



Engage your Research

An introductory guide to engaging & involving the public in research



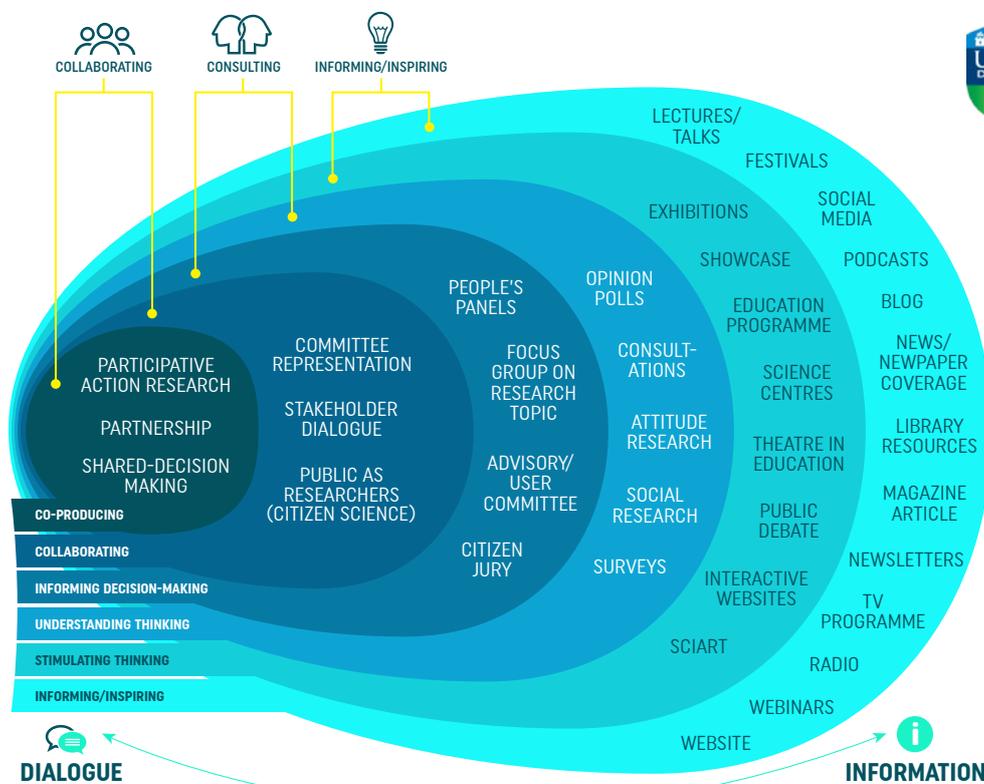
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Introduction

Public engagement in research encompasses a wide spectrum of activities (figure 1). This guidance document focuses on public engagement activities that foster sustainable two-way dialogue between academic research and civil society.

The focus on public engagement in research has evolved overtime. The focus of public engagement was once solely on enhancing research reputation (for example, through media articles) and education of the public (for example through public lectures). Promoting awareness and understanding of research in society is undoubtedly important, however, there is a growing acknowledge of the importance of two-way dialogue between researchers and civic society.



Based on Wellcome Trust Public Engagement 'Onion'- Adapted by the UCD Public Engagement Working Group

Figure 1: UCD Spectrum of Public Engagement

The science in society (SiS), and later science with and for society (SwfS), EU programmes demonstrated a clear added value when responsible research and innovation (RRI) approaches were applied. This led to RRI becoming enshrined in the Rome Declaration in 2014.

Responsible Research and Innovation (RRI) is an approach which implies that societal actors (including researchers, citizens, policy makers, companies and civil society organisations) work together in the whole research and innovation process in order to better align both the process and its outcomes with the values, needs and expectations of society. Public engagement is one of the six dimensions of RRI.

Responsible Research & Innovation (RRI)



Figure 2: Domains of RRI, adapted from RRI Tools (<https://rri-tools.eu/>)

RRI contains six dimensions:

	Public Engagement	See UCD Research Portal	➔
	Ethics	See UCD Research Ethics range of supports	➔
	Gender Equality	See UCD Equality, Diversity and Inclusion's range of EDI supports	➔
	Governance	Learn more about UCD's Research Governance guide	➔
	Open Access	See UCD Library's Open Scholarship Researcher's guide	➔
	Governance	See an example of UCD outreach to encourage Science Education in underrepresented communities	➔

In line with the RRI approach, this guidance document moves beyond engagement activities that focus only on educating the public about research. Rather, we provide guidance on research engagement to better align both the research process and its outcomes, with the values, needs and expectations of society.

Why Engage?

There is an increased focus on aligning strategic research with societal needs, expectations and values both nationally and within Europe. Engaging the public in different aspects of research design, conduct and dissemination can harness collective intelligence and improve science-society literacy in addition to improving the relationship between science and society.

Traditional Research	Engaged Research
Breaks new ground in the discipline.	Breaks new ground in the discipline and has direct application to broader public issues.
Answers significant questions in the discipline.	Answers significant questions in the discipline that have relevance to public or community issues.
Is reviewed and validated by qualified peers in the discipline.	Is reviewed and validated by qualified peers in the discipline and by members of the community.
Is based on solid theoretical basis.	Is based on solid theoretical and practical basis.
Applies appropriate investigative methods.	Applies appropriate investigative methods.
Is disseminated to appropriate audiences.	Is disseminated to appropriate academic and community audiences.
Makes significant advances in knowledge and understanding of the discipline.	Makes significant advances in knowledge and understanding of the discipline and public social issues.
	Applies the knowledge to address issues in the community.

Table developed by Prof. Andrew Furco, Professor of Higher Education and Associate Vice President for Public Engagement at the University of Minnesota

Public engagement acknowledges that knowledge produced by publicly funded research is a public good, and researchers should endeavour to maximize its impact. It challenges researchers to ask the question “how is this research relevant to society?” Understanding this creates an impact mindset, focusing your research where needed and sets your work on a trajectory toward future public benefit.

Benefits to Research

Engaging the public in research can provide a number of benefits to research, researchers and research organisations including:

- ✓ More impactful research outcomes
- ✓ More relevant research
- ✓ Greater accountability in research
- ✓ Novel perspectives
- ✓ New research ideas
- ✓ Expansion of network
- ✓ Enhanced motivation and focus
- ✓ Improved communications
- ✓ Increased public support for research
- ✓ Stronger funding applications

Why Engage?

Research funders increasingly expect public and citizen engagement

Engaging the public in research can provide a number of benefits to research, researchers and research organisations including:

“Support the development of policy and practice on ‘engaged research’ in Ireland”

A key Action in IRC’s 2020-2024 Strategy

Irish Research Council

The Irish Research Council (IRC) strongly promotes engagement as part of the research process. The IRC supported Campus Engage and the production of an Engaged Research Framework in 2017 to promote high quality and impactful research.

Science Foundation Ireland

Science Foundation Ireland’s (SFI) Strategy 2025 has advanced their definition of public engagement to acknowledge the importance of two-way dialogue with the public. They have increased their emphasis on engaged research practices. As part of their strategy to create “*A cohesive ecosystem*”, SFI aims to enhance the societal relevance of research by increasing active participation of citizens and stakeholders across all stages of research and innovation. One of their key actions is to “Incentivise and require researchers to engage early and often”.

Health Research Board

The Health Research Board (HRB) have been the pioneering funding organisation in Ireland for advancing public engagement in health research. In health and social care research, this is called public and patient involvement (PPI) in research. The HRB introduced a question on involving public(s) or patients in research design in 2014 and have been strategically implementing a culture change towards involved and engaged research ever since.

In HRB’s Strategy 2025, they have reemphasised their commitment to PPI. One of their key actions is to “Involve the public, patients and carers in HRB-funded research in order to ensure that it is relevant and usable and can catalyse cultural change in the research system.”

“We believe that putting knowledge users at the centre of all stages of the research that we fund, from design to delivery of results, will lead to improved research outcomes that are more likely to be applied in practice and deliver the greatest benefit for Ireland and its people”.

HRB Strategy 2025

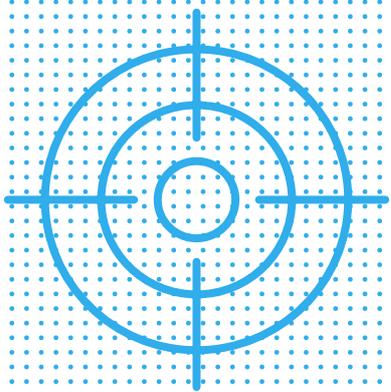
Why Engage?

“Citizens and end-users will therefore be important contributors to research and innovation outcomes”

Horizon Europe Programme Guide, 2021

Horizon Europe

In the latest workpackage for research in Europe, the EU commission has recognised that engaged research, including citizen science, was *“insufficiently recognised within the EU research and innovation system as conducting high-quality activities that can have numerous side-benefits”* and is specifically addressing this past under-investment in Horizon Europe. From the Horizon Europe Strategic Plan: *“Horizon Europe will also support and promote the involvement of citizens, civil society and end-users in public engagement, citizen science, and user-led innovation modes of research and innovation”*. Horizon Europe views public engagement as a cross-cutting issue and has embedded it across all missions.



How to Engage?

- How you engage and involve the public(s) in your research is entirely context dependent.
- It should always be driven by research need.
- The improvement of research and research impact should always be at the core of public engagement and involvement.

Preparing to engage

While every research project is unique, we encourage researchers to consider a set of questions when preparing and planning their engagement.

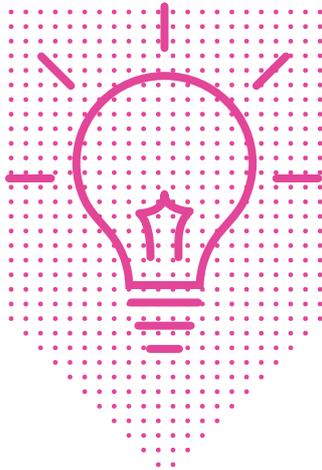
Why do you want to involve the public(s)?

- An ethical and practical reflection on why you want to engage people should be your first step.
- Develop a transparent justification for why you are involving these public(s), ensuring that this also aligns with research needs.

Are you going to be responsive to the suggestions of the public(s) you are involving?

- Public engagement in research is a two-way process with the goal of generating mutual beneficial impact. Impact is a change, be that to your own skills, your research concept and design, or the community.
- If you are not open to change, then engaging communities or patients will only be symbolic or perfunctory.
- You must give due consideration and respect to input from the public(s) you engage to avoid tokenism.

How to Engage?



Who should you engage and involve?

- Consider who your research intended for.
- Do the people you plan to engage reflect the users of your research?

How can you engage your targeted public(s)?

- Enable an informed choice for people to get involved by providing accessible, clear and transparent information.
- You are building a working relationship with people. You should be clear and transparent as to the goals of engagement.
- Be very clear with regards to expectations: what should the people you are engaging with expect from you? What do you expect from them?
- Be clear about how you will collaborate: what frequency, time commitment, how/how often you will communicate, how/how often will you feedback etc.

How to Engage?

Where to Engage Interested Public(s)

How do you actually find people interested in helping your research? There are numerous sources you can leverage to find and reach out to interested parties. This includes existing community groups, local and national organisations, and your own private and personal networks.



UCD PPI Ignite developed a core-set of values that we recommend you use when initially engaging and building relationships with interested public(s). The relationship building should begin at the pre-award stage of research projects (also called the pre-commencement stage). This stage includes the time before a research project/partnership starts and before funding is being applied for.

Respect refers to valuing the diverse perspectives, knowledge, and contribution of each individual, with an openness to learn from each other.



Openness is about active listening and being honest, transparent, receptive, explicit and clear.

Reciprocity focuses on mutual benefit, based on relationships of fairness and shared power.

Flexibility is about being responsive, open to new ideas, and allowing for adaptation and evolution.

For more information on the values-based approach to enable public engagement at the pre-commencement stage of research see the UCD PPI Ignite publication from 2020.

How to Engage?

Methods of engagement

There are numerous methods of involving the public in your research. Which you use will be context dependent. It will depend on you and your public contributors, your research needs, your budget, and your own ability, knowledge and expertise.



RRI Tools is an EU funded resource hub. It arose from an EU project to promote not only excellent but also socially desirable science and technology. It has a diverse toolkit of public engagement tools.



The **Engage2020** Consortium have created the Action Catalogue. The Action Catalogue is an interactive decision support tool to help researchers (and others) that want to conduct inclusive research find the participatory methods best suited to their specific needs. This tool is very comprehensive and covers a wide variety of engagement methods suited to local, national and transnational research projects, multiple levels of public involvement and multiple objectives of engaging the public.



Involve, the UK's public participation charity, has a resource bank of different types of public participation methods. These methods are categorised by type and research phase and are particularly applicable for public participation in aspects of agenda setting, policy development and implementation.



Campus Engage produced the Engaged Research Framework. This was developed specifically for the Irish context and provides guidance as to what questions to ask at each stage of the research process to identify opportunities for engagement, and it provides ideas for engagement methods that may be beneficial for each identified opportunity.



Engaging the public throughout the research cycle

The research cycle includes all aspects of the organising, planning, conducting, analysing and reporting on research. There are potential opportunities throughout these stages of the research cycle that could benefit from public involvement.

Fundamentally, whether you engage the public at each stages should be based on whether the collaboration is meaningful for all parties involved and, crucially, whether it will benefit the research or research impact.

The majority of research is not public facing but can still derive benefit from public engagement in research. If research is funded by the public, there is a professional responsibility for that research to be accessible and accountable. There is also a professional duty to contribute to the public understanding of research. Engaging the public throughout the research process can help to ensure these responsibilities are met.



Engaging the Public throughout the research cycle



Idea

The idea stage is where the foundations of a research project are laid. Engaging and involving the public at this stage of the research is important to improve and streamline the entire research cycle. Engaging with and encouraging discussion and debate between all relevant stakeholders including the potential users of the research (your target public(s)) can help to ensure your research is relevant. It gives the opportunity to uncover many over-looked aspects of a topic not commonly discussed in the professional literature. This can increase research novelty and highlight unmet needs of the community. Engaging and involving the public at this stage can strengthen community relationships to research.

When the target users of your research are included in the design, they can identify overlooked research considerations and opportunities.



Application

In preparing a funding application, the research ideas need to be further developed and tailored to align with the funding call. Involving the public in your research design helps to ensure that human factors are considered. When the target users of your research are included in the design, they may be able to identify over-looked research considerations and opportunities. They can also identify potential ethical or safety issues that need addressed before the study begins.

Collaborating with public contributors can help researchers to explain research ideas, concepts and relevance in a more accessible way. Good communication is key for successful funding applications. Refining the key messages and goals of your proposal can greatly benefit from review from a public mentor.

Engaging the Public throughout the research cycle



Award

During the awarding phase of a research grant, ethical approval will need to be obtained and recruitment of research staff and students may need to be mobilised.

Having involved the public in your research design helps to identify and address ethical issues in the design phase, thereby improving the research and improving the writing of ethics applications, potentially leading to faster approvals. Involving the public in reviewing or co-writing (where appropriate) ethics applications can lead to more fully thoughtout ethics applications and increase the likelihood that the core elements of ethics and informed consent are being met.

For research focused on making an impact to society and the public good, inclusion of a public contributor on the interview panel for research staff may assist in the assessing candidates in their transferable skills and their knowledge of a topic beyond the technical aspects. It also sets the environment for the research project by demonstrating from the outset that public engagement is an integrated aspect of the research.

Public members of the governance team can reinforce and strengthen project relevance, responsiveness and researcher accountability throughout the project lifecycle.



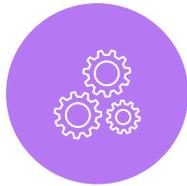
Set-Up

The set-up is the stage of the research cycle where project governance and oversight are established, and relevant project management plans put into place.

Similar to the rationale behind public engagement related to ethics; data and data sharing has resource, data security and ethical implications. Thus, engaging your public contributors can provide beneficial insights into aspects of the data management plan.

Public engagement in research governance (such as research advisory groups) can greatly help to build public trust in research as it acknowledges that the public have a genuine stake in the work and that public insight is valued. Including public members of the governance team can reinforce and strengthen project relevance, responsiveness and researcher accountability throughout the project lifecycle.

Engaging the Public throughout the research cycle



Run

This is the stage of the research cycle where methodology is applied to test your research hypotheses. In addition, effective project management, reporting, training, continued professional development and research enhancement activities all occur.

Different types of research are more amenable to the incorporation of public engagement in research methodology. Participatory action research (PAR) incorporates participants of research into a reflective cycle, whereby participants collect and analyse data, then determine what action should follow. PAR is most commonly applied to health and social care research. The [International Collaboration for Participatory Health Research](#) has resources for PAR.

Citizen Science encompasses a wide variety of activities and practices that recognises non-professionals as valued and empowered actors in advancing knowledge, research and innovation. For some, citizen science is synonymous with engaged research, others view it as disciplinary-specific alternative to PAR, whereas others view citizen science more narrowly in terms of citizen contribution to data collection. The European Citizen Science Association has developed [10 principles for citizen science](#) and [characteristics of citizen science](#) that can guide you on how to include citizen science within your own research. [EU Citizen Science](#) is a useful platform for sharing Citizen Science resources, tools, training and projects throughout Europe.

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Outcomes

Knowledge accumulation is one of the professional responsibilities of academic researchers. Scholarly communication alone is not sufficient to allow knowledge accumulation. Effective communication to all research stakeholders is an important aspect of research. To maximise the return on the public investment in research, research findings need to be communicated to the correct audience in an accessible manner.

Engaging the Public throughout the research cycle

Successful communication requires an understanding of the audience's information needs. Involving the public in communicating and dissemination can help you appropriately tailor your communication language and style to your audience and increase creativity in how research findings are disseminated. An outside voice not indoctrinated into the traditional methods of science communication can promote alternative dissemination practices.



Impact

Research impact encompasses the longer-term changes that result from outputs and outcomes. There are bottlenecks in the academic system that can prevent potential impact from being realised. Public involvement may be key to closing the gap between research production and research use. Involving the public in the concept and design of research can make the research more relevant and thus more likely to be impactful.

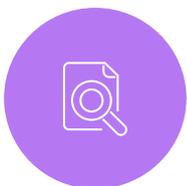
Public engagement helps with the diffusion of research and innovations among cultures and communities. Collaborating with the relevant public(s) and engaging in public dialogue together can have significant influence on policy decisions. Having the public actively informed and involved in research can have the knock-on benefit of these publics becoming informed advocates for research. Furthermore, a wider community of engaged stakeholders can help to identify the public and private enterprises that could fully exploit the research for public benefit.



Did You Know?

UCD have a Research Impact Toolkit that provides you with resources and tools to help you plan, capture, communicate and monitor the impact of your research.

www.ucd.ie/impacttoolkit/



Close

Although often overlooked, formal research project closeout can add exponential value to the research through lessons learned. Project closing can be a time of critical analysis and can help build resilience and improve the research process. Public involvement in the reflective process of project closure can provide beneficial input as to whether the whole scope of work has been truly “completed” from a public or non-academic perspective. Collaborating in the retrospective analysis can provide alternative perspectives on what the key lessons learned were and how these can be applied in future.

Terminology

Responsible Research & Innovation (RRI)

The term for integrating approaches within research to align both the research process and its outcomes with the values, needs and expectations of society. The goal of RRI is to improve research integrity by fostering the design of inclusive and sustainable research and innovation.

Public(s)

Refers to your targeted audience, be they communities of people based on their interests, passions or other shared circumstances. It should be noted that although some initiatives may be targeted to reach an interested 'general public', targeting the general public as if they were an undifferentiated group of people is rarely successful.

Public Engagement in Research

A broad term that includes the multi-faceted and varied ways researchers engage with others outside their field. It includes both civic and community engagement and often consists of different levels of activities, characterised based on their ability to influence research.

Involvement

A two-way knowledge exchange where the public(s) typically have a defined role and either inform or directly have a level of decision making. The target public(s) should jointly plan and/or conceive aspects of the research project.

Co-production

Co-production of research is an approach in which researchers, practitioners, and the public work together sharing power and responsibility from the start to the end of the research project. The sharing of power is a key principle in the co-production of research.

Public and Patient Involvement (PPI) in Research

PPI is the term for research involvement and co-production frequently used within the disciplines of health and social care research.



You can contact the PPI Ignite Network
@ UCD by emailing ppi@ucd.ie

Useful Resources

General Research Engagement

UCD Research Portal:

<https://www.ucd.ie/research/portal/outcomesandimpacts/publicengagementandengagedresearch/>

Campus Engage:

<https://www.campusengage.ie/>

Foster Open Science Course “Engaging the Public in Responsible Research and Innovation”:

<https://www.fosteropenscience.eu/node/2749>

RRI Tools for Public Engagement:

<https://rri-tools.eu/en/public-engagement>

Living Knowledge Toolbox:

<https://www.livingknowledge.org/resources/toolbox/>

Community Based Participatory Research. A guide to ethical principles and practices:

https://www.publicengagement.ac.uk/sites/default/files/publication/cbpr_ethics_guide_web_november_2012.pdf

Public & Patient Involvement

PPI Ignite National Network:

www.ppinetwork.ie

Health Research Charities Ireland (HRCI) Guides on Public & Patient Involvement:

<https://hrci.ie/publications/patient-public-involvement/>

European Patients’ Academy on Therapeutic Innovation (EUPATI) Toolbox on Patient Engagement:

https://toolbox.eupati.eu/resources/?post_types=peresource

Citizen Science

European Citizen Science Association:

<https://ecsa.citizen-science.net/>

EU Citizen Science Training Platform:

<https://moodle.eu-citizen.science/>

