

Blocked and thwarted – Public engagement professionals in higher education deserve greater recognition.

*Professional service staff specialising in public engagement in higher education institutions often occupy precarious and poorly defined positions. Drawing on a largescale qualitative study of public engagement professionals (PEPs), **Richard Watermeyer** and **Gene Rowe** discuss persistent issues described by PEPs in developing effective cultures of public engagement within higher education institutions and the ways in which the important boundary spanning roles they fulfil are often marginalised by university administrative structures.*

Before the pandemic hit and set in motion major changes to how universities operate, we undertook a study to better understand how leadership for public engagement in UK universities works.

We visited nine research intensive universities and one specialist research institute across England, Scotland and Wales, where we undertook focus groups with key public engagement personnel and/or staff with significant responsibility for public engagement. Our focus groups involved consultation of well over a hundred university staff, the vast majority of whom would be recognised as public engagement professionals (PEPs), nearly all of whom were found to work within their universities' professional service divisions.

The PEPs we spoke to told a story, common to most if not quite all working in higher education; of occupational struggle, cultural, procedural and structural roadblocks, and of their efforts in leading engagement being persistently frustrated and/or thwarted. In [writing up](#) this research we theorised PEPs working within universities as a community of 'boundary-crossers', who bridge academic and professional service realms. Public engagement as an activity that brings together academics and professional service staff, or more specifically PEPs, is thus correspondingly, a 'boundary object'. However, in the institutional settings we visited, we identified that PEPs' capacity to boundary cross is frequently inhibited and obstructed by what we have called, 'boundary-blocks' – forms or resistance to their leadership for public engagement that are endemic to the work culture of universities.

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Much has been written of public engagement in universities as a 'third mission' activity, which – in spite of significant investment by funders, directed particularly at institutional culture change, and a more recent association with research performance evaluation in the shape of a REF impact agenda – remains a very distant 'third', some way behind research and teaching as core priorities and levers of institutional prestige. Indeed, in the competitive hunt for positional goods of esteem, superior ranking, and let's not pretend otherwise, *finance*, which dominates the *modus operandi* of universities and their staff, the intrinsic value of public engagement is more often than not lost. Especially, for those in single-minded pursuit of more tangible, recognised and celebrated prizes, for instance, grant income and – if you'll excuse the REF parlance – 4* research outputs.



More than a decade on from the [Beacons for Public Engagement initiative](#), which in many ways kickstarted the formalisation of public engagement as an academic and institutional responsibility in UK universities, institutional infrastructure for public engagement is at best [patchy and in many cases neglected](#). We have found that those delegated its leadership have dwindled in numbers and are less than well-resourced in many settings. In fact, our focus group discussions revealed that while universities are quick to advertise their commitment to public engagement and their public engagement credentials, this is more often than not the stuff of artifice that disguises an altogether starker reality.

Instead, we found evidence of PEPs' leadership for public engagement routinely compromised by their poor role articulation within universities, the absence of an explicit and appropriate career structure, and the dearth of professional development and career progression opportunities. The PEPs we spoke to complained of a low career ceiling in universities and being unable to progress into more senior and better rewarded pay and grade profiles that more accurately reflect their accumulated expertise. Poor remuneration and relatedly, poor institutional recognition, they claimed, contribute to PEPs becoming disenchanted and prone to seeking alternative and improved employment opportunities at other institutions or outside of the higher education sector altogether, with obvious implications for the implementation of long-term strategy for public engagement within universities. Some of our focus group participants spoke of being 'in limbo'. Nearly all our participants addressed the precarious and typically short-term nature of PEPs' employment in universities and of PEPs being forced to frequently move between jobs and institutions.

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Universities run the constant risk, it would therefore seem, of surrendering their public engagement talent and squandering any internal gains or momentum in affecting an *engaged* work culture. However, the potential of any such gains may be heavily restricted given the obstacles to career progression faced by PEPs and of them being denied senior-level roles that provide opportunities for influencing institutional decision making. Our participants suggest that PEPs are largely frozen out of advocacy for public engagement at senior levels and lack institutional authority and agency, compounding the fate of public engagement as a low-status and marginal activity in universities. A problem of leadership for public engagement in universities is also seen to be exacerbated, where it is collapsed into broader strategic portfolios led by senior institutional managers with little understanding of, experience or appetite for public engagement. This leads us to also note that a gender bias for public engagement and a far greater representation of women than men, certainly as PEPs, loomed large in discussion and also characterised focus group participation, and was reflected upon both as an issue for public engagement leadership in universities and as part of an ongoing problem of gender inequality in higher education – concerns we are continuing to examine. The marginalising effects of such status games were also discussed in the context of PEPs, many of whom are educated to doctoral level, being *othered* by academics, who routinely fail to recognise their expertise and who are prejudiced by what they perceive to be PEPs' service role, and equally also professional service staff, with whom in most organisational structures they awkwardly sit.

And so, at a time where universities in the UK are making their submissions to REF2021 in which an obligation to evidence societal impact has intensified, many will assume that public engagement – as a primary route to impact generation and more controversially instance of impact – enjoys generous institutional support and well supported leadership. Some will also no doubt factor that universities' engagement with their local, national and international communities at a time of global crisis is never more pertinent. Yet the starker reality presented here dictates that universities are less than well equipped – culturally and organisationally – and still less accepting of the expertise necessary to fulfil their 'third' mission.

*This post draws on the authors' co-authored article, [Public engagement professionals in a prestige economy: Ghosts in the machine](#), published in *Studies in Higher Education*.*

Note: This review gives the views of the authors, and not the position of the LSE Impact Blog, or of the London School of Economics.

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