

## PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

**ECIU University Research Conference, Barcelona 2023** 3rd/4th October, sought to move beyond traditional conference structures and embody a challenge-based approach by providing an interactive forum for discussing common challenges, forging partnerships of societal stakeholders, and contributing to the implementation of shared policies to enhance the resilience of cities and society.



### Introduction

Presentation of the ECIU Public Engagement Guidelines and introduction of the conference participatory exercise (Mentimeter) designed to obtain the views of all the participants in the session, approximately 300 researchers.

Troels Jacobsen, University of Stavanger, Director of Innovation and External Collaboration

**Round Table:** all the panellists were asked to address the following questions from their particular vantage points:

1. How do you define public engagement?
2. What are the challenges to doing public engagement?
3. What are the positive outcomes of public engagement?

By way of introduction the facilitator spoke about the very diverse dynamics covered by the term public engagement, ranging from PPI (public patient involvement) in the health area, citizen science, participatory arts, lifelong learning, community learning, etc while highlighting, in particular the potential of ‘engaged research’ (that would include ‘citizen science’) for a research platform such as ECIU.

Active engagement with society; such as with community organisations or vulnerable and/or marginalised groups, can offer indispensable knowledge and in turn play a key role in addressing social issues and policy-making. Actively involving the public in the research process empowers the community to positively influence change, be it at a local, county, or national level.

Through Engaged Research the subject, the community, is placed at the heart of the research project and included throughout the various research stages.

What is at stake in these debates on the possible extension of the social mission of the university and the harnessing of knowledge to address social problems is the very future of the university in the 21st Century.

We must ask what needs to be done for the university to be continuously 'relevant' (to society) and 'responsive' (to the needs of society). This is potentially a win/win scenario for both the community and for the university.

**Facilitator:** Ronaldo Munck, Dublin City University, Director Centre for Engaged Research

**Kathryn Higgins and Andrew Grounds, Queen's Communities and Place (QCAP) spoke to this initiative based on engagement and partnership between academics, policy makers and some of the most deprived communities across Northern Ireland**

Supporting Places & Communities through Engagement, Research & Innovation: Advancing Social and Civic Responsibility Queen's Communities and Place (QCAP) exists to advance Queen's University Belfast's Strategy 2030 and its key priority regarding social and civic responsibility, and economic prosperity.

Queen's Communities and Place (QCAP) uses a place-based approach to address the inequalities experienced by communities through engagement and partnership with community and voluntary sector partners, policymakers and academics.

### **How do you define public engagement:**

Moving beyond the conceptual and to a practical and operational definition of public engagement with communities. Drawing on wider experiences and its work during the first two years, QCAP have developed 6 pillars which facilitate engagement with community partners across Belfast. These will be shared and outlined further with examples in the session.

### **What are the challenges to doing public engagement?**

- Public engagement represents more than parallel actions.
- Developing mutual agenda through mechanisms which facilitate engagement (AWG's)
- Communities want to hold on and have a high degree of pride in what they do.
- Challenges around organizational cultures, capability, competencies, knowledge, and skills.
- Funding the work (availability) but also the capacity to effectively leverage funding that can support transformational change.
- Learning how to be a critical friend but maintain a sound working relationship based on trust and equity.

## What are the positive outcomes of public engagement?

- Successfully leveraging resources as without them it is not possible to tackle stubborn and persistent local challenges.
- Building the capacity or competencies of the community to use these resources in an effective and sustainable way is also critical.
- Being relevant to the community and their needs, particularly when research tools or projects translate into practical support that creates positive outcomes.
- Making the institution more porous and allowing individuals or communities to experience what pathways and opportunities are possible or open to them.
- Acknowledging the layers of engagement and that transformational community-based outcomes are not possible without the right enabling environment.

Therefore, policy advocacy is critical to shape the right policy levers at the institutional level to help drive change at the grassroots in local communities.

**Begonya Saez Tajafuerce, Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, who works on gender, ethnic, class and sexual identity in cultural processes, has developed a module for ECIU will talk on Public Engagement: A Gender Perspective.**

I would like to begin by reading aloud a poem from the late sixties, written by a Danish female poet, Inger Christensen. As we know, the late sixties stand on their own as a paradigm for public engagement if we think of it as an epistemic - yet also political - *conditio sine qua non* for egalitarian relations of every sort and, therefore, also for egalitarian forms of governance.

The poem is entitled *A Society*.

*A society can be so stony  
that everything is one sheer block  
and the mass of inhabitants so bony  
that life has just entered into shock  
And the heart is entirely shadowed  
and the heart has almost given up  
until someone starts building  
a city that, as a body, is soft*

The first point I want to make is that I take Inger Christensen's poem to basically and at the same time radically convey what public engagement should be about, specifically from a Feminist perspective.

Public engagement should be about softening, softening societies and softening cities. Softening relations. Softening structures indeed. All sorts of structures that, given their stony character and effect, do not allow for the public space and whatever *action* takes place in it (Hannah Arendt), to be genuinely public, that is, open and accessible to everyone or, rather, to everybody.

Taking a step further into the poem, a second point can be made, when we realize that in "A Society", in "a city", the body appears to be the main reference for public engagement.

Both are conceived of here as a body, as a soft body. The material and the affective conditions for public engagement are thereby highlighted. For the heart, the heart of society, the heart of the city to keep beating, life has to be their driving force: change, transformation, innovation are crucial yet not any change, transformation or innovation count for public engagement.

Taking life into account is a major goal of Feminist political action today. In this very light, still the light of the poem, while I believe that public engagement needs to call upon governments, academia, industry, civil society and even environment because they are uncontested agents of public engagement, it also needs to consider life. Furthermore, life needs to be not only the focus of concern in public engagement policies, but equally its all encompassing actor. And life needs to count in its full diversity, because bodies are materially and affectively diverse.

The third and last point I want to make regards a significant aspect of this soft body of public engagement.

Maybe some of you have in mind the image at the cover page of Hobbes' *Leviathan*, the relevant political treatise written in the XVIIth century. We see here a literal representation of the body of the State, constituted by a multitude of bodies, a "mass of inhabitants so bony" that one hardly dares thinking are part of life even if it is clear that the State would not be alive without them. The logic that accounts for the relation among these bodies is domination. Domination is a petrifying logic resulting in harsh, disaffecting, alienating, and, in the end, unlivable, societies and cities; unlivable lives. Not any logic suits public engagement because not any logic and definitely not the logic of domination suits everybody.

Public engagement requires a logic of proximity, of belonging and of attachment that can grant and uphold common life as the basis for its collective vivification.

Such logic might ensure that public engagement and its results are not only effective but equally fair, that is, in accordance with the principle of justice and all its derivatives: sustainability indeed, but likewise equity and inclusiveness so that nobody is left behind, unasked, unheard or silenced.

**Roberto Martins, University Aveiro, a marine biologist working on green nano technology and other topics will talk to the 'citizen science' perspective in scientific research and the importance of public engagement.**

### **How do you define public engagement?**

Public engagement refers to the **process of involving and interacting with the public** in research or decision-making, discussions, and/or activities that impact society, policy, or projects. It should be a **two-way communication and interaction between institutions, organizations, or individuals and the public**, with the goal of gathering input, sharing information, and fostering a sense of participation, collaboration, and transparency. Key elements of public engagement include **inclusivity, transparency, two-way communication, participation, education, collaboration and accountability.**

## What are the positive outcomes of public engagement?

Public engagement can yield a wide range of positive outcomes for all involved parts. These outcomes contribute to more informed, equitable, and transparent decision-making processes. **Public engagement can:**

- lead to **innovative solutions and ideas** that may not have been considered otherwise, since researchers (or decision-makers) can have access broader pool of knowledge, experiences and perspectives. This can lead to better research and better-informed decisions that take into account a wider range of potential consequences and benefits.
- promote **sustainable practices and decisions** that consider long-term impacts. As an example, CARE project, a pilot funded in the framework of the SMART-ER project, mobilized large hundreds of citizen-scientists across Europe, to increase their environmental awareness across four main areas, water quality, air quality, biodiversity and waste management. As an example, it was possible to co-create a spatial-temporal monitoring program of one invasive marine species (*Arenicola marina*) which went to field in two seasons and collected a large quantity of data critical to recognize that the species expanded its distribution more than 10 km further south in the Ria de Aveiro coastal lagoon. Our post-activity survey showed that 92% of the citizen scientists found the activity very or extremely important, helping them to integrate concepts or even recognize that bioinvasions are an environmental and socioeconomic threat.
- **empower communities** by giving them a voice in decisions that impact their lives, leading to a sense of ownership and responsibility for community outcomes and strengthening democratic values and practices.
- **foster transparency, building trust between institutions and the public.** When people feel heard and included, they are more likely to trust the decisions made by those in authority.
- **enhance accountability.** Researchers, but also decision-makers, are more accountable when they are required to explain how our taxes are invested, and how public input influenced the research (or the decisions that were made, preventing arbitrary or biased decisions).

## What are the challenges to doing public engagement?

Some of the common challenges include, **diverse stakeholder interests** (it is important to balance the interests, cultural norms/values) and perspectives of diverse groups and ensure an equitable representation of these groups), **accessibility** (ensure that engagement methods and platforms are accessible to all, including marginalized or disadvantaged communities), **resource constraints** (organizations may have limitations in terms of time, money, and personnel staff), **balancing quantity and quality** (collecting a large quantity of input is not necessarily valuable if the quality of that input is low), **information overload** (the public may be inundated with information, making it difficult to understand complex issues or discern accurate information from misinformation), **trust issues** (building and maintaining trust between public and researchers or decision-makers is crucial, which includes deliver feedback to the engaged citizens, on how their input influenced research or decisions), **legal and ethical concerns** (it is important to comply with privacy laws, e.g., RGPD, obtain informed consent, and address ethical concerns related to data collection and use), finally, **measurement and evaluation** of the effectiveness of public engagement efforts can be also challenging.

**Poppy Kalesi, International relations coordinator, Rogoland County Council, who is Advisor to the North Sea Energy and Climate Change Working Group and Chair of the North Sea Commision's Fit for 55 Task Force, spoke about the challenges and opportunities for university research in informing policy.**

There is a huge range of opportunities, spanning from participating in elections to providing knowledge and input to planning processes. We need to consider:

- Presencing and absencing
- Choosing to participate and be involved
- Choosing to keep a distance

### **What works?**

Consciously using the space between the strategic and the practical for example:

- Climate neutrality to parking spaces
- Practical recommendations that clearly show impact in terms of cost, quality, effectiveness, level of engagement or business development ex. Begonia's analogy with resilience
- Advocacy down well, not questioning the impartiality of the researcher
- Softening structures works! Open and accessible to everyone.
- Taking life into account
- Daring to hold us accountable by involving us here today, and every day – what the University of Stavanger colleagues do with us.
- A 'can do' attitude rather than a firm no- a mindset of possibility

### **What doesn't?**

- Sending articles out of context
- Involving us too late in the process, when you need an alibi for dissemination
- Language and terms that are not universally understood.

Finally: After two days with the ECIU community I come away with a sense of renewed optimism and commitment to work together with the ECIU alliance to develop connected, resilient societies across Europe!

## **Recommendations (derived from the discussion online and two surveys)**

1. Public engagement- particularly as applied to the research mission as engaged research- represents an opportunity for ECIU to position itself as the leading network in Europe in its embedding, promotion and impact enhancement. By networking its member universities capabilities in this emerging priority area, it is well placed to scale up public engagement through engaged research to 'make a difference'. Concrete mechanisms need to be put in place to embed this area of work in ECIU strategy and activities. ECIU should re-instate a network of persons central at each university working with engagement. This can be administrators and academics having a key role in engagement with the society. This network could address the common challenges universities have with the collaboration with society, public and private. It could, in addition to the pure methodologies of PE, also develop possible joint projects of PE between our universities.

2. Resources and recognition are the key areas participants felt that ECIU could promote a step forward to the benefit of all. Participants highlighted the need to have more recognition and incentives for ER. This can come in the form of formal recognition, awards, increased chances of promotion, honorariums and increased spotlights on them and their work. As academia becomes more competitive, formal recognition for engaged research needs to be given for it to be mainstreamed across Europe. ECIU can play an important role in that regard.
3. Engaged Research Training needs to be further developed and scaled up. Additional training in ER; methodologies, evaluation, fostering new community relationships and partnerships, and dissemination tactics, are warranted to facilitate the development of ER in the member universities and across ECIU. This is especially pertinent for those in the early career stage who may need additional support. Respondents recognized that existing training is a valuable support, however additional and bespoke support is needed. This is an area where a blended mix of online teaching and dedicated research summer schools would have an impact.
4. There is a pressing need to develop robust impact evaluation measures. Evaluating ER, especially those in areas where outcomes are more difficult to quantify, needs to be addressed. This is increasingly relevant as funders and funding opportunities which emphasize impact. There has been some progress with the Open Science agenda, however much more is needed. When evaluating the impact of engaged research approaches many researchers have found this to be a real challenge. It would thus be opportune for ECIU to spearhead an innovative methodology in this area.
5. There is a need to consolidate our work with community partnerships through a common methodology, possibly to be developed across the ECIU network. Many of the participants referred to the fact that there is an over-reliance on personal contacts within organizations. The danger here is that once a person leaves either organization, a successful university-community relationship might be lost. There is a need to consolidate relationships between the university as a whole and community organizations to encourage sustainability of the relationship and to safeguard future research. Ultimately, it is about making relationships work for both the university and the social partners. We note the **ECIU Webinars on PE methodologies** run by Noelle Billon, INSA, there will be another one at the end of the year. Please follow on ECIU website.
6. Regarding the ethical and the political dimension of public engagement in the collaborative context given by a quadruple or quintuple Helix scheme, it is necessary to take differences into consideration (gender, sex, race, age, class, etc.) and, furthermore, to be aware of the way in which these differences intersect, increasing discrimination and, thus, epistemic injustice. In order for public engagement to be inclusive, sustainable and equitable, in one word, fair, it needs to be properly situated, that is, it requires paying attention to the material and affective life conditions of those expected to take part in all engagement actions for them to be truly transformative.



## APPENDIX 1







## What are your expectations for the ECIU Research Conference?







## What institutional-level recommendations would you prioritize in the PE engagement guidelines?





# Guidelines for Individual Researchers

- 1st Invest time to develop long-term relationships
- 2nd Develop interpersonal skills and competences
- 3rd Enhance your research communication skills.
- 4th Be pro-active
- 5th Commit to stakeholder engagement

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Mentimeter



## Any questions for the panellists or reflections you want to share

12 responses

What do you think is the difference between "public engagement" and "engaged research". Does the wording matter?

Do you have reflections upon how to work with data and ethical considerations when it comes to it democratisation? What democratisation of data entails?

I feel a little confused. Not researching/working in this field, I find it difficult to follow the panelists. Also, what was the question the panelists were going to answer?

I hear often that the good ones leave academia because they can't stomach what they see. To all panelists: how do we improve recruitment in academia so these nice values you share are not lost?

I'm a new Postdoc working on citizen science and the use of technology for participation in urban planning, there is research support/funding/ for keep working on research related to this topics?

Isn't it up to science to engage in society, next to asking society to engage in science?

If you work on silicon wafers (as an example) how would you apply public engagement?

How do you train researchers to be better prepared for public engagement?

By doing public engagement, do you think it contributes to decrease the rate of people in society who are manifesting about something against politicians and governments but clearly not informed?



## Any questions for the panellists or reflections you want to share

12 responses

Softening societies the idéal is great... dépends what do you mean with soft... liquid societies are probable not the signer one!

I think Ronnie's brief overview given after the panellists spoke, should have come in the beginning, to allow the audience to understand the basics. Some of us in the audience do not know this field.

One the public is engaged, how do you keep them engaged?

# ECIU continue with a PE community



## Share your ideas how ECIU should strengthen our capacity for PE

5 responses

Get more external funding from external stakeholders

Funding opportunities for students and more support for citizens science projects, and enhance collaboration with other universities outside Europe. Like tec of Monterrey,

Focus on communication and bringing the content level closer to the society to spark engagement. Also, break the bubble, bring research and researchers closer to real society and practical contexts

Develop a strategy, including definitions and best practices, to be presented at the EU level with the support of the BXL office to direct future funding opportunities for enhanced collaborations

Engage with CoARA on the topic via the ECIU VPR Group

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