



National
Co-ordinating
Centre for
Public Engagement

How to... ...write a business case for public engagement

Advice on developing a compelling business case to secure investment in public engagement

Getting started

A strong case can be made for the wider benefits of public engagement but how can this be turned into a compelling business case?

One route is to make the case for investment in a central unit, responsible for supporting staff and students to engage with the public. This unit may be constituted in a variety of ways, but plays an important function including:

- Supporting training and development
- Facilitating learning
- Championing engagement
- Supporting staff and students to engage
- Maximising efficiency and quality
- Advising on funding for engagement

Whilst some universities have successfully bid for strategic funding to develop a public engagement unit, other universities have chosen to support this by investing core funds. We provide some examples below.

So how can you encourage your institution to invest significant resources to support public engagement effectively?

Typical activities for which funding is sought

Generally bids will seek to secure an individual or small team to coordinate the following kinds of activity:

- Provide advice and guidance to support funding bids and departmental strategy and planning
- Lead / manage / support public engagement with research projects
- Lead / coordinate pan-university public engagement festivals / campaigns
- Coordinate opportunities / platforms for staff and students to engage with the public (e.g. running a regular series of interactive public events)
- Develop a fellowship or champions network
- Coordinate internal and external communications to improve awareness and involvement in PE activities
- Identify and establish clear routes into the University for external organisations.
- Provide Public Engagement training / CPD
- Work with HR to incorporate engagement into HR strategies, and establish a framework of reward and recognition
- Establish, promote and run a small grant awards scheme for novel engagement activities
- Collate data for Higher Education Business Community Engagement (HEBCE) reporting and provide where relevant data for further reporting
- Evaluate and demonstrate the value gained from PE activities to the University

Rationale and context

Typically, business cases will emphasise the following external factors:

1. The increasing demand for universities to respond to society's 'grand challenges' and to achieve and evidence the societal impact of their publicly funded research
2. The demand for universities to play an increasingly dynamic role as 'anchors' within their cities and regions to enhance human and social capital

Sources of funding

Business cases will highlight a range of sources of income, framed by the increasing expectations of research funders and the HE funding councils for HEIs to engage the public both for the general public good and in the creation of research.

- Research funders collectively set out their expectations for public engagement in the [Concordat for Engaging the Public with Research](#), defining public engagement as any activity that engages the public with research, from communication, to consultation, to public dialogue and the co-creation of research projects.
- The Research Councils encourage researchers to describe potential '[Pathways to Impact](#)' in their funding bids, and to allocate funding resources to facilitate this activity
- The HE funding councils encourage public engagement as a route to impact in their guidance on the REF, and suggest it is critical in ensuring the 'public benefit' of higher education.
- Wellcome (and other Health funders) are increasingly challenging and rejecting research bids which fail to include a robust engagement plan.
- Many universities are also choosing to use some or all of their [HEIF funding](#) to invest in their public engagement infrastructure.

Competitor activity

Business cases usually stress what 'competitor' universities are doing to support public engagement. Many universities are now investing very significant resources in infrastructure to support public engagement:

- Former Beacon and Catalysts for PE universities have chosen to invest in public engagement infrastructure after the initial funding was over. For example, UCL currently employ 8 people in their [PE unit](#), which has expanded since the Beacon funding ended; [Queen Mary University](#) has made a long-term commitment to their PE team
- Universities, such as Bristol, Birmingham, Warwick, Kingston, UWE, and Imperial support public engagement. [Bristol's public engagement work](#) has been funded centrally for the last 10 years, and they now have a team of 13 staff.
- All these institutions recognise public engagement's intrinsic value for the University and society, but also recognise that it is an essential enabler of successful funding bids.

Some exemplar outcomes

The following are some of the outcomes which can be secured through sustained investment:

- A strategic approach to engagement embedded across the institution's plans, policies and processes.
- Increased levels of external funding.
- The creation of opportunities for productive collaboration with external organisations.
- Establishing a number of durable, strategic partnerships with key stakeholders
- An enhanced environment and cultural offer to local residents, students and staff.
- Greater cross-faculty, inter-disciplinary and inter-professional working to achieve a common aim.
- Greater visibility of civic engagement and research projects.
- Supporting aspects of student employability – at both UG and PG level public engagement enhances the student's skills and experience profile
- Better coordination of activity across the institution, enhancing its efficiency and impact



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