

IOE Engagement and Impact Meet-Up

Engagement, Research and Rigour Briefing Note

Introduction

The *IOE Engagement and Impact Meet-Up: Engagement, Research and Rigour* event, held on 28 November 2024, explored the evolving role of public engagement in driving impactful research, reflecting its growing prominence in evaluation frameworks such as REF 2029. The event brought together academics, research professionals, doctoral candidates, and impact and public engagement experts to discuss how engagement can foster societal impact, enrich knowledge production, and address contemporary challenges.

From public engagement core principles distilled by [Paul Manners](#), Co-Director, National Coordinating Centre for Public Engagement ([NCCPE](#)), to practice led by [Dr Mukdarut Bangpan](#), Associate Director of IOE's [EPPI-Centre](#), speakers offered insights to support impactful public engagement, complemented by useful resources shared by [Helen Craig](#), UCL Head of Public Engagement.

What We Learned

1. The Role of Public Engagement in Research Impact

- Public engagement fosters inclusivity, enabling co-creation and diverse knowledge production that addresses societal needs.
- [Research England's Steven Hill's vision for Research in 2040](#) highlights collaboration with stakeholders as a critical metric for universities to deliver impactful research.

2. The Evolving Research Paradigm

- A shift from “[Mode 1 academic knowledge](#)” in RAE 2008, which was focused on traditional, disciplinary, academically-driven research, and “[Mode 2 applied knowledge](#)” in REF 2014 and 2021, which prioritised more problem-focused, interdisciplinary research aimed at practical applications, to a “[Mode 3 – collaborative knowledge](#)” approach for research, which integrates knowledge from academia and society to address complex global problems, underpins REF 2029's focus on public engagement.
- The idea of “[Mode 1](#)” and “[Mode 2](#)” research was first proposed by Michael Gibbons, UCL's Peter Scott and colleagues in their book [New Production of Knowledge: The Dynamics of Science and Research in Contemporary Societies](#). Later, other writers proposed adding a third paradigm, moving from

application to co-creation of knowledge. This helps us understand how research assessment has evolved.

- Rigorous public engagement design is critical for impactful research.

3. REF2029 and the Emphasis on Engagement

- The 'Impact' profile has been redefined in REF 2029 as 'Engagement and Impact', to acknowledge the significance of engagement processes in the realisation of impact.
- The Panel Chairs have also been invited to explore whether to introduce an additional criterion for this profile ('rigour') to focus attention on the quality of engagement activity emphasising mutual benefit in public interactions. Rigour is a word that invites us to ask why and how we work with research, and how we put in place the reflexivity to ensure that work is ethical, enabling and effective.

Key Takeaways

- **Public Engagement as a Core Component of Research Excellence:** Public engagement is not peripheral but central to producing meaningful, impactful research. It encompasses activity which strives to find meaningful ways to involve people in research – whether as learners, citizens, patients, parents or communities of place and interest.
- **Rigour in Public Engagement with Research:** Rigorous public engagement with research involves expertly planned and evaluated projects, and reflects a wide range of expert methods such as patient involvement, dialogue and co-production, citizen science and community engagement. Common to all of them is an intense focus on meaningful, mutually beneficial encounters. Although not all impacts can be planned for, excellent public engagement is sensitive to both anticipated and unanticipated impacts, and to managing their social and ethical consequences.
- **Strategic Preparation for REF 2029:** Institutions must embrace public engagement with research as a critical component of their research culture to align with the evolving REF assessment criteria.
- **Practical Examples of Rigour in Public Engagement:** Illustrated through projects engaging diverse groups, from older adults in Manchester to youth outreach in physics.
- **EPPI-Centre's Approach:** Dr Bangpan highlighted the importance of systematically involving diverse stakeholders, such as policymakers, practitioners, and the public, at all stages of evidence synthesis. This ensures that research outputs are both rigorous and tailored to real-world needs. Examples included participatory methods in co-designing systematic reviews.
- **Engagement Models and Innovation:** Engagement strategies at the EPPI-Centre emphasise diverse approaches that allow for incremental changes and sustained partnerships, promoting the importance of contextual sensitivity and innovative methods.

Recommendations

1. **Promote Public Engagement with Research Training:** Empower researchers by equipping them with skills to design, deliver, and evaluate engagement activities, recognising the value contributed by experts in public engagement, exemplified by the professional support offered by the PE teams at UCL.
2. **Foster Collaborative Networks:** Build connections between researchers, public stakeholders, and policymakers.
3. **Embed Public Engagement with Research in Institutional Strategies:** Recognise and reward high-quality public engagement as part of research excellence priorities within institutions.
4. **Integrate Sustained Partnerships in Research Projects:** Research funders and institutions should recognise the time-intensive nature of building academic-public partnerships. Proposals should include resources for long-term engagement, ensuring meaningful collaboration from project inception to post-project impact evaluation.

Some questions the audience has raised

Q: Given REF 2029's emphasis on rigour in research impact, could you please expand on strategies for researchers to balance robust public engagement processes with the practical constraints of time and resources often encountered in research projects?

PM: Engagement and impact good practice takes time and planning. You should expect to be able to draw on support from colleagues – for instance from people with expertise in public engagement. The key is to ask for help and support.

Q: What are the specific 'practices of measuring the impact' that you are expecting to see in REF 2029? Would testimonials be the sole measure here?

PM: Testimonials are only the tip of the iceberg. [A REF 2021 impact case study submitted about 'age-friendly work'](#) for instance explored measures of impacts on the participants, on local policies and investments in social care, and on practitioners' ways of working with older people.

Q: We're 15 years into the Impact Agenda and university staff are still arguing for workload allocations. Should the workload for Engagement and Impact be reported as an aspect of REF 2029 People, Culture and Society or the Engagement and Impact submissions?

PM: Yes, it should, and researchers should reach out to senior leaders and contribute to discussions to enable FTE allocation for Engagement and Impact as part of current workload planning.

Q: If funders do not provide additional impact tracking funding beyond the project timeline, how are researchers expected to measure the sustained impact of their study, as it is often only realised at a later time beyond the project cycle?

PM: The REF allocates QR funding to HEIs on the basis of their performance. This is strategic funding which HEIs have discretion to invest to support excellence in research, engagement and impact. You should explore with colleagues how QR funding might be invested to enable this longer-term impact tracking.

Q: Is it likely that the REF Impact template will change in your view, as the REF 2021 version does not appear to be well suited to the inclusion of the new rigour requirements?

PM: Yes, there will be new templates developed for REF 2029, to address the evolving expectations, and we can expect that these will address issues like the one you identified.

Resources

- [National Coordinating Centre for Public Engagement resources](#)
- [EPPI-Centre: Engaging stakeholders with evidence and uncertainty resources](#)
- [UCL Co-Production Collective Resources](#)
- [Public Engagement Training for UCL staff and students](#)
- [Public Engagement Advice for UCL researchers](#)
- [UCL Citizen Science](#)

Thanks to all guest speakers and [Professor Lynn Ang](#) and [Professor Becky Taylor](#) for their collective contribution.

[Tatiana Souteiro Dias](#), IOE Research Development Manager, 5th December 2024

Briefing notes: IOE Engagement and Impact Meet-Ups

[IOE Engagement and Impact Meet-Ups](#) are jointly organised by the IOE Research Development Team and the IOE Research Engagement and Impact Committee and have benefited nearly 900 researchers and professionals so far since its launch in 2020. As part of the IOE Research Strategy 2022-27, this event series aims to bring together experts, senior academics, and early career researchers to focus on making authentic impact a key consideration in research projects from their inception.