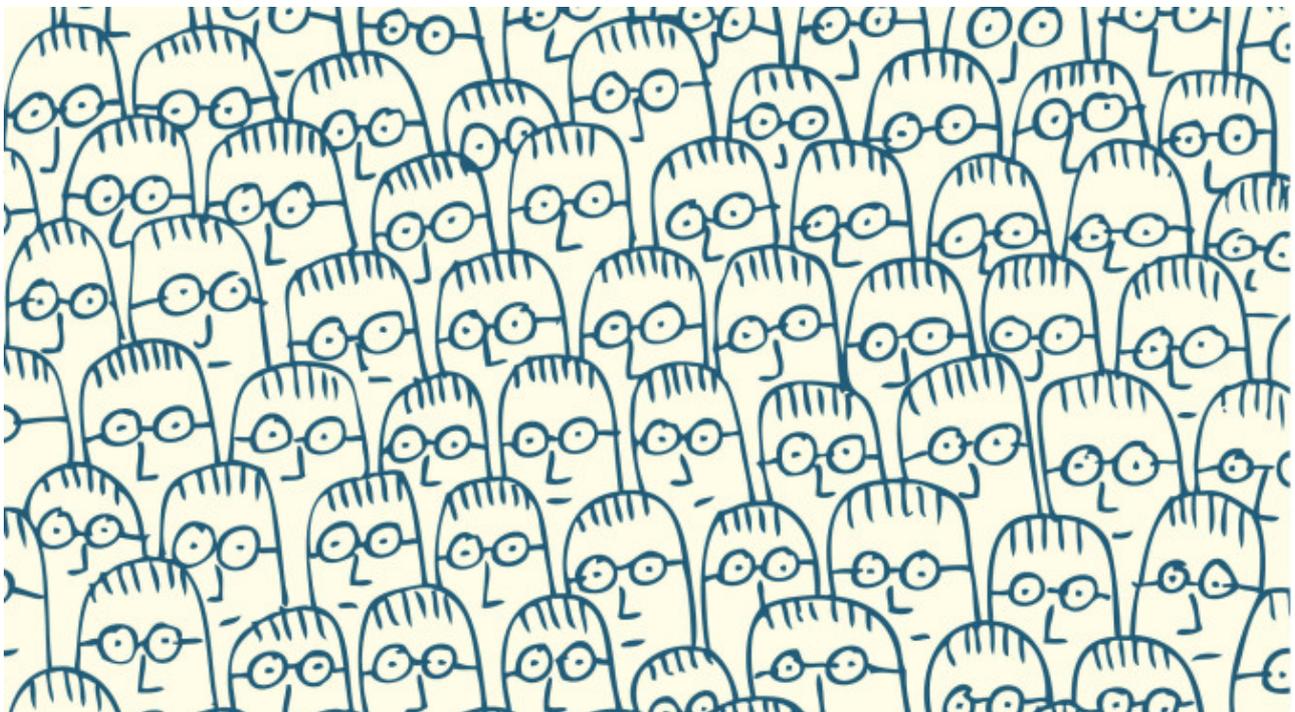




Scientists engaging with members of the public and other stakeholders have yet to gain recognition for doing so, as part of the career promotion criteria by which they will be evaluated. Yet, until such activity is better defined and further adopted by academic institutions, it is unlikely that further efforts would be devoted to raising the quality of these activities. In this opinion piece, based on the findings from research, Richard Holliman explains why.

Valuing engaged research



Giving adequate credit to scientists engaged with various publics and other stakeholders could stimulate many more to do it

Earlier this year, two related research papers on public engagement with research -- which represent an increasingly prevalent aspect of academic scholarship -- were published (they are available [here](#) and [here](#)). The papers document evidence from interviews with 40 UK academics, exploring the degree to which they feel that public engagement is valued within their respective universities as an equivalent activity when compared to teaching and research.

A number of issues are addressed in the two papers, including: academic identity, motivation, resourcing, support mechanisms and processes of recognition. The results and interpretations in the papers present a bleak picture, reflecting low levels of meaningful upstream engagement with

relevant publics and other stakeholders. And they provide no obvious solutions of how to address these issues.

Together, the two papers make important contributions to our understanding of the challenges facing academics working the field of public engagement with research. Having read them, however, I was left with a number of unresolved questions to consider. Why should universities introduce measures to recognise the value of engaged research? If they should, what should be done to improve the current problems and in what order of priority? How can we encourage academics, in particular postgraduate and early career researchers, to become more engaged with publics through their research endeavours without offering false hope of successful career progression? And, much closer to home, why should I continue to work in this field if my career will suffer?

Ins and out of public engagement

It should come as no surprise to people who know me that these are questions I care passionately about. I recently led one of the eight [Public Engagement with Research Catalysts](#) initiatives funded by Research Councils UK and supported by the [National Coordinating Centre for Public Engagement](#). The remit for our project, '[An open research university](#)', was to introduce measures to address the difficult questions listed above. Our ultimate and very ambitious aim was to embed public engagement within the research culture at the Open University.

Our multi-disciplinary project, the findings from which are reported [here](#), was informed by action research. Like the author of the two papers mentioned above, Richard Watermeyer, we were also interested in how academics, in our case Open University researchers, were making sense of public engagement with research.

What we [encountered](#) was huge diversity in how academics from different disciplines define public engagement activities, the types of publics they value and what they see as measures of quality. It follows that one of the biggest challenges we faced throughout the three-year course of our project was a lack of shared understanding about the very thing we were trying to embed: public engagement with research.

Defining engaged research

This challenge became such a big issue that we decided to collaboratively produce a shared definition. In the end, this became a definition of [engaged research](#). This is due, in part, to the fact that defining who counted as a 'public' was too problematic when we considered research across all academic domains.

The definition is as follows:

Engaged research encompasses the different ways that researchers meaningfully interact with various stakeholders over any or all stages of a research process, from issue formulation, the production or co-creation of new knowledge, to knowledge evaluation and dissemination.

In this definition stakeholders may include user communities, and members of the public or groups who come into existence or develop an identity in relationship to the research process.

Having defined the very thing we were trying to change, we introduced a number of further interventions. For example, we developed measures of short- and long-term recognition, the former through an [Award Scheme](#), the latter through revised [promotion criteria](#) that offer careers paths for academics who can demonstrate excellence in engaged research.

There is clearly much more to be done to secure a sustainable future in this field, one where the [postgraduate researchers](#) of today can be confident that engaged research is an equivalent career path to success, compared to research and teaching.

Universities have it within their power to address many of the relevant issues, but they are not the only stakeholders that need to change. As we argue in the conclusion to our recent report entitled [An open research university](#), for a culture of engaged research to be sustainable in the medium to long-term also requires ongoing recognition and acceptance of its progressive values by researchers, funders and ultimately, policy-makers.

[Richard Holliman](#)

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