

## Developing further guidance on impact arising from public engagement in REF 2021

### Background

In his 'Independent evaluation of the Research Excellence Framework', Lord Stern recommended that:

“Guidance on the REF should make it clear that impact case studies should not be narrowly interpreted, need not solely focus on socio-economic impacts but should also include impact on government policy, on public engagement and understanding, on cultural life, on academic impacts outside the field, and impacts on teaching.”

A significant number of respondents to the funding bodies' consultation on REF 2021 ([REF 2017/02](#), paragraphs 80-81) highlighted the need for clearer guidance on capturing impact arising from public engagement.

Responding to these concerns, the initial high-level policy decisions on REF 2021, published in September 2017, set out the funding bodies' intention to ensure the REF could better capture the multiple and diverse pathways and mechanisms through which impact arises, including working with the panels to provide additional guidance on impact arising from public engagement ([REF 2017/01](#), paragraph 21).

### What is public engagement?

Although there were a number of mentions of public engagement as a route to impact in the 2014 guidance, no explicit definition of public engagement was provided. NCCPE offer some advice below that you might find useful to consider in your discussions:

Question	Answer
What is public engagement, in the context of the REF?	'Public engagement' (in the context of the REF) describes an approach to involving the public in <b>meaningful roles in the development, uptake and/or application of research</b> . The act of engaging the public with research <b>does not count as impact</b> . Impact is what happens when people <b>interact with the research, take it up, react or respond to it</b> . Public engagement doesn't just happen when the research is complete. It can (and often does) take place <b>before and during the research</b> – for instance, helping to shape its focus and direction and its relevance to potential users.
Are public engagement and dissemination the same thing?	Public engagement describes <b>mutually beneficial interactions</b> between researchers and citizens. It includes, but is not limited to dissemination, which is one of a number of techniques that might be deployed as part of a public engagement project to mediate the underpinning research and make it accessible beyond academia.

<p>Who are the 'public' in public engagement? How does public engagement sit alongside other kinds of user engagement?</p>	<p>There are found broad professional groups who might have an interest in research:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Policy makers</li> <li>• Civil society organisations, e.g. charities</li> <li>• Practitioners and professionals</li> <li>• Businesses and SMEs</li> </ul> <p>The roles played by the public when they engage with research are often associated with one of these professional groups. Publics might be defined as voters; learners; patients or service users; or as communities with a particular shared interest or who live in the same place etc. Speaking generically about 'the public' should be avoided where possible.</p> <p>One could argue that all of these groups constitute, in their totality, the 'public' of public engagement; or that 'public engagement' refers just to engagement of citizens, as opposed to people in professional capacities.</p>
--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------	--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------

### **Barriers to submitting case studies featuring public engagement**

The [evaluation of REF 2014 impact case studies](#) carried out by Kings College London and Digital Science demonstrated that a great diversity of impact types were in fact submitted. Similarly, the [NCCPE's review](#) estimated that around 45% of the total case study sample included some reference to public engagement.

However, both the Stern Review and the consultation reflected a concern that some types of impact, including those based around public engagement, were narrowly interpreted, or not well understood by the academic community, and that institutions were cautious about submitting such case studies in 2014. There is anecdotal evidence supporting this, with many people claiming that they were discouraged from submitting such case studies in 2014, and that in the run up to REF 2021, similar caution and restraint is being encouraged by many REF teams.

*What are the challenges to be overcome?*

In order to understand more fully the reasons why institutions might be reluctant to submit case studies based on public engagement, we would like you to answer the following questions:

- |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Can you think of an example of a case study that was not submitted to REF 2014 or might not be submitted to REF 2021 because of institutional concerns around submitting case studies based around public engagement? What were/are the perceived barriers?</li> <li>• Can you think of a case study based on public engagement that was submitted to REF 2014? In what ways – if at all – did it differ from those case studies featuring public engagement that were not submitted (e.g. scale, type of impact, beneficiaries)?</li> </ul> |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|

### **Overcoming institutions' concerns**

Lord Stern's review highlighted a perception within HEIs that some kinds of impact were likely to be valued more highly than others, and that this discouraged impacts arising from public engagement (and cultural engagement) from being submitted to REF 2014.

Anecdotal evidence suggested that there was a **perceived hierarchy of impact value**, held within institutions with some types of impact being more valued than others. Similarly, institutions were reported to have **limited confidence in the validity of certain types of evidence of impact**. For example, commercial impacts that could offer quantitative evidence of products sold or profits made were deemed by institutions to be a 'safer bet' than impacts on public understanding arising from cultural engagement.

However, [the NCCPE review](#) suggests that there was no significant difference in the scoring of case studies mentioning public engagement as a route to impact. Based on a small sample, they estimate that around 32% of the case studies featuring at least three mentions of engaging with the public were assessed as 3\* and 4\* (compared with 35% of case studies overall).

- How can REF guidance address the concerns that persist around case studies with public engagement as a pathway to impact?
- What broad areas should the guidance cover?

### **Format and presentation of guidance**

In REF 2014, guidance on impacts arising from public engagement was provided within the impact section of the panel criteria. The call for more detailed guidance raises several questions around the most effective way to present it, including (but not limited to):

- To what extent might distinguishing impacts arising from public engagement actually increase HEIs' concerns? Are they perceived to require additional effort, for example, in explaining the link to research?
- What level of detail is appropriate/helpful? How do we provide clarification without being perceived to be prescriptive?
- Are there any problems around terminology or definitions that need to be resolved?

### **NCCPE's pathways to impact framework and impact indicators**

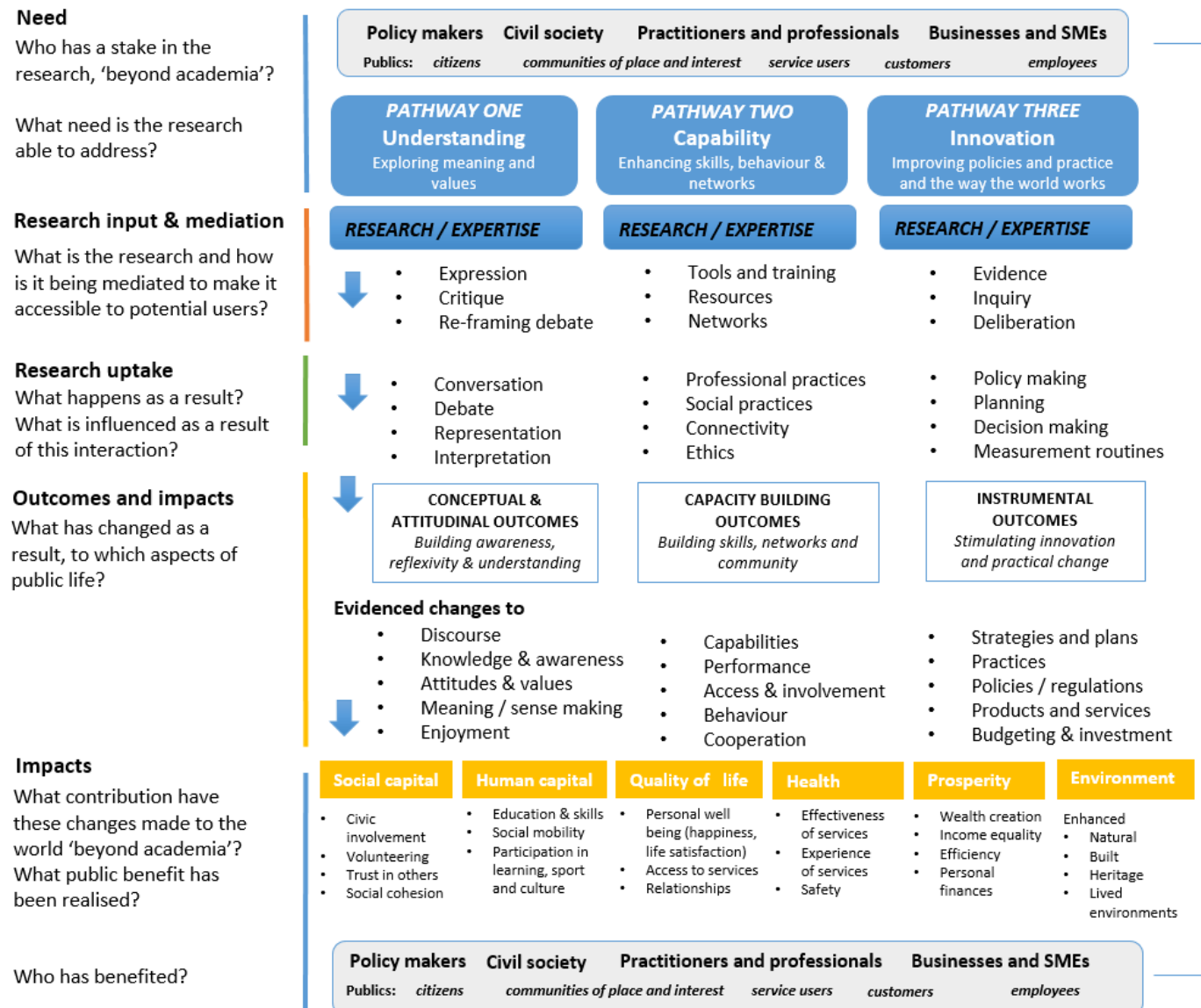
NCCPE have developed a framework which allows researchers and institutions to talk explicitly and robustly about how impacts arise from all forms of interaction with society, whether with citizens, policy makers, professionals, businesses etc. This pragmatic representation of different pathways to impact aims to reduce ambiguity and vagueness in discussions of public engagement. The framework is included in Annex 1. A much more detailed 'step by step' guide through the framework is available on request.

Bearing in mind the questions above:

- What concepts do you find helpful in the diagrams?
- Are there any aspects that you find problematic or confusing? Why?

- Are there other 'pathways' (not included in the NCCPE framework) that you think could help people better understand impacts arising from public engagement (and other forms of interaction)?
- To what extent and in what ways could these diagrams (or similar) be incorporated into REF guidance?
- What additional information/detail would you require?
- Are there other frameworks you are aware of which you would recommend?

## Annex: NCCPE framework for assessing impacts arising from public engagement



The next page shows how one of the outcome areas (social capital) might be expanded to offer more detail:

## Social capital

The concept of 'social capital' underpins the ONS choice of indicators of well being. They describe it as follows:

*'In general terms, social capital represents social connections and all the benefits they generate. Social capital is also associated with civic participation, civic-minded attitudes and values which are important for people to cooperate, such as tolerance or trust. "Social capital is the glue that holds societies together and without which there can be no economic growth or human well-being" (Grootaert, 1998). Without the social connections that link people to each other and lead them to exchange resources, without trust and other cooperative norms of behaviours, society could not function. The networks of individual relationships with family and friends, local community and through civic engagement, form the fabric of a cohesive society.'*

Their framework identifies four key aspects of social capital: personal relationships, social network support, civic engagement and trust and cooperative norms. Data and indicators to measure these are drawn from the Government's [Community Life survey](#), run annually by the Cabinet Office to look at the latest trends in areas such as volunteering, charitable giving, local action and networks and well-being; and from [Understanding Society](#), the UK household longitudinal survey which follows the lives of 40,000 UK households.

Drawing on this, and on their 'dashboard' of well-being indicators, we suggest that the following indicators of impact could usefully be applied to the REF:

Aspect of social capital	Indicators
<p><b>Civic Engagement</b>  <i>This refers to "the actions and behaviours that can be seen as contributing positively to the collective life of a community or society" (OECD, 2013). It includes activities such as volunteering, political participation and other forms of community actions. (ONS)</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Suggested measures include volunteering in the last 12 months; being involved in social action projects; voting in general elections; being involved in political action; being very or quite interested in politics</li> </ul>
<p><b>Relationships</b>  <i>This aspect of social capital refers to the "structure and nature of people's personal relationships" (OECD, 2013), and is concerned with who people know and what they do to establish and maintain their personal relationships. (ONS)</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Suggested measures include average rating of satisfaction with social and family life; meeting socially with friends and relatives or work colleagues at least once a week; regularly stopping to talk to people in the neighbourhood</li> </ul>
<p><b>Trust and cooperative norms</b>  <i>This refers to the trust and to the cooperative norms or shared values that shape the way people behave towards each other and as members of society. Trust and values that are beneficial for society as a whole (such as for example solidarity and equity) can determine how much people in a society are willing to cooperate with one another. (ONS)</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Suggested measures include: trust in national government; feeling that most people in their neighbourhood) can be trusted; feeling safe to walk alone after dark; agreeing that people around them are willing to help their neighbours</li> </ul>
<p><b>Social network support</b>  <i>This refers to "the level of resources or support that a person can draw from their personal relationships" (OECD, 2013), but also includes what people do for other individuals on a personal basis. (ONS)</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Suggested measures include whether respondents: Have a spouse, family member or friend to rely on if they have a serious problem; Give special help to at least one sick, disabled or elderly person living or not living with them; Borrow things and exchange favours with their neighbours</li> </ul>