

Interim Review of the Public Engagement with Research Catalysts Programme 2012 to 2015

**A report for Research Councils UK
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SUMMARY

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1. The Public Engagement with Research (PER) Catalysts programme

This document summarises the full report¹ of an interim review of the Public Engagement with Research (PER) Catalysts programme. The PER Catalysts programme was funded by Research Councils UK (RCUK) from 1st April 2012 to 31st March 2015. Its purpose was to support eight Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) to embed public engagement with research within their policies, procedures and practices.

“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.” (National Coordinating Centre for Public Engagement²)

Grants of up to £300,000 over three years were awarded to the following HEIs:

- University of Aberdeen
- University of Bath
- University of Exeter
- Institute of Education
- University of Nottingham
- Open University
- Queen Mary University London
- University of Sheffield.

Each university also provided matched funding, or in kind support to an equivalent value, to support their planned project. The eight individual Catalyst projects developed in different ways, each with their own specific aims and objectives. Some established public engagement teams or dedicated units, to take the Catalyst work forwards, both during and beyond the funded project. Others set up Catalyst project teams for the duration of the funding, embedding the work in other parts of the institution when the project ended. Several HEIs described a ‘distributed network’ approach, where academic and/or professional services staff were involved as PER co-ordinators or advocates, alongside the Catalyst or public engagement team.

All projects were required to consider and respond to the overall aims of the PER Catalysts programme, summarised as follows:

- To create a culture within the grant holding HEIs where excellent PER is formalised and embedded, through:

¹ <http://www.rcuk.ac.uk/pe/embedding/>

² <http://www.publicengagement.ac.uk/explore-it/what-public-engagement>

- strategic commitment to public engagement
 - integration of public engagement into core research activities
 - reward and recognition of researchers involved in PER
 - encouraging and supporting staff to become involved
 - creating networks within institutions to support, share and celebrate good practice
 - contributing to a wider network supportive of public engagement.
- To build on experience to develop best practice that recognises the two-way nature of public engagement with research.

2. About this interim review

The purpose of this interim review was to synthesise evidence about how the funded activities of individual Catalyst projects had contributed to the aims of the programme as a whole. Work on the review took place in November and December 2015 and involved desk-based, documentary analysis of the Catalyst projects' annual, final and evaluation reports. The review's objectives included:

- To consider the extent to which the Catalyst projects had met the overall aims of the programme.
- To assess what had changed (in terms of processes and outcomes) for the Catalyst HEIs as a result of RCUK investment and the extent to which these changes were embedded and sustainable (impact of the programme on culture change).

3. To what extent have the Catalyst projects met the overall aims of the programme?

The review found that the funded activities of the eight Catalyst projects had met the overall aims of the programme in the following ways:

- The projects had all found a number of significant ways to signal their *strategic commitment* to PER, both externally and internally.
- The Catalysts provided evidence in their reports about how they had *integrated public engagement into many of the core research activities* undertaken by their host HEIs.
- All eight Catalyst projects gave examples of the ways in which their input had helped bring about changes to the *reward and recognition* of researchers.
- All of the eight Catalyst projects had found numerous ways to *encourage and support staff to do public engagement work*.
- Most had *created internal networks* to share good practice, support staff and celebrate public engagement.

- Through their reports, the Catalyst projects provided evidence about how they had *contributed to a wider network* supportive of public engagement by sharing learning and disseminating best practice in PER.
- All eight of the Catalyst projects provided at least one example of how they had helped to develop and support *best practice that recognised the two-way nature of public engagement with research* (i.e. activities which involve interaction and listening, with the goal of generating mutual benefit).

Table 1 on pages 7-10 provides more detail about the processes and outcomes achieved through the aims of the PER Catalysts programme as a whole.

4. What had changed for the eight HEIs as a result of their involvement in the PER Catalysts programme?

Strategic changes

Involvement in the Catalysts programme helped HEIs make a commitment to PER at institutional level, thereby giving public engagement a 'strategic stamp of approval'. Many of the Catalysts had made significant strategic changes which included:

- Embedding a commitment to PER in corporate plans.
- Developing new, shared understandings of PER at institutional level and defining and articulating these definitions in university-wide strategic documents.
- Developing new institutional PER strategies, or including PER in other strategies and planning documents.
- Making adjustments to formal governance arrangements to ensure institutional oversight of PER activities.
- The introduction of PER champions who helped to raise the profile of public engagement, formalise a visible commitment to PER, and for some HEIs, increase the effectiveness of support available to researchers.
- Establishing on-going strategic, financial commitment to sustaining central PER support (and some PER activities) after the end of the funded Catalysts programme.

Operational changes

Involvement in the Catalysts programme had enabled HEIs to develop new operational structures, systems and resources for PER, including:

- New structures which provided co-ordination and visibility for previously disparate PER activity - for some HEIs this involved setting up new, central PER units or teams; others used dispersed networks and/or senior level champions to facilitate the delivery of support for PER.

- Changes to elements of core research support - these included changes to ethical review, financial and administrative systems for supporting PER, job descriptions, performance and annual review processes, promotion criteria, workload allocation; and changes to leadership development and professional development programmes to include PER.
- Evidence of the outcomes of changes to core research support, including four PER-led promotions to Professor during the timescale of the Catalysts programme.
- Increased practical support and new resources for PER – tailored support and guidance on embedding engagement activities into research funding applications; new PER awards schemes; increased learning opportunities and training; more access to PER platforms and opportunities.
- New initiatives to trial and embed methods for measuring the quality and impact of PER activities - this was an area where HEIs were keen to develop their understanding in order to better inform PER practice and planning in the future.

Attitudinal changes

The evidence for attitudinal changes was less easy to identify, but key outcomes noted by Catalysts' final and evaluation reports included:

- More recognition of the value and expertise of the Catalyst team or unit.
- Increased motivation and enthusiasm for PER amongst staff.
- The recognition by staff that public engagement adds value to a university's core business and helps to deliver high quality research and teaching.
- More cross-university understanding of the role, importance and value of public engagement with research, particularly in terms of being a legitimate and valued component of research roles within HEIs.
- Increased recognition of the value of PER as a potential platform for career enhancement, through additional funding streams and new forms of career recognition.
- One Catalyst's evaluation also provided evidence, through baseline and post-project interviews with eight public partners, of changes in public attitudes towards universities, and improved understanding of the work and activities of the host HEI.

Conceptual changes

This review considered the ways in which the eight Catalyst projects had helped broaden, define and articulate new understandings of public engagement with research within their host HEIs, so bringing about conceptual changes at strategic and operational levels. There was no clear evidence from the Catalysts' reports of the extent to which these conceptual changes were fully embedded into the thinking and practice of *individual HEI staff*. However, all eight of the Catalyst projects cited examples of staff practice that recognised the two-way nature of public engagement with research, from setting the agenda and defining research questions through to publication and dissemination of research findings.

Other evidence for conceptual changes included:

- Increased breadth and variety of PER undertaken by staff in the Catalyst HEIs.
- Wider understanding that including PER in grant applications makes bids stronger – several HEIs made the case that many of their successful proposals had received input and advice from Catalyst teams, particularly with preparing ‘pathways to impact’ statements and plans for embedding PER throughout the proposed research project.
- Inclusion of PER as part of the research discourse at most Catalyst HEIs – public engagement in research was now embedded within the day-to-day vocabulary of academic staff seeking support for their funding applications, academic activity and personal development.

5. To what extent were these changes embedded and sustainable?

Self-assessment data from the Catalysts themselves³ provided clear evidence that many of these changes were now embedded and had already made a significant impact on the culture of their host HEIs. The Catalysts’ self-evaluation data also confirmed their awareness that further focus is needed on measuring the *quality and impact* of PER activities on public groups and communities.

All eight HEIs gave some details of how they planned to sustain the impact of their work. Most Catalysts were planning to retain many of the *strategic* and *operational* changes made during the lifetime of their projects. But it was not possible to identify their plans for maintaining *attitudinal* and *conceptual* changes from the material available at this stage. The nature of evidence in relation to these types of changes necessitates collection via carefully designed research and evaluation with staff, students and the public. Most HEIs were still at an early stage of development of such methodologies and had yet to establish the nature of key changes in stakeholders’ attitudes and understanding in relation to PER. This is to be expected, given that the primary remit of the three-year Catalysts programme was firmly focussed on establishing institutional processes and structures for supporting and embedding PER.

³ The Catalysts used the EDGE tool, a self-assessment tool designed by the National Centre for Coordinating Public Engagement (NCCPE) to map progress against nine key dimensions of institutional support for public engagement: mission, leadership, communication, support, learning, recognition, staff, students and public. Catalysts self-assessed their position on the EDGE tool in terms of a number of statements relating to each of the nine dimensions which summarised the extent to which they felt their PER practice was ‘embryonic’, ‘developing’, ‘gripping’ or ‘embedded’. For more information, see: <http://www.publicengagement.ac.uk/support-it/self-assess-with-edge-tool>

6. Conclusions

From the evidence available, it is clear that when taken as a whole, the funded activities of the eight Public Engagement with Research Catalysts projects have fully met the aims of the programme overall. Involvement in the Catalysts programme has led to numerous and significant changes for the host HEIs. Many of these changes have now been embedded at strategic and operational levels and will be sustained in the longer term, thus showing clear evidence of culture change within the eight universities involved in the programme.

Suggestions for future review and post-programme evaluation include:

1. Further collection of consistent and comparable data on the processes, outputs and outcomes of each of the Catalyst projects.
2. Further evaluation of the extent to which culture change has been embedded and sustained within the host HEIs beyond the end of the Catalysts programme funding.
3. An investigation of the impact of the Catalysts programme on the wider sector.

Table 1 Summary of processes and outcomes of the Public Engagement with Research (PER) Catalysts programme against its aims

Programme aims	Processes	Outcomes
To create a strategic commitment to public engagement with research	Embedded a commitment to PER in corporate plans	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Four HEIs had achieved the inclusion of PER in their host HEIs' corporate plans
	Developed and established a shared understanding of PER	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Four had developed and defined a shared understanding of PER, the wording of which was now embedded in university-wide strategic documents For the other four HEIs, there was evidence that they had focussed on developing a shared understanding, but less explicit reference in their reports to development and agreement of a specific definition of PER
	Developed institutional PER strategies, or included PER in other strategies and planning documents	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Two HEIs had developed an institutional PER strategy Seven HEIs provided evidence of the inclusion of PER in other strategies and planning documents
	Created senior leadership and engagement champions to oversee and promote PER	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Four HEIs made changes to their formal governance arrangements to ensure institutional oversight of PER activities All eight recognised the importance of high level champions who could create institutional respect and recognition for engagement activities and represent a PER 'voice' on strategic working groups Many of the Catalyst projects had also created formal and informal PER champions to support and embed a culture of engaged research at an academic level
	Made a financial commitment to PER	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Six HEIs provided details of their financial commitment to PER through institutional funding of a range of PER support and activities during the lifetime of their Catalyst projects Seven HEIs confirmed that on-going financial commitment was in place to sustain central PER support post-Catalyst, from April 2015
To integrate public engagement into the core research activities of HEIs	Provided practical support for core research activities which emphasised the importance of PER	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Support with developing funding applications including 'pathways to impact' statements (seven HEIs), resulting in PER-related support to at least 800 academic staff and input to at least 300 grant applications Evidencing PER activities - e.g. support with preparing impact statements for the REF, submission of PER activities within the RCUK Research Outcomes System or ResearchFish (four HEIs) Input and guidance on including/embedding engagement activities into different parts of the research process (all eight HEIs) Changes to ethical and administrative processes to facilitate PER (two HEIs)

Programme aims	Processes	Outcomes
	Measured the quality and impact of PER activities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> All eight Catalysts had undertaken some form of research or evaluation work to collect evidence about the progress and impact of their projects Five Catalysts teams had conducted their own research, whilst in two cases, other university staff from outside the Catalyst team were recruited to undertake evaluation tasks One HEI had commissioned an independent evaluation from an external research organisation which ran alongside the Catalyst and reported at interim and final stages Five Catalysts had employed some element of a pre- and post-programme design, comparing baseline data collected at the start of their programme with follow-up data collected in 2015 using the same research tools Of these, three HEIs took a primarily formative approach, using mixed methods to explore and inform their Catalyst work Two had chosen to focus their efforts primarily on summative evaluation against aims and objectives, using qualitative methods such as interviews and focus groups Several HEIs were planning to continue exploring methods for measuring the quality and impact of PER activities post-Catalyst
To reward and recognise researchers involved in public engagement	Made changes to job descriptions, performance reviews and promotion criteria	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> All eight of the Catalyst projects had found ways to flag up the importance of incorporating public engagement into job descriptions, performance reviews and promotion criteria
	Provided evidence of PER-led promotions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Two HEIs provided evidence of four PER-led promotions to Professor during the timescale of their Catalyst projects
	Made changes to workload management to include PER support and activities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Six HEIs made specific mention of changes to workload frameworks or role recognition, which took into account PER activities
	Established PER award schemes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Seven of the eight Catalyst projects had either established their own award schemes for recognising excellence in PER, or had 'piggy-backed' on an existing award scheme, for example by adding a new category related to public engagement

Programme aims	Processes	Outcomes
To encourage and support researchers and staff at all levels to become involved	Supported funding applications and plans for research projects	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Seven projects offered tailored, one-to-one support with grant applications (including 'pathways to impact' statements). Four provided other forms of application support via group workshops, master classes, case studies and good practice guidance materials or toolkits. One university had developed a Public Research Interest Group which provided 'lay' expertise in reviewing research proposals from around 50 public members. Four HEIs also helped researchers to provide systematic evidence of their engagement activities, for example through impact statements for the REF, submissions to the RCUK Research Outcomes System or ResearchFish, and other forms of formal feedback on the outcomes and impact of PER. All of the Catalyst projects had found ways to offer input and guidance on PER throughout the research life cycle, from agenda setting, to designing methodologies and forms of dissemination that enabled the participation of different people, communities and groups
	Provided training and opportunities for professional development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Mentoring and one-to-one training/professional development (all eight HEIs) PER-specific training and professional development programmes (four HEIs) Integrating PER training to other professional development programmes (six HEIs) Input on PER to undergraduate and postgraduate programmes (six HEIs) Workshops and other one-off learning opportunities (four HEIs) At least 5,300 individuals (researchers, students, and professionals support staff) have taken part in informal and formal learning as a result of the Catalysts programme
	Set up seed funding or grants schemes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Seven of the eight Catalyst projects had established seed funding or grants schemes to support, explore and develop aspects of PER, resulting in at least 174 additional public engagement projects being funded and supported as a result of the Catalysts programme
	Provided and sign-posted PER platforms and opportunities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Highlighting existing opportunities and platforms for PER, such as local initiatives or national festivals Proactively working with the organisers to ensure their HEI's involvement in these national or regional initiatives Creating new platforms and opportunities for public engagement activities.
	Developed PER resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> All of the eight Catalyst projects developed resources for raising awareness of PER and sharing good practice

Programme aims	Processes	Outcomes
To create networks within institutions to share good practice, celebrate their work and ensure that those involved in public engagement feel supported	Created internal networks to share good practice, support staff and celebrate public engagement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Two HEIs set up online or email based PER networks • Six established networks that meet regularly for discussion and to host events or training • Two helped to create PER networks aimed at students
To contribute to a wider network supportive of public engagement including the NCCPE, other recipient HEIs and the wider HE community	Contributed to wider networks supportive of public engagement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • All eight of the Catalyst projects had shared advice and learning with other HEIs, through personal visits, teaching engagements, invitations to speak at other HEIs' seminars or conferences, or partnership working • Six of the eight HEIs provided information about the events their Catalyst staff had been involved with as speakers or presenters • Three of the Catalyst project teams had been involved in contributing to external consultations relating to aspects of public engagement in research, including for example the development of guidance for the recently launched RCUK Catalyst Seed Fund • All eight of the Catalyst projects had found ways to share learning about PER more widely across the sector and outside of HEIs
To build on experience from the Beacons and other HEIs (including grant holders) to develop best practice that recognises the two-way nature of public engagement with research	Helped to develop and support examples of embedded PER in practice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • All eight of the Catalyst projects had supported PER activities that reflected researchers' understanding of the benefits of engaged research as a mutually beneficial dialogue with the potential to be embedded at different stages of the research process