referenced hybrid programmes, where some of the interaction could take place face-to-face, and some online. There was a strong commitment to embracing the lessons learned during the pandemic to develop more embedded and integrated digital strategy and delivery.



- **Better support for engagement from funders and HE leaders:** That PEPs were keen to underline the importance of resourcing engagement appropriately is perhaps not surprising. In a context where resources are tight, and in light of the short-term nature of funding for PE, the system is vulnerable to policy changes. Many respondents felt that the impact of the pandemic had reinforced the ‘business case’ that can be made for long-term investment in PE. As institutions and funders regroup, there is an opportunity to make a very robust case for the urgency of investing properly in effective and sustained engagement with communities and publics.

LOOKING AHEAD

There was a lot of positive thinking about the future, despite the context of the pandemic. The most common focus for this optimism was the idea that PEPs, researchers, leaders, and communities were thinking more deeply about their engagement work, both in terms of the activities that they were doing, and the strategic approach they were taking:

But everyone's thinking a lot more deeply about the engagement that they're doing. I think we've had a lot of things taken away from us and a lot of things given to us and I think it's making everyone sit back and be like, actually, anything is possible... someone said at Engage⁴⁵ is that you know, we all thought that so many of the things that we were doing this year were impossible. (Int 45)

For some, there was more resource going into their work, and an interest in developing hybrid models (where in person interaction is combined with online engagement) for the engagement going forward:

Suddenly, we're going, actually this can be a really effective way and so this has given us time, we have a job description, a new job description, ready to go as soon as they say we can recruit, that will give us the skills. And I think this, I hate the word blended [...] but this blended model of engagement is something that has been a real positive that's come out of here. So I'm really excited. (Int 98)

⁴⁵ The NCCPE Engage conference is an international annual conference bringing PEPs, researchers, policy makers and organisations working with universities together to explore all aspects of engagement policy and practice ([link](#)).



where PE is understood as a key part of research, and where PEPs are valued for their skills and experiences in more thoughtful ways. For some respondents it could reflect a desire to see engagement deliver value to society.

FUTURE PRIORITIES FOR PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT

We invited survey respondents to identify where attention should focus in order to build on lessons learned during the pandemic and improve on support for PE within the HE sector. The options offered were informed by a recent report published by UCL and NCCPE, *The Engaged University - turning words into action*⁴⁶. Respondents were invited to consider the following opportunities and select the top three areas where development and support should be prioritised for the future of the PE sector. Respondents were also offered an 'other' option, and could supply free text answers.

- **Building trust and addressing equality, equity and inclusion:** addressing intersectionality and power, proactively researching new partners and audiences, putting people and values at the heart of the work.
- **Collaborative platforms:** creating social mobility partnerships, convening regional cross-organisational strategy groups, working inter-professionally, place-based strategies and plans, network building and social connectedness.
- **Data, evaluation and insights:** improving data capability in the sector (i.e. financial value of PE), activity mapping, influencing global rankings, building evaluation and monitoring into the sector.
- **Nurturing leadership and developing capability and talent:** developing leadership capacity and skills, encouraging systems leadership, working more across disciplinary silos, teams and organisations, and developing leadership academies.
- **Incubating new ways of working:** experimenting with placed-based approaches, adapting to digital spheres, investing in seed-funds/experiment funding, combining engagement with other activities (i.e. social enterprise), and diversifying funding sources.
- **Open and reflective environments:** more opportunities to practice engagement and learn from it, reflective team-based learnings, involving partners in feedback and development.

⁴⁶

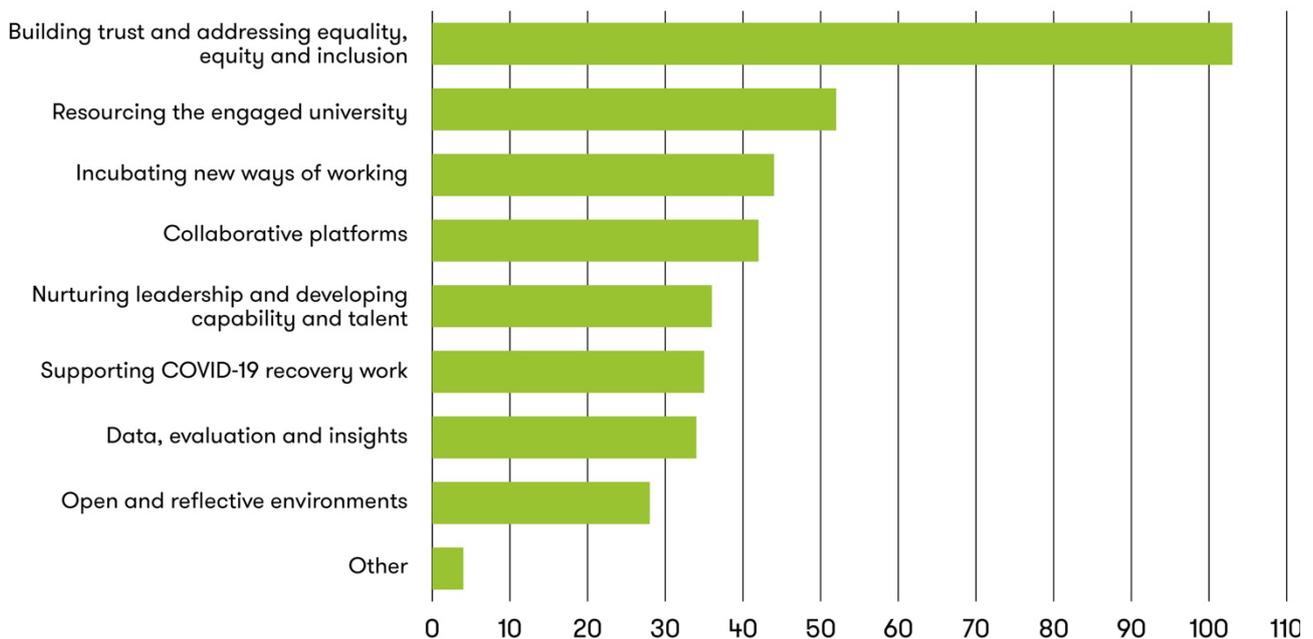
https://www.publicengagement.ac.uk/sites/default/files/publication/nccpe_the_engaged_university_report_aug20_v4_2.pdf



- **Resourcing the engaged university:** examining the balance between staff resource and programme resource, and core and external funding opportunities, ad-hoc resource deployment and strategic resource deployment.
- **Supporting Covid-19 recovery work:** community-driven programmes of support, enhanced support for engagement with policymakers, PEP-driven programmes and projects.

The results are shown in the graph below.

Of the options provided, which 3 are the priority?



As highlighted in the responses to the previous question, building trust and addressing equality, equity and inclusion was a priority for 103 of the respondents. 52 thought that resourcing the engaged university was a priority, with incubating new ways of working and collaborative platforms being prioritised by just over a third of the respondents.

In inviting comments about these choices, some interesting reflections emerged about what mattered to the PEPs being surveyed. Of the 34 comments shared, 5 emphasised the need for inclusive practice:



EEI⁴⁷ is so fundamental and we have to make progress here, it's a crying shame that this hasn't effectively been addressed by the sector still. (Survey)

Embedding accessibility and inclusion in our work is the most important first step as any work we do from then on will be better and more responsive to the needs of everyone if we are diverse and inclusive as a sector. Supporting local communities is also vitally important as this is a pressing need that affects all of us. (Survey)

Some called for a radical shift in practice, with a recognition of the dispersed and diverse places where engagement happens, the need to recognise those with lived experience, and sufficient capacity for long-term working:

All universities have significant work to do on building trust and addressing equity and inclusion. These values have very often been at the heart of public and community engagement practice, but this has not necessarily been taken on by the HE sector. The 'PE sector' within the HE sector is too often a talking shop with the same voices and attempts to professionalise the sector are damaging to a desire to be more inclusive. How and where engagement is done within the HE sector is diverse and dispersed. We need to value more the experience of those of us who come into this sector from the very places we are often trying to reach - community and voluntary sector. We place value on leadership but not on lived experience. (Survey)

Increasing diversity and inclusion is the key challenge of public involvement and engagement work, and to do this we need to work in different ways [...] we need sufficient capacity in terms of staff and skill to invest in these activities which need a longer-term perspective. (Survey)

Resourcing the engaged university was reflected on by nine of the respondents, with a recognition that without this, other areas of practice could not be prioritised:

Without proper resourcing / funds - none of the other actions can happen. A high turnover of staff does not allow for long-term meaningful relationships to be made - which is at the heart of the other options I have selected. (Survey)

⁴⁷ Equality Equity and inclusion



With our University re-prioritising PCE⁴⁸ there will need to be some difficult conversations around what it will take to do things properly in terms of "resourcing the engaged university" in the current context of ever-decreasing funds. (Survey)

[...] I think resourcing the engaged university needs to happen - i.e. addressing funding, short-term nature of contracts/funding - needs to be addressed before we can fully and meaningfully commit to long-term, place-based relationships. (Survey)

Seven focused on the need for data and evaluation, suggesting that without this it was difficult to advocate for engaged ways of working.

I do feel that for PER⁴⁹ to truly be taken seriously, given resource and for it to become part of academic life we need more data on the impact of PER and more support to embed longer-term, strategic interventions/projects rather than one-off events and activities (the latter are often all that is possible due to the nature of PE funding and resourcing). (Survey)

It is fundamental to most development processes to have the means to gather and evaluate data which can tell us what has happened, what is happening and what is projected to happen; then any changes which we might make under the banner of improvement or economy can be evaluated for efficiency, effectiveness and focus on public good; this evaluation should include wider and longer-term social value [...](Survey)

And five referenced the need to focus on collaboration.

I think collaboration is key, looking outside of our sector to work with and learn from other organisations who are trying to reach the same people or who are already working with them.

SUGGESTIONS FOR STAKEHOLDERS

In addition to the options shared above, we were interested to explore the ideas PEPs had about how their hopes for PE might be realised. We specifically asked survey respondents to consider what funders, NCCPE and/ or other stakeholders could do to support the sector to achieve these

⁴⁸ Public and community engagement

⁴⁹ Public engagement with research



visions of the future. There were a range of suggestions. As before this data was themed, in order to explore where the main foci lay.

The majority of recommendations were for funders. Of the 54 comments made, 22 specifically referenced changes to funding. PEPs were keen to see funders bring more clarity as to how PE with research can be embedded into grants (8 comments), suggesting that better provision be made for funding community organisations and partners (3 comments), and that those receiving funding be held to account for delivering what was promised (9 comments). PEPs wanted to raise the issues linked to short-term funding, which sits at the heart of many of the challenges faced by those seeking to embed engagement within their institution (5 comments). They also wanted recognition that funding could be used to cover the costs of PEP time, valuing the expertise and relationship management undertaken, and its value to research (8 comments).

PE should be included in every research grant in a meaningful way, which is properly resourced (money) and staffed. If the application does not contain this it should be returned/rejected by the grant funder. At the mid-point and end of grant, there should be checks made to make sure that the proposed activities (or suitable high quality alternatives if contingencies have had to be put in place - but these should be fully explained) have been achieved. If not, money should be refunded to the funding agency (as would happen for research itself). (Survey)

Funding communities, charities and cultural organisations to lead PE with research supported by research partners. Challenging the balance of power. (Survey)

Fund PE staff TIME, as well as PE activities, events & resources, in order to facilitate PE relationship building & maintenance

Fund PE staff TIME in order to build trust and invest in addressing equality, equity and inclusion

Fund PE staff TIME in order to develop PE capability and leadership, provide career stability (i.e. shift away from FT [Fixed-term] contracts) and facilitate progression within a PE career. (Survey)

We also need resources for the background work. If COVID demonstrates anything it is that we need good relationships with diverse communities, and systematic easy access to services like translation so ensure our work is representative. Investment in relationship building is often only impactful in the long-term, and certainly we are seeing the impact of



lack of investment. The demand for demonstration of impact in the short-term preclude this kind of essential activity. (Survey)

Several referenced the need for funders to consider the precarity of contracts for research staff and PEPs and how this influenced the opportunity for long-term partnership development.

If possible, create partnerships which facilitate longer funding awards. A lot of postdocs and temporary impact staff are on a treadmill of contracts of 12 months or less. This might also encourage more diversity in the sector (precarity can be easier [to] weather if you have financial security from family, partners etc). (Survey)

Some PEPs touched on the infrastructure for engagement, and the role of funders and senior HE leaders in providing this:

Create spaces in which partnerships are possible (without questions of power and pressures from academia resulting in compromise when it comes to collaboration). (Survey)

Funding for improving/enhancing relevant digital technologies and platforms. Making that technology accessible and available much more widely for e.g. community groups, schools, student groups, charities, etc. (Survey)

Equality, diversity and inclusion was highlighted in several ways including the need to diversify who participates within research, the importance of developing sustained relationships with communities requiring funding support, the need to address inequalities in who has access to research funding, and understanding the contexts within which this work happens.

Funding/institutional commitment to permanent community roles was also recommended, to grow and maintain place-based partnerships.

Long-term commitment from funders to diversity of partnerships - the worry is that researchers will develop short-term relationships with i.e. BAME groups in response to funding streams, helicoptering in and out of communities and making them feel used or taken advantage of. (Survey)

Others focused on the lack of diversity in the engagement sector itself:



The PE sector needs to be more diverse - how can we work [to] diversify the people we work with if we are not addressing the lack of diversity in our sector? (Survey)

And the elephant in the room: why are the majority of PE professionals middle-class white women? What impact does this have on the sector and our collective credibility? (Survey)

Some of the comments referenced sector wide changes, where funders, NCCPE and other stakeholders play a significant role.

Evidence and evaluation was once again referenced as a key part of moving the sector on (9 comments).

An evidence based culture needs to be established, with clearer ideas about data organisation, collection and analysis; we need to distinguish between data that measures work content and performance, data that indicates effectiveness and data that indicates satisfaction (for service users and for staff) (Survey)

It's not fair to expect individuals to undertake that level of work [sector level evaluation], when really it's the funders and others (politicians) who are asking for the evidence. (Survey)

And there were suggestions about the need to share good practice to enable the sector to enhance the quality of engagement work being undertaken.

Eight PEPs referenced the need to continue sharing good practice, recognising the value of both celebrating great practice, learning from things that have gone badly, and the need to evidence the value of broader types of engagement to senior leaders.

Create more communities of practice, opportunities to share and to celebrate the amazing work that is being done. (Survey)

World behaves too competitively to support open and reflective environments. We need to share the bad without it being detrimental to our organisation's 'public image'. (Survey)

Curate and share clear examples of where public engagement has made research better or has led to positive outcomes - it's hard to convince senior leadership that there is value in



progressing our work to engagement with research when we are still mostly operating at the events and outreach stage and there are so few examples to draw on. (Survey)

The role of the NCCPE was highlighted, with suggestions that more could be done to make a case to senior leaders, and equip them to embed engagement within their institutions, and aligning this with relevant policy agendas.

NCCPE can support senior managers in understanding, developing and nurturing PE within their institutions, providing forums and evidence-based documentation. They can also broker between funders, government and institutions. (Survey)

There were also suggestions around building on the thought leadership and training undertaken by the NCCPE, as well as an interest in new award schemes.

NCCPE-sponsored institutional awards for PE activities that can be awarded to PEP professionals as well as academics i.e. "NCCPE PEPper of the Year at University of X for Y project" awarded at annual staff ceremonies to highlight PE as a "thing" that we do. (Survey)

REFLECTIONS

PEPs reflected a real excitement about the potential for engagement in the future, referencing new formats; new audiences; and new ways of developing effective approaches.

This belief in a positive future had several characteristics:

- Where inclusive practices that reflect the diversity of the UK are the norm.
- Where PEPs were recognised for their value to research, and funded appropriately.
- Where community organisations can be funded as part of grants, and recognised for their contributions.
- Where effort can be joined up to maximise the societal value of the investment.
- Where we have significant, robust evidence of the effectiveness of engagement that is compelling to those making decisions about it.



PEPs were keen to see universities and funders take the steps necessary to realise these positive futures, and were hopeful that this could make a positive contribution to recovery from the impacts of the pandemic.



Chapter 5: Acting on the research

The research sought to gain insights specifically from PEPs on their experiences of the pandemic in order to support PEPs, senior HE leaders, funders and the NCCPE to recognise the current state of the sector, and to respond effectively.

In this final chapter we identify four areas where we think attention could most usefully be focused in response to what the research has revealed. The table below identifies the key challenges which the research has highlighted, and a recommendation of how each challenge can be addressed.

The remainder of this chapter takes each challenge in turn, and fleshes out how it might be addressed. These suggestions build on the insights gleaned through the research, and draw on the collective experience and expertise of the PEP Research Insights team. It is our intention to use these as a stimulus to create some specific recommendations for the funders, senior university leaders, and PEPs.

FOUR KEY CHALLENGES

CHALLENGE	RESPONSE
<p>Addressing inequality and exclusion. PEPs were often at the frontline of their institution's responses to issues of exclusion. There was a recognition that more could be done to develop inclusive practices for engagement, and the challenges posed by short-term funding.</p>	<p>Scale up and consolidate promising practices The pandemic and other events in 2020 has highlighted the huge impact of inequality, and the potential of universities to play their part in addressing this. The research has revealed a range of promising engagement practices which urgently need scaling up, alongside a range of systemic issues that need collective action.</p>



Lack of clarity about what public engagement is, and its value to the sector.

This lack of clarity and strategic ‘grip’ was exposed by the pandemic in many HEIs and contributed to a number of the issues foregrounded in this research.

Bring clarity to complexity

Many institutions are still tentative about their commitment to PE and lack a clear strategy to guide their investment. There is an urgent need for institutions to clarify the scope and focus of their commitments in this area. This would be helped if there was clearer and more robust guidance from funders about their expectations.

Adequately resourcing our ambition.

The pandemic has placed enormous stresses on the resources of the HE sector. It has also highlighted the significant gains that can be brought by well-resourced engagement.

Resource effectively

There is no shortage of aspiration about the public role of universities. But resourcing often falls far short of need. The research has revealed how intensely that lack of resource impacts on the quality and scope of the work PEPs can realise, and the strain this places on people and projects. This gap between ambition and actual investment needs to be faced head on.

Clearly there are several factors at play here, not least the way funders support and resource engagement, and how institutions choose to resource it.

The relative invisibility of PEP expertise and experience.

The research has made clear the impact this has on staff wellbeing, and also how it leads to significant ‘missed opportunities’, with institutions failing to capitalise on the expertise of key staff.

Make the invisible visible

PEPs – in common with many other professional services staff – are often in marginal roles and their contribution is not clearly valued or understood. In the context of renewed interest in research culture, it is vital that steps are taken to address the effects of this, and to maximise the impact and influence of PEPs.



IDEAS FOR CHANGE



1. SCALE UP AND CONSOLIDATE PROMISING PRACTICES TO ADDRESS EXCLUSION:

Collectively

Given the systemic nature of exclusionary practices, there is a real sense that we need to work collectively to address them. PEPs reflected that we all need to play our role in addressing systemic racism and seeking to work in more inclusive ways.

Specifically, in relation to PE practice, collective action was needed to:

- Develop a greater understanding of who we are reaching collectively, and how and why.
- Building knowledge and skills in the sector to work alongside marginalised groups.
- Develop skills and capacity for developing more inclusive programming.
- Research the emerging profiles of what work and life will be like in the coming years, and how this will affect engagement.
- Embrace the potential of digital engagement, developing skills to ensure practices developed are as inclusive as possible, and ensuring this is complemented by other methodologies.

It was recognised that there also needs to be action to address the systemic issues within HE PE work:

- Ensuring recruitment of PEPs better reflect the diverse communities that they serve
- Supporting ways to include diverse communities in decision making about PE, and research priorities.
- Building on effective practices to include community representatives in grant assessment, staff recruitment.



- Drawing on the work of Common Cause⁵⁰ to inform our collective response.

Funders

PEPs with expertise in community engagement reflected on how the current ways of accessing funding did not allow for effective collaborative working to inform research priorities and directions. Suggestions included:

- Work with partner organisations based in diverse communities to create needs-based funding calls.
 - Make funding opportunities available that are focused on building mutual trust and relationships with diverse communities.
 - Consider funding schemes that are available for communities and intermediary groups within civil society.
- Consider changes to funding decision-making, for example
 - Include public and community representatives on funding panels (even if this means slightly changing *how* these processes have to be conducted to enable access).
- Have clearer expectations of those you fund
 - Develop "Community Payment Principles" which set a minimum expectation of how individuals have to cost payment for public time (such as Involve⁵¹).
 - Lobby and work with University Leaders to develop new standards for routes to payment to enable engagement activity.
 -
- Communicate what you are doing
 - Develop accessible and transparent approaches to communicating how funding priorities are set; and how funding decisions were made

⁵⁰ https://cpb-eu-w2.wpmucdn.com/blogs.bristol.ac.uk/dist/a/358/files/2018/09/CC_Enablers_Barriers_Poster_final-1f2iunj.pdf

⁵¹ <https://www.involve.org.uk/>



by panels so that publics can understand these approaches/decisions.

Senior HE leaders

PEPs recognised inclusion in the context of their institutions, and the need to address the challenges posed by the lack of diversity across the sector. They looked to university leaders to address these issues at an organisation level:

- Recognise the role of inclusive engagement practice, and the need to build on ED&I and champion diversity in recruitment of staff and students.
- Consider all aspects of work with communities, and facilitate access to university space and resources where appropriate, as part of the work with local community organisations.
- Prioritise inclusion of community voice/representation into university governance and decision-making processes.

PEPs also invited university leaders to take their engagement work seriously, and consider their role in their place.

- Champion PE with diverse groups and communities, responsive to societal needs and built on respect, trust, transparency and mutual benefit.
- Consider the institution's role in addressing inequalities within local areas and facilitate more collaborative approaches (e.g. health inequality research hubs between community groups, local health providers, researchers, students).

They also wanted to see senior leaders take practical steps to enable effective engagement work to happen.

- Support partnership development between university staff and community organisations.
- Make a commitment to developing mechanisms to pay for PE in a more transparent and more accessible way.
- Support the development of inclusive digital engagement practices, but support these as only one part of the range of practices needed.



NCCPE

PEPs saw the NCCPE as having two main roles: contributing understanding and insight to inform policy, at a national and university level and supporting capacity building for PEPs.

They were keen to see the current mechanisms offered by the NCCPE to support strategic change, be explicit about ED&I, for example:

- Include ED&I more explicitly in the Watermark processes.
- Research and develop effective ED&I strategies to promote with HEIs and PEPs.

They were also eager for the NCCPE to continue to offer practical support for PEPs:

- Support PEPs to harness and promote PE practice that works effectively alongside marginalised groups in mutually beneficial ways.
- Establish this as an ongoing 'theme' within Engage Conference-- inviting people to propose sessions and respond to it every year moving forwards, and capture/publish reflections from this after the event.
- Create a sub-PEP Together strand that focuses on discussing issues around ED&I at least quarterly. These sessions should be very action-focused by design.
- Build capacity and understanding around the role of digital engagement in supporting inclusion.

PEPs

PEPs reflected that they often had a deep understanding of their local context, and the communities alongside the university. They saw opportunities to contribute to the institution wide discussion and action relating to ED&I, but also recognised that they also had lots to learn.

There were three main things they thought could contribute to the inclusion agenda:

Developing their own understanding and skills:

- Build their knowledge base about ED&I issues in relation to their university and the communities it serves.



- Take opportunities to upskill their digital engagement skills.
- Upskill in areas related to ethics and inclusion, such as GDPR.

Developing engagement practice:

- Consider the legacies of online engagement. What gets preserved and what does not? Decisions which relate to issues of inclusion, exclusion and privilege.
- PEPs to help develop a framework for ethical and responsible engagement (either in their University context, or on a more national level in collaboration with NCCPE) to help address some of the ED&I issues faced.

Affecting change:

- Where it is within PEP power to do so, community voice and representation should be included in PE governance and decision making (i.e. internal funding calls).
- Work together and prioritise researching and developing effective ED&I strategies.



2. BRING CLARITY TO COMPLEXITY: ideas for change

Funders

PEPs were keen to see funders communicate consistently and effectively about PE, bringing much needed clarity to the sector. Suggested actions included:

- Celebrate the successes of PE during the pandemic, and highlight the commitment to support PE as a key aspect of recovery.
- Ensure that the role of PE in assessments like REF, KEF, TEF as well as the representation of PE in funding calls is 'joined up', complementary and coherent.



- Support leadership development programmes that evidence the effectiveness of PE as a core aspect of the research landscape.
- Build on the Quality Assurance process which requires institutions to answer questions about support for PE, and use this to leverage institutional support for engagement.
- Recognise and celebrate universities who are doing this work well e.g. as evidenced by the NCCPE Engage Watermark awards.

Senior HE leaders

Senior leaders were identified as a key part of addressing the lack of clarity and commitment. Drawing on the culture change work of the NCCPE, PEPs suggested leaders focus their attention on the following actions:

- Develop a shared understanding of the role of engagement across all aspects of the university's work, and develop a strategy to focus and consolidate your activity.
- Identify the unique contributions that your institution can make and commit to making them.
- Share your practice, successes and failures and what you have learnt about establishing support for PE.
- Learn from work that has started during the pandemic and seek to build on this by participating in opportunities to work with other leaders from across the UK and internationally.

NCCPE

The NCCPE were seen to add real value through their strategic work with universities. Suggested future actions included:

- Help HEIs to navigate the policy and funding drivers for PE, in the context of wider developments in Knowledge Exchange and research culture, to identify opportunities and focus their planning.
- Bring institutions together to share their responses to these drivers, and to evidence successes and challenges in addressing them, for instance through a leadership development programme and engagement with PEPs (e.g. PEP Together, training workshops).



PEPs

PEPs were keen to mobilise to address some of the challenges brought about by lack of clarity and commitment. The actions suggested included those at organisational level, and nationally:

- Understand the complexity of the PE landscape (REF, KEF, Civic Agenda) and work collaboratively to challenge silos and forge connections within and beyond your institution.
- Use available evidence and metrics strategically to make the case for PE within your institution.
- Support strategic planning in your institutions, for instance by using the NCCPE Edge tool, and by foregrounding promising practice from other HEIs to inspire and influence colleagues.
- Contribute to NCCPE and other networks, sharing your perspectives, insights and approach, and learning from others.



3. RESOURCE EFFECTIVELY: ideas for change

Funders

The research highlighted a number of key opportunities for funders to facilitate more effective practice. Suggestions for how this could be done included:

- When setting up funding calls, and when assessing funding bids, ensure realistic resourcing for PE, including roles of PEPs, partners and others.
- Recognise the many 'hidden costs' of the system as it currently stands and consider fair payment for all those involved, including researchers who currently give up their time to be more effectively engaged with the public, community organisations who contribute value to the ecosystem but are not appropriately recompensed, freelancers who support the interface between research and publics, and the many publics involved in different ways.
- Work with NCCPE to make explicit the ways in which engagement can be integrated within HEIs, and models for how this can be resourced.



Senior HE leaders

The research suggests that many institutions are committed to PE, but that this does not always translate into the resources needed to engage the public effectively. PEPs were keen to see their senior leaders recognise the opportunities for engagement across all aspects of the universities work, and consider how these could be integrated more effectively, and resourced appropriately. They were keen to see some of the effective partnership work during the pandemic be built on in the future.

PEPs had various suggestions of how university leaders could facilitate this:

- Continue to think of new and creative ways in which the university estate and its resources can be leveraged for the benefit of its local community.
- Build sustainability into the heart of the work, moving towards models of centrally funded and resourced PE teams rather than PEPs associated with funding bids.
- Develop models to retain skilled PEPs who are project based (i.e. bank of long-term project PEPs whose time can be bought out for projects rather than recruiting externally every time).
- Support resourcing for 'relationship building' activities (in the absence of this from central funders) such as 'conversation pots', 'sandpit events', 'seed funds'.

NCCPE

The NCCPE's work to support university leaders to develop more effective support for PE was recognised. PEPs were keen to see this work built on.

- Work with funders and HEIs to illustrate different approaches to resourcing PE, and evidence the pros and cons of each.

PEPs

PEPs were keen to see PEPs have agency to effect change within their institutional contexts, for example:

- Identify other allies at your institution, who are struggling to secure long-term funding to develop effective relationships with other organisations e.g. knowledge exchange team; impact leads.



- Draw on the PEP Network⁵² to share practice, and to develop tactics for change.
- Draw on the NCCPE culture change resources to inform your approach.



4. MAKE THE INVISIBLE VISIBLE: ideas for change

Collectively

Take opportunities to celebrate and share the value of PEPs: this could take the form of a national award for PEPs; showcasing profiles on the NCCPE website; nominating PEPs for key roles/ awards within HE; creating platform opportunities for PEPs to share their knowledge and expertise.

Funders

PEPs were keen to see that attempts were being made to recognise the breadth and depth of roles involved in the research ecosystem. They were keen to see this translate into practical actions that would enable the work of intermediaries to be recognised, and valued. For example:

- Key assessment tools e.g. KEF; TEF and REF could include a section on key university staff involved in supporting engagement/ impact. This would provide recognition for the work of professional services staff including impact officers, PE officers, community liaison officers, digital developers, etc., to be recognised.
- Encourage grant holders to fully cost the engagement work needed in their applications – including PEP time, training of staff/students, costs to participants, and include effective realistic assessments of this.
- Raise awareness that engagement takes time, especially with less represented groups, genuinely linking to the needs of participants rather than information giving, and reflect this in the funding offered.

⁵² <https://www.publicengagement.ac.uk/nccpe-projects-and-services/professional-development/public-engagement-professionals-network>



- Make provision for the hidden work of engagement in the bid development stage, for example by offering funding to cover costs of partnership development.
- Review reporting on engagement for HEBCIS, ensuring that the measures used reflect the work of all staff involved in developing and delivering engagement activities.
- Commit to including PEPs in the development of PE elements of funding calls (and associated guidance) and the associated panel review processes.

In addition, PEPs were keen to develop more opportunities to engage with funders, and their work:

- Work with the NCCPE to establish opportunities for PEPs and Funders to meet to exchange ideas and thinking relating to PE.
- Work with the NCCPE to capture stories for funder newsletters and websites, ensuring that the value of this work is celebrated

Senior HE Leaders

PEPs were keen to see senior HE leaders consider the roles of professional services staff effectively through awards; appraisals; and career progression:

- Establish (or broaden) institutional awards that are not focused on research/teaching but on other broader categories in which PE (and other HEI activity) can be recognised: best innovation; most supportive team; outstanding colleague; ED&I award; inspiring others; external engagement; enhancing student experience; etc.
- Recognise and reward staff who facilitate and support partnership development and engagement work both inside and outside of the institution, reflecting this in internal and external communications.

NCCPE

- Raise profile of current work and undertake new work to evidence how universities have embedded engagement, and practical tips for others.
- Work with UKRI to ensure that PE 'wins' and 'highlights' are more readily recognised in the weekly UKRI email digest that is circulated every Friday afternoon.



- Build on work already in train in relation to PEP roles and career pathways. Provide outline job descriptions for different grades of role, and map out potential career pathways for PEPs.
- Expand the PEP network to offer additional professional development opportunities e.g. Mentoring programmes, consultancy, assessment panels.
- Make explicit opportunities to share work through the NCCPE website and events.
- Training supporting PEPs to develop the confidence, and right tools/approaches, to enable them to put value to what they do.

PEPs

PEPs were keen to contribute significant value to raising the visibility of their work. Suggestions included:

- Be proactive in membership of networks, including the PEP Network, BIG, ScotPEN, etc.
- Be ready to work with the other stakeholders on the ideas suggested earlier in the table.
- Join or form localised support networks taking time to share good practice or things that have failed.
- Commit to being more frank and honest in our collective reflections, sharing the things that haven't worked as well as the learning inspired from failures.



Appendix 1: Research findings sub-themes

Challenges	Immediate impact of lockdown Personal circumstances/ Wellbeing/ Furlough Lack of capacity in researchers/community organisations etc. Continuing engagement with target audiences/ Making new relationships Missing face-to-face contact/ ad-hoc meetings
Opportunities	New skills (including digital skills) New opportunities for engagement Support Networking and support with PEPs
Challenges and Opportunities	Home working Digital engagement/ access and inclusion Adapting to new context
Future	Governance of funding Sharing learning Inclusion
Future Challenges	Concerns about uncertainties about the future Funding Planning
Future opportunities	Increased public interest in research New engagement approaches New publics Hybrid approaches
Future challenges and opportunities	Commitment by universities to PE Nature of PE (purposes and practices) Nature of PEP role