Public Engagement Goals and Impacts

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Since Ernest Boyer's work redefining scholarship (1996), there has been a growing movement to increase focus on public engagement in higher education on the whole. This has included acknowledging that many disciplines have long conducted some form of public engagement, as well as recognizing the inherent value of engaged work and its alignment with the missions of higher education (e.g. Furco, 2010; Fitzgerald et al 2012; Franz 2010). This movement has articulated a larger view of the purpose behind public engagement: "to participate in the building of a more just society" (Boyer, 1996, p. 22).

At the same time, it's also important to consider the high-level goals and impacts for an individual's engaged efforts. While there are many ways to think about *why* you might conduct public engagement, below we present a summary of two frames that we've found particularly helpful when considering engagement at a more individual level.

Societal Goals

Fecher and Hebing (2021) sought to understand how researchers in Germany approach broader societal impact - what they define as the benefits that research holds for the economy, individual well-being, the environment, and culture. To prepare for their study, they performed a structuring content analysis of Research Excellence Framework (REF) impact case studies to develop a list of societal spheres and potential goals that researchers seek to accomplish through their work, summarized in the table below.[1]

Societal Sphere	Goal
Culture & Education	Create an entertainment offering
	Preserve cultural heritage
	Contribute to education
Innovation & Value Creation	Drive technical innovations
	Contribute to national and/or international security
	Contribute to economic growth

[1] The REF is the "UK's system for assessing the quality of research in UK higher education institutions" (https://www.ref.ac.uk/about/). It was first launched in 2014 and involves review of written narratives (impact case studies) to consider impact beyond academia.

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Environment & Health	Protect environment and biodiversity
	Contribute to the physical and mental wellbeing of the population
Civic Society & Social Justice	Improve processes and working conditions in organizations
	Strengthen disadvantaged groups
Politics & Public Discourse	Support legislative decision-making
	Contribute to informed political decision-making
	Stimulate public discourse

Consider: which of these goals most resonate with you and what you hope to accomplish at a high level through your scholarship?

Research Impact Typology

Reed (2018) defines impact as "the good that researchers can do in the world. It consists of the non-academic benefits that arise, whether directly or indirectly, from research." A leader in the field of impact and evaluation within public engagement, Reed has created a typology of ten impacts, shared in the table below. According to Reed, it's helpful to use this categorization to consider the full range of possible impacts; for instance, you might have a more narrow focus on one particular impact, but that impact in turn could lead to other impacts over time.

Type of Impact	Definition
Understanding and awareness	People understand an issue better than they did before, based on your research
Attitudinal	A change in attitudes, typically of a group of people who share similar views, towards a new attitude that brings them or others benefits
Economic	Monetary benefits arising from research, either in terms of money saved, costs avoided or increases in turnover, profit, funding or benefits to groups of people or the environment measured in monetary terms
Environmental	Benefits from research to genetic diversity, species or habitat conservation, and ecosystems, including the benefits that humans derive from a healthy environment

Health and well-being	Research that leads to better outcomes for the health of individuals, social groups or public health, including saving lives and improving people's quality of life, and wider benefits for the well-being of individuals or social groups, including both physical and social aspects such as emotional, psychological and economic well-being, and measures of life satisfaction
Policy	The contribution that research makes to new or amended laws, regulations or other policy mechanisms that enable them to meet a defined need or objective that delivers public benefit. Crucial to this definition is the fact that you are assessing the extent to which your research made a contribution, recognising that it is likely to be one of many factors influencing policy. It also goes beyond simply influencing policy, to enabling those policies to deliver public benefits. If the policy intervention would have had the same impact without the elements based on your research, can you really claim to have had impact? Arguing for the significance of your contribution is therefore an essential part of demonstrating that your research achieved policy impacts.
Other forms of decision-making and behavior change impacts	Whether directly or indirectly (via changes in understanding/awareness and attitudes), research can inform a wide range of individual, group and organizational behaviors and decisions leading to impacts that go beyond the economy, environment, health and well-being or policy.
Cultural	Changes in the prevailing values, attitudes, beliefs, discourse and patterns of behavior, whether explicit (e.g. codified in rules or law) or implicit (e.g. rules of thumb or accepted practices) in organizations, social groups or society that deliver benefits to the members of those groups or those they interact with
Other social	Benefits to specific social groups or society not covered by other types of impact, including, for example, access to education or improvements in human rights
Capacity or preparedness	Research that leads to new or enhanced capacity (physical, financial, natural, human resources or social capital and connectivity) that is likely to lead to future benefits, or that makes individuals, groups or organizations more prepared and better able to cope with changes that might otherwise impact negatively on them

Consider: which of these impacts most resonate with you and what you hope to accomplish at a high level through your scholarship?

Citations

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