

Universities need proactive and imaginative strategies to communicate their research and to achieve high impact scores

by Blog Admin

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Knowledge brokers can provide a creative and sustained approach to publicising research and creating impact. Chris O'Brien, who has worked as a consultant on the University of Exeter's Prometheus project, argues that better communication can help to ensure that research catches the eye of governments and stakeholders.



The term “knowledge broker” is gaining increasing prominence in discussions on research impact. It refers to intermediaries that act as a bridge between academia and users of research, actively promoting research findings that have the potential to make a significant economic, social or cultural (or all three in a utopian existence) contribution to the wider world.

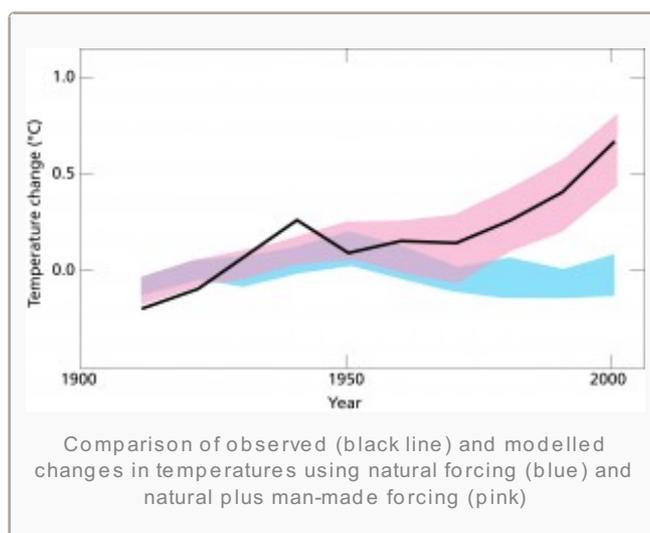
My own company, [Bulletin Academic](#), is an academic communications agency. It falls under the knowledge broker tag, occupying the often roomy space between researchers and the audiences they wish to influence: policymakers, industry, media and the public to name a few. From our experience, the institutions that succeed in implementing proactive, sustained and imaginative communications strategies for specific research projects – whatever the discipline – will score highest in the impact stakes. For this to be effective, universities will have to support individual academics by bringing together the skills and contact books of their communications, research & knowledge transfer, business development and design teams, as opposed to these departments working in relative isolation.

A recent project we took on for the University of Exeter serves as a useful case study for the importance of employing a long-term, creative and, at times, tenacious approach to achieving impact, and ensuring research reaches the right audiences that can translate findings into action.

The research

Academics at the Centre for Energy and the Environment (CEE) have devised free-to-download data files – as part of their [PROMETHEUS](#) project – that predict the weather up to 2080 and can be used by architects and engineers to test the resilience of any existing or future building design to climate change.

The data promises to be especially useful in protecting hospitals and schools from overheating as global temperatures continue to rise, avoiding a repeat of the thousands of deaths across Europe during the 2003 heat wave that were attributed to heat stress in buildings. The ultimate goal is to establish the PROMETHEUS files as a standard tool used by the building industry to adapt the built environment to climate change, a tool that is recognised and supported by policymakers.



The challenges

With the current emphasis on cost-cutting and a distinct preference among policymakers for climate change mitigation over adaptation, the academics face the challenge of persuading industry that the extra

investment required to adapt buildings to climate change is necessary.

Climate change policymaking is a messy business. The findings need to be communicated to policy advisors in the Department of Energy and Climate Change, the Committee on Climate Change, the Department for Communities and Local Government, the Environment Agency and the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs.

The strategy

We identified key industry bodies and government departments whose backing will be required for PROMETHEUS to succeed. We wrote two research briefings – one with a regulatory emphasis for the policy community and the other with a practical focus for industry – and distributed them to 100 leading architects, engineers, industry bodies and policy advisers.

We worked with the university's RKT team to attract companies to countrywide workshops, produced a document detailing PROMETHEUS's influence on the design process of four case studies including the UK's first zero-carbon primary school, informed stakeholders of the project's progress and used industry events as networking opportunities. We secured a speaking slot for a CEE academic at an event for government advisers and prepared a media briefing for distribution by the university's communications team. We then followed up the connections we had made to record evidence of impact.

The impact

By the end of our involvement the weather files were being used in more than £3 billion worth of building projects, influencing the sustainability practices of world-leading engineering and design firms, and were referenced in the government's [Low Carbon Construction Action Plan](#).

The inclusion of PROMETHEUS in a government paper is significant but should only be seen as a checkpoint along what promises to be a lengthy journey to four-star impact. This is where universities will need to invest resources in taking this kind of project further along the policy process long after funding for the actual academic research has run out.

Inevitably, the introduction of the impact element to the REF will drive the development of an integrated impact strategy across universities. Academic institutions will hopefully recognise that this investment will bring wider benefits in terms of profile raising, forming collaborations that can lead to additional funding opportunities and developing relationships that might enable subsequent research projects to achieve impact more easily.

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