



# ***The perceptions and attitudes of academic staff within a research intensive university towards public engagement***

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## **1. Introduction**

In September 2007, six higher education institution (HEI) led Beacons were established in Cardiff, Edinburgh, London, Manchester, Newcastle and Norwich, with a national co-ordinating centre based in Bristol. Each Beacon has a different emphasis and approach but, importantly, they all share a common goal of encouraging higher education institutions (HEIs) to undertake greater public engagement by working more closely with communities and the wider public. Funded by the UK higher education funding councils, Research Councils UK (RCUK) and the Wellcome Trust, the initiative aimed to achieve a more joined up and embedded approach to public engagement across higher education institutions.

The Norwich Beacon, led by the University of East Anglia (UEA), was called Community University Engagement East (CUE East) and planned to undertake both inward (seeking to stimulate a change in university culture with regard to increased levels of public engagement) and outward (encouraging genuine dialogue and debate with the public) looking activities.

This paper presents one aspect of a wider research project conducted on attitudes towards public engagement and the factors affecting involvement by academic staff. This research formed part of the formative evaluation of CUE East conducted by The Research Centre, City College Norwich. The aim of the research was to provide a baseline against which change in institutional culture could be assessed, with regard to making public engagement a greater part of university life (see McDaid, 2008, for full report).

The term 'public engagement' covered a wide range of activities and could be used in a variety of ways by different people. Public engagement could, arguably, be any activity that brings together higher education staff and students with the wider public in communication or dialogue, to promote mutual understanding and learning. It could also include public lectures, debates and events, media work, participatory research processes, and outreach work with schools. However, the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) defined public engagement as:

*"...the involvement of specialists listening to, developing their understanding of, and interacting with, non-specialists"* (HEFCE, 2006, p5).

## **2. Methodology**

This research was conducted with staff from the University of East Anglia (UEA), Norwich, UK. A total of 55 semi-structured interviews were conducted with a cross-section of academic and research staff at UEA (hereafter referred to as 'academics'). This included a number (n=24) of targeted individuals, such as the Heads of Schools, Associate Deans for Research and Associate Deans for Enterprise and Engagement. There were also a stratified sample of academics (n=31) using the combined criteria of 'Faculty' (either Science, Social Science, Arts and Humanities or Health) and 'Grade Level' (either senior academic, academic, senior researcher or researcher) (see McDaid, 2008, for further details). The majority of interviews were conducted face to face at the University of East Anglia between May and August 2008.

### 3. Results

Where anonymity was not compromised, interviewees own words have been reported verbatim to ensure that key points/issues were illustrated fully. A main theme addressed during each interview was: 'What is understood by public engagement?'

#### 3.1 What is understood by Public Engagement?

Public engagement was "...not familiar language..." amongst most academics interviewed at UEA. Indeed, interviewees often deflected the question about what the term might imply back to the researcher. At the most basic level, there appeared to be a consensus that the term meant activities through which the university sought to connect with a non-academic audience. However, when discussing in greater detail, respondents varied according to a number of different factors, which were:

- A. the purpose of public engagement
- B. the meaning of public
- C. the different levels of engagement
- D. the role of discipline area

Each of these four factors were explored in greater detail.

##### *A. The purpose of public engagement*

Interviewees expressed very different opinions regarding the purpose of public engagement, and at times these were contradictory. Several academics conceptualised public engagement in terms of existing university agendas. At the extremes, some academics talked about public engagement solely in the context of student admissions or public relations. However, the majority of responses were multifaceted and considered that public engagement overlapped with a number of existing UEA agendas, such as widening participation, knowledge transfer or enterprise and consultancy.

##### *B. The meaning of 'public'*

The term 'public' was understood by interviewees to hold different meanings

depending on the context in which it was used. In simple terms, interviewees often drew a distinction between members of the public in their capacity as citizens and other university stakeholder groups. A range of different terms were used by the academics to describe the former, which included 'lay-public', 'general public', 'non-aligned public', 'non-specialist public', 'civic society', 'non-organised public' and 'mass public'. These terms implied people who do not already have a "...defined relationship in relation to the knowledge being produced..." or who were not experts in that given field. A further difference highlighted by UEA interviewees was 'geographic publics', such as local, regional, national and international, as public engagement could take place in a variety of geographic references. For example, academics in the School of Development studies could consider overseas populations as their public, thus, it was more complex than simply the community geographically local to the university. A number of interviewees also talked about different 'publics of interest' when giving examples of engagement activities, such as 'school children', 'patients' or 'women'. There were also references to more organised publics, such as all, or parts, of the voluntary and community sector, the faith sector or business sector. Other interviewees spoke about "...policy communities..." or "...policy-makers..." as a target audience for public engagement activities. This included work with government departments and other professional bodies.

##### *C. The different levels of engagement*

A number of the interviewees highlighted the different levels of engagement, while others did so indirectly through describing activities that they considered as public engagement. These activities ranged from the class linear or one-way model "...in which knowledge gets translated as it goes through various communication channels, with the hope that the wider public will understand it and find value in it..." (Head of School) through to "...genuine dialogue activities where the public are given the opportunity not just to inform but to influence what we do..." (Senior Academic).

**D. The role of discipline area**

Depending on the faculty that a respondent was employed in appeared to directly influence their definition of public engagement, and the language they used to define it. As one academic stated, “I think my perspective is coloured really by the School I work for”. For example, in the Faculty of Health, public engagement was synonymous with ‘user involvement’, highlighting the direct influence of the National Health Service (NHS) user involvement agenda. However, in the Faculty of Science, the term ‘science communication’ featured greatly in responses from academics employed within this faculty.

Also, within faculties there were differences between the Schools in terms of how ‘public facing’ certain disciplines were. Discipline areas, such as the social sciences and health, have always had a level of interaction with the public, due to those subject areas being concerned with the study of people. As indicated by one interviewee from the Faculty of Health who stated, “...the very nature of a medical School is to engage with the public...”, while an academic from the Faculty of Social Sciences stated, “...as a researcher in my field I have to get out in to the community and speak to people...”. The difference appeared to be whether people were perceived merely as ‘research subjects’ or whether they were involved in a more meaningful way that encouraged genuine dialogue and debate.

**3.2 Involvement in public engagement**

Most of those interviewed during this research were involved in some form of public engagement, when defining public engagement at its broadest sense. However, not all would have necessarily conceptualised their activities under such terms. When the interviewees were asked if they had been personally involved in public engagement, 84% (n=46) said that they had. However, involvement consisted largely of one-way information flow activities, such as public lectures, media work or writing for non-academic audiences. A range of two-way activities were also cited to a lesser degree, such a pro-bono work, blogs, participatory

research, involving the public in democratic decision making, involving patients in the development of curriculum and teaching, working with schools to shape curriculum, activity days and dialogue events, sitting on charity boards and other bodies.

The type of engagement activity and rate of engagement appeared to be influenced by a range of factors. These included subject area, research topic, stage of research and seniority. In regard to the latter point, one senior academic stated that “At senior level you are obviously called much more to public platforms and bodies...”. While in regard to the issue of subject area, demand-led public engagement was certainly stronger in some areas than others. For example, one academic from the School of Mathematics stated, “Put it simply, nobody has come knocking on my door with a microphone or a camera”. It was also stressed by a number of the interviewees that public engagement was not suitable for all academics. While another small number suggested that it was not suitable for all research areas. As one academic stated, “Public engagement is not always a natural extension of research”.

However, in general, an individual’s involvement in public engagement was often voluntary, with people recorded doing public engagement in their own time, such as in the evening or at weekends. This was unless it had already been integrated into their role in some way, such as a condition of funding or engagement as a research methodology.

**3.3 The importance of public engagement**

Of the academics interviewed in this study, a majority regarded public engagement as important but not as important as other activities, particularly core activities like teaching and research. Such ideologies were highlighted in the following quotes:

*“There’s no doubt that your teaching and your research, and especially your research, is the key thing in your career from a promotion and progression point of view. Whereas public engagement is seen as a little bit on the outside of this, so it is not*

*important in the sense of getting ahead but I think in terms of your sense of what you are there in the world to do it's very important.*" (Head of School).

and

*"It's very difficult to say because it almost comes into a different category because it is not part of my job description or one of the measures against which I think I will ever be measured ... it's more like deciding do I want to go for a run today? It's something I enjoy and it's important but I don't really see it as part of my paid job."* (Senior Researcher).

There were a few academics who could not "...see the point..." of public engagement or were not clear "...that it actually makes that much sense". Variation was also recorded between the Heads of Schools in regard to how important public engagement was profiled. As one academic highlighted, public engagement often lacked leadership and/or support from Heads of School, as they set the priorities for the School, which "...rub off..." on others. This was supported to some degree by the shared view of Heads of School that when managing a School budget it was not always easy to justify academics' time being spent on non-core activities, such as public engagement, or to give it priority, particularly when it was unclear what the impacts were for that School.

*"Because I am a manager, in the end, I would have to ask the question 'where is the income stream?'"* (Head of School).

### **3.4 Barriers to public engagement**

A range of inter-related barriers were cited as preventing public engagement by interviewees. Of the barriers cited, five were commonly stated between the academics interviewed: A/ time, B/ career progression, C/ peer approval, D/ the research led culture, and E/ funding.

#### **A. Time**

Almost unanimously, among all interviewees, time was viewed as the greatest barrier to undertaking public engagement activities. Academics felt an increasing pressure on their time, with most working far in excess of their specified work hours. There was particular concern that time allocated to public engagement would, ultimately, negatively impact their research and/or teaching. This reported barrier of time was further compounded by the fact that public engagement was not thought of as "...core business..." and often featured at the lower end of an academic's list of priorities.

#### **B. Career progression**

Public engagement was not viewed as a good career progression option by the majority of those interviewed. The higher education sector was seen as an increasingly competitive environment where academics were judged solely in terms of publication outputs and grant income, as highlighted by the following academics' views:

*"It's not going to be anything we can use on our CV for future job applications, so I suppose the brutal truth of it is it's got to be done as an act of social citizenship rather than anything else."* (Senior Researcher).

and

*"I can't really see anyone getting promoted on the basis that their public engagement was enormous and they hadn't brought in any research grant and they hadn't published anything."* (Head of School).

Concerns were also expressed for younger academics that had not established an academic track record yet to support them. It was felt that the lack of any career recognition for public engagement activities could act as a major disincentive to their involvement. However, a very small number of academics from across Schools did view public engagement as a positive option for career progression, suggesting that it "...demonstrated a particular attitude, like drive and enthusiasm..." or that it could help

to "...forge links that can be used in the future...".

#### **C. Peer approval**

Some academics interviewed expressed concern about their reputation amongst fellow academics. For example, one risked being deemed a "...popular thinker..." or that "...public engagement is going to be seen as a kind of dilution of your work or a dumbing down of your work". Such views appeared to be expressed by those academics with significant involvement with the media, as the following statements highlight:

*"Academics are prejudice against it as it isn't seen as proper scholarship, mere journalism"* (Senior Academic).

and

*"There are certain types of academics, such as the media or the cultural intellectuals, that turn up and spout about anything and these are actually the people that infuriate academics because they talk nonsense most of the time!"* (Head of School).

#### **D. The research-led culture**

Strongly interlinked with career progression and peer approval, the research-led culture and pressure to publish was regularly cited as a barrier to embracing public engagement. In particular, the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE, now the Research Excellence Framework or REF) was considered to be a major factor in reinforcing the research-led culture that dominated the HEI experience.

*"If you take the RAE, the kind of work that it gives the highest rewards to is exactly the kind of work that doesn't get on television, so there is a tension between the popular and the scholarly."* (Head of School).

and

*"Most people are only doing work that is recognised by the RAE criteria."* (Senior Academic).

#### **E. Funding**

Increasingly funders have requested that public engagement be included in proposals

as part of research outputs, which has started to provide limited resources to carry out public engagement. One academic from the Faculty of Arts and Humanities commented that "Three out of the four applications that I put in last year for funding asked about the potential for knowledge transfer and engagement". However, no School had a specific budget line for public engagement. Those carrying out smaller, less formalised activities, often sought access to alternative, small pots of funding to cover basic costs, such as room hire and marketing materials. Two of the academics interviewed had actually paid for activities out of their own pocket; although they hadn't always approached the School to ask if there were funds available. While one academic stated "I haven't asked but I don't think it would be forthcoming."

#### **3.5 Recording public engagement**

It was apparent that very little recording of public engagement activities took place. In fact, several interviewees reported that they had carried out public engagement activities but had not reported them through any official channels, or even mentioned it to anybody at the university in some cases. The lack of any formal process of recording public engagement has led to the "...whole thing becoming invisibilised...", stated one academic. While another academic stated that the lack of any recording protocol simply highlighted its unimportance. However, some Schools were recording public engagement. For example, in the School of Biology a 'Bio-Tracker' was being piloted. This was a basic online tool for individuals to report their public engagement activities. The School of Environmental Sciences published annual reports that captured some of the public engagement activities and events that had taken place in the School. A few Schools put "...special announcements on their websites saying what public engagement people have been doing". However, generally the level of organisation and frequency of reporting was highly variable. UEA did have an annual Community Engagement and Outreach Survey that was cited as an existing mechanism that could capture some public engagement activities. However, few Heads

of School and other senior academics interviewed were aware of this survey, although this was not to say that they had not previously completed the survey and submitted it to the university.

There were concerns expressed by some academics regarding capturing their public engagement outputs through a fear that line managers might think they were spending too much time on public engagement. One interviewee stated:

*"Nobody knows whether it counts towards their work time, so it dis-sways people from doing it or telling people they are doing it because they might be called upon to fill up those hours somewhere else."*  
(Researcher).

### 3.6 Recognising public engagement

There were mixed responses to this question. Some academics categorically stated that public engagement was not recognised, while others said that it was recognised but only at the School level. A few academics felt that only the "...highlights are recognised really well...", such as those activities that make it into Broadview or other media. A small number of interviewees thought that recognition for public engagement was growing, as in all universities. This was thought to be due to the government and funders 'pushing' the public engagement agenda.

### 3.7 Supporting public engagement

There appeared to be pockets of senior management support for public engagement, but as one academic commented, "Support is personal rather than organisational...". Consequently, levels of support varied between Schools. Interviewees gave examples of being allocated the time to go and do one off public engagement activities or where the School had paid for their travel expenses, but this was very ad hoc. The lack of a coordinated support for public engagement was highlighted in the following statements:

*"Do I feel supported by the University? Not in any tangible sense."* (Head of

School).

and

*"Public engagement is not part of an overall strategy which is positively encouraged or where people sign up to it. It happens because someone with a bit of public spiritedness says oh we should be doing this for the Schools."* (Senior Academic).

One academic stated that, at the School level, public engagement had "...actively been discouraged..." because it was seen as a distraction from core activities. Academics were not always clear who to approach regarding support for public engagement. Even when support was available, it wasn't always known about, as an academic stated:

*"I've only just found out that all the resources and equipment that I've had to source myself are actually freely available from [name of academic] in the School."* (Academic).

It was felt that the institution needed to provide a clearer mandate for public engagement. One academic said, "It doesn't take a great deal for an institution to show from the top what degree of support there is for this type of activity". While another stated, "The signals for academic staff are diverse, complex and contradictory". Some interviewees suggested that having the Beacon status was the clearest indication yet that public engagement was on the rise at UEA in regard to strategic priorities.

### 3.8 Rewarding public engagement

Public engagement was not rewarded in a formal way at UEA. At most, it was commented on by Heads of Schools that public engagement had been raised in promotion discussions as "...a testament of character..." or included in a job reference as an indication that the individual was "...a fully rounded academic...". A couple of academics suggested that there was scope to promote people for their public engagement work under the knowledge transfer heading in the promotions criteria. However, there was no evidence provided by those interviewed that

anyone had been promoted because of their public engagement activities. However, an academic might get either "...a pat on the back..." or a "...commendation and encouragement..." for their public engagement work.

### **3.9 Evaluation**

Of the public engagement activities that were conducted through UEA, very little evaluation was undertaken. Formalised events were sometimes evaluated using basic event focussed evaluation forms, but aside from these, much of the feedback was anecdotal:

*"We don't evaluate, only in an anecdotal way, nothing systematic. Time and resources, I think, are a big part of the problem here."* (Academic).

One academic, who did activities at fairs and other public gatherings, also commented that they didn't feel evaluation was always appropriate. Although this also highlighted the need to promote more creativity in evaluation methodology:

*"Just the thought of handing them a questionnaire at the end of it and saying can you fill that in and hand it back is, well it would put me off doing it really. It kind of distracts from the friendly atmosphere you are trying to impart."* (Academic).

However, while funders were seeking an increased focus on public engagement in grant applications, there was limited attention given to ensuring suitable measures were in place to record data for the evaluation and impact of public engagement activities.

## **4. Discussion**

Public engagement, where undertaken, can take a variety of different formats within the context of a higher education institution. Therefore, it was important to develop a shared understanding of what the term implied and a clear definition of public engagement was particularly important, especially for measurement purposes.

Without this, putting the concept in to operation would be a challenge, especially in regard to measuring its impact at an institutional level.

There was much enthusiasm from most academics to become involved in public engagement. Indeed, many had been already undertaking some form of public engagement, though most would have not thought of their activities in such terms. However, there was a bias in the interview sample undertaken in this study towards more senior figures, as a result of interviewing targeted individuals in management positions. Therefore, it was unlikely that the values presented in this paper were representative of the whole academic population at UEA. However, despite the mainly positive view reported here, public engagement was often awarded a low priority. Core activities, such as research and teaching, invariably took precedence as the higher priorities.

Recording public engagement rarely took place at UEA and, therefore, it was impossible to know the true extent of public engagement being undertaken at UEA. It was also highlighted that no strategic, institutional-wide support for public engagement or any formal rewarding mechanisms were in operation at UEA. Academics saw both of these factors as barriers to increasing levels of public engagement. A range of alternative barriers to public engagement were also cited, with many acting as inter-related, confounding factors. These included barriers, such as attitudes and skills, institutional barriers, such as support and recognition for public engagement. In addition, external pressures within higher education, such as the pressure placed upon institutions to produce research outputs, which in turn seek to secure future grant income and on academics to progress their careers, were other cited barriers. Addressing these barriers not only needs to take place within the individual institution but more significantly needs greater attention across the HE sector as a whole.

Very few academics were formally evaluating their public engagement activities. In fact, most interviewees had not even considered evaluation per se, while some thought that evaluation was not always appropriate. This signalled the need to encourage greater creativity in evaluation methodologies and raise the importance of evaluation. Even the costs involved in evaluation were considered a barrier to evaluation by some academics.

Thus, in summary, public engagement activity has been thriving at UEA in spite of the lack of institutional-wide promotion and support. This study has highlighted that there was significant potential to improve the coordination, recognition and reward mechanisms for the public engagement at UEA. In doing so, helping to support a culture

change at UEA, to one where "...public engagement is truly embedded as a worthwhile activity" (CUE East, 2008).

## **References**

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