

German and South African Public Engagement Exchange

Cape Town | 2022

Senior Round Table Report



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INTRODUCTION

In December 2022, the Berlin School of Public Engagement and Open Science, in collaboration with the South African Department of Science and Innovation and the German Federal Ministry of Education and Research, hosted a Senior Round Table (SRT) on Public Engagement (PE) in Cape Town, South Africa. The SRT brought together individuals operating at a senior level in Research Institution Management, Research Funding, Research Policy, and Public Engagement Support and Delivery in South Africa and Germany. The task was to discuss the status and potential of Public Engagement with research to inform future agendas for cooperation and funding between South Africa and Germany.

The SRT, sought to:

- Identify the opportunities and benefits that embedding Public Engagement Practice could bring to organisational research structures and cultures, nationally and internationally,
- understand what opportunities in adopting an international approach to engagement, and
- identify the barriers to achieving these goals; structural, attitudinal, perceived, or fully evidenced, and how can we overcome them.

The output of the round table is this report for participants and funders, which intends to inform future agendas for cooperation and funding, and provide recommendations for future activities.

For the purposes of the round table, we used the following definitions:

PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT

Public engagement describes the myriad of ways in which the activity and benefits of higher education and research can be shared with the public. Engagement is by definition a two-way process, involving interaction and listening, with the goal of generating mutual benefit.

National Coordinating Centre for
Public Engagement, UK

PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT PRACTICE

The delivery, facilitation, and support of ethical and meaningful Public Engagement.

Public Engagement practice includes the delivery of Public Engagement from an individual to an institutional level, the institutional embedding of Public Engagement, training for Public Engagement, and creating awareness around the importance of participatory research and engagement processes.

Berlin School of Public Engagement

SENIOR ROUND TABLE

WELCOME

Mr Khaya Sishuba, Director, Overseas Bilateral Cooperation, Department of Science and Innovation, South Africa, and Mr Frithjof Maennel, Head of the Directorate for International Cooperation, Federal Ministry of Education and Research, Germany, welcomed delegates, and gave introductory speeches. Both parties touched on how Public Engagement is at the core of democracy, and how it underpins large scientific infrastructures. They looked forward to investigating the potential of an international partnership on the topic.

DISCUSSION POINT #1

What opportunities and benefits could embedding Public Engagement Practice bring to your organisational research structures and cultures?

Participants were asked to reflect on the above question and significant areas of commonality were identified.

Accountability of public spending on research was immediately recognised as an area in which most could benefit. Another area of commonality is in the potential to shape research questions through dialogue, and the professional development of researchers. It was recognised that basic or fundamental sciences are often overlooked yet have great potential for contributing to, and benefiting from, PE. Participants thought researchers can often have a very narrow focus or specialism, and a broadening of research, and researcher, perspectives through PE is fundamental to innovation in the research system and has the potential to revitalise research culture.

Further reflecting on culture change, from an institutional point of view, well connected and managed engagement with society, and with each other, has far-reaching implications. Our research institutions, research funders, science centres and museums should be viewed as anchor institutes within their communities. Embedding PE in institutional culture was recognised as potentially contributing to institutional mission, reputation, and relations in, e.g. Equality, diversity, and inclusion, teaching, and civic responsibility and partnership.

A significant area of discussion was around the benefits to society. Trust was a key word here. The participants see opportunities to develop trust and encourage critical dialogue through engagement. A crucial point is in the timeframe of engagement. Ethical engagement and social justice thinking should be incorporated throughout research not just at the end. Engagement projects should be developed with and not for citizens to build trust and inclusivity in research.

Discussion further emphasised PE is not an end point in itself, but a tool to achieve our goals. As with any tool, it requires practice and knowledge to implement well. Significant discussion came up regarding models of engagement. Science literacy was considered by some to be a prerequisite for engagement, while others saw this as an outdated deficit model approach not taking into account that individuals will respond differently depending on their background, values, culture, beliefs etc. The concept of science capital¹ as opposed to science literacy was discussed as a model enabling citizens to value research and feel the value to themselves. This is considered an area that would benefit from further discussion.

1. <https://nustem.uk/resource/what-is-science-capital/>

DISCUSSION POINT #2

What are the opportunities in adopting an international approach to engagement?

Participants were asked to consider the above question.

It was expressed that as we face global challenges together we need to work together to overcome them. Recognising that concepts from the global south, independent from the global north, should have equal weight in shaping research agenda, adopting an international approach can contribute to breaking out of silos of discipline and culture, and integrate diverse values. Bilateral funding of research engagement could also open up representation and intersectionality in research priority setting. Localised recognition and credibility of PE could be significantly bolstered through international collaboration and funding. It is agreed this would in turn create an interest and demand for engaged practice.

An international approach is also considered an opportunity to reduce PE project costs, and potentially research costs, through collaboration, sharing resources, and pooling expertise. In addition, opportunities of scalability are more likely to be recognised and acted upon. As new technology has opened up new ways to connect, and new possibilities for collaboration, there is now an opportunity to integrate PE into funding streams or the work packages of international projects.

Through building communities of diverse practitioners, we can create and adapt strategies and tools with wider sources of reference. However, a lack of awareness of the value of PE to the Academy was also a theme, with calls for training and policy setting at multiple levels to create integrated and strategic support for PE. Participants recommended identifying, empowering, and connecting powerful champions of PE to advocate for PE practice in our institutes, and for resources to empower African researchers and practitioners in order to amplify existing work.

Another focus was the benefit to research. Drawing on PE infrastructure and expertise internationally is an opportunity to strengthen research connections, lead to profitable exchanges of concepts, and can challenge any problems of extractivism and equity in research partnerships. Good practice can amplify the societal impact of research, and research policy. Finally, through thoughtful and purposeful collaboration, there is an opportunity here to lead the way globally in connecting PE practice and research into PE to further the academic fields of PE and science communication.

DISCUSSION POINT #3

What are the current barriers for an international approach on Public Engagement? What potential actions could be taken to overcome these barriers?

Participants were asked to think of immediate barriers to an international approach to PE, and any potential ways to overcome these. This was an interactive session allowing input from any participant on any point, resulting in a wall of recognised barriers and potential actions. These are graphically summarised in [Appendix 1](#).

1

STRUCTURAL BARRIERS

Barriers here included language, funding, recognition and support.

Language, academic and spoken, are a barrier. There are technological ways to overcome spoken and written language barriers, and accessibility issues created through the use of jargon can be overcome by communication training complemented by the opportunity to practice. There are potential advantages to be gained in multi-lingual teams, in that they bring a diversity of perspectives, as summarised below.

In terms of **funding**, participants suggested now was the time to integrate ring fenced PE funding into international research and bilateral activity, but this must be accompanied by measures to hold researchers accountable and recognise them for the quality of their activity. Different funder regulations and procedures were also considered a barrier that could potentially be overcome by international collaboration between policymakers and funders. A clear call was also made to invest in research into the value of PE to the research community in order to demonstrate this value and accelerate an embedding of engaged practice in these communities.

A final structural barrier was in terms of institutional recognition and support for PE. Researchers are rarely recognised or supported in their PE, they have competing priorities and many do not recognise PE as a profitable activity. This aspect is discussed further in attitudinal barriers below. There was a variety of suggestions for overcoming the structural barriers here, including investing in support frameworks or creating a strategic white paper for the policy and academic community on PE practice, and linking PE to research excellence and promotional criteria. There was also a call to develop widely recognised and accredited training concepts for researchers and practitioners.

2

CULTURAL BARRIERS

Participants remarked on cultural differences such as social relations, hierarchies, value systems, and histories. There is also significant legacy and historical differences leading to unequal power relations, a lack of equity in terms of access to infrastructure, an imbalance of resources, and research colonialism. However it was also recognised that engaged practice in research has significant potential to overcome these barriers through facilitating communication, partnership, and transparency.

Participants recommended cultivating collaborations and partnerships in the practice and assessment of PE, linked to professional mentoring of these shared approaches to ensure the inclusion of ethics and value systems that embrace divergent viewpoints.

Further suggestions included creating funding calls on research themes focussing on intersectionality, and PE collaborations that mandate diverse perspectives and research teams or between natural and social sciences. In all of this there was also a call for facilitated dialogue and listening between all stakeholders from all sectors, and a focus on thought leadership.

3

COMPETENCIES OR ATTITUDINAL BARRIERS

Attitudinal barriers included current stigma or doubt about the value of PE, or its dismissal as a fringe activity not integral to research culture. This is exacerbated by a lack of an academic evidence base with which to demonstrate the value of PE to research. These attitudes, plus a lack of time or resources, reinforce PE as a low priority for leading researchers. In younger researchers, although there is more appetite for engagement practice, there is a lack of skills and competencies and low confidence levels in interacting with publics.

It is suggested we identify engagement champions across both countries, recognise them and fund exchanges. Linking PE practice to research excellence and promotional criteria was also thought to potentially be a significant driver of change, as is training together and further opportunities to network and practice skills learnt. This must however be linked to a campaign of recognition and visibility in order to influence wider research culture.

Another action in overcoming these barriers was a suggestion that we should interrogate the barriers themselves through international research and evaluation, which in turn will expand the evidence base regarding the value of Public Engagement to the academic community as well as the public.

INPUT FROM PRACTITIONERS

Complementary to this Senior Round Table the Berlin School of Public Engagement also facilitated training workshops in Cape Town with researchers and PE professionals. The attendees were asked to comment on what they thought was the value of PE to society, research institutions, and to researchers, and on the barriers and potential motivators for researchers undertaking PE. PE professionals were also asked to comment on their recommendations for future international interactions.

The results of these queries are listed in [Appendix 2](#), and have been taken into consideration in drafting the recommendations on the following pages.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Berlin School of Public Engagement represents significant expertise and wide ranging practical knowledge in PE training, strategy, policy and internationalisation. As round table hosts the School has curated comments and recommendations from senior leaders and practitioners, to recommend the following activities be considered in taking forward international activity around Public Engagement.

1

RECOMMENDATIONS

Scalable training linked to delivery opportunities and exchange programmes.

Activities to be considered here include:

- Online, accredited, training portfolio concepts for international groups of researchers and PE professionals, defined as individuals whose job descriptions include a remit to support PE or science communication.
- Further development of professional networks and communities of practice from a national to an international scale.
- Supported opportunities to participate in low-barrier international activities such as online international research show-cases, and other bi-directionally scalable activities.
- Opportunities for in-person international knowledge exchange, mentoring, and collaboration through international exchange programmes.
- Competitive seed funding opportunities for innovative international collaborations.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Culture change initiatives.

Activities to be considered here include:

- Development of international initiatives to create recognition of PE activity, such as Excellence awards or Funding of activity (e.g. exchanges, training, and seed funding as above)
- Co-create a toolkit of institutional embedding initiatives for HEIs.
- Create highly recognised, ring-fenced, accountable PE funding.
- Host further international round tables taking a more granular focus on PE in research, e.g. between the [German Rector's Conference](#) and [Universities South Africa](#) building on evidence around the institutional value of PE in terms of research, teaching, and reputation.
 - *This in turn could be presented as a joint initiative to the [International Association of University Presidents](#).*
- Draft a white paper that informs policy makers on recommendations on embedding PE in research for national and international impact.
- Integrate PE into bilateral calls for research collaborations and use these to evidence value
- Ensure that practitioners are included in funding review panels.
- Create new calls requiring the inclusion of diverse perspectives internationally in terms of both research and community involvement.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Research and evidencing of the value of PE.

Activities to be considered here include:

- Innovative funding calls for practice-based research into PE. Examples of focal research areas might include,
 - *PE barriers and motivators.*
 - *Value of PE to research, researchers, and institutions.*
 - *A purpose orientated model of PE practice.*
- Develop an impact model for embedding PE in research culture

APPENDIX 1

Barriers and Opportunities for an international approach of public engagement.

BARRIERS

OPPORTUNITIES

STRUCTURAL



COMPETENCIES AND ATTITUDES



CULTURAL



DESIRES FOR FUTURE WORK AND COLLABORATION

PE professionals were asked what they desired in terms of future work and collaboration on an international footing. Below are the collected inputs from participants in our workshop, in their words, as collected on the day. PE Professionals were asked what they perceived in their daily practice to be the fundamental value of PE to institutions, researchers and society, and what the barriers and potential motivators for participating and leading PE might be for researchers.

INTERNATIONAL PE COLLABORATION AND KNOWLEDGE EXCHANGE

International activity

International activities

Capacity development through exchange programmes

Opportunities for research institutions and PE teams to collaborate and undertake institutional visits.

International KE, training and collaboration

Knowledge exchange (x 4)

Knowledge sharing

Community building

Community building for PE

TRAINING AND RESEARCH

Accredited sci comm courses for practitioners

Accredited science communicator course for science engagement practitioners

Training on how to measure impact as a PE practitioner

How to co-engage and co-design research with the public

PE training

CE workshop

How to evaluate your PE

Further studying of PE and Sci Comm

Research on science education performance

Research collaborations

FUNDING, MOTIVATIONS AND STRUCTURE

Funding

Can funding and growth opportunities be offered to everyone who is interested and not let job titles or descriptions be a hindering factor

Create more permanent structures so that science communicators can have permanent employment

Provide career promotion opportunities

Change policy to make incentives for researchers so that they will be motivated to engage

Make PE compulsory for researchers

Create time to communicate!

More CE activities and initiatives in South Africa

How can researchers help science centres become knowledge hubs

How relevant is your research to people in rural areas

VALUES, BARRIERS, AND MOTIVATIONS

VALUE TO THE INSTITUTION

- social responsibility
- funding requirement
- recruiting future researchers
- support form communities
- marketing tool
- priority setting
- identity and reputation
- community relations

VALUE TO THE SOCIETY

- informed decision making
- awareness of research activity
- helping solve problems
- enhance knowledge
- increase public support
- inspiration
- collaboration to benefit communities

VALUE TO RESEARCHER

- improve skills and practice
- increases self value and meaning
- new perspectives
- driving implementation
- raise profile
- raising trust
- countering fake news
- de-politicising science

BARRIERS FOR RESEARCHERS

- lack of skills
- lack of time
- language barriers
- lack of relevant pitching
- lack of awareness of value of research
- lack of professional interest
- lack of understanding of value to themselves
- no rewards or incentives
- lack of funding
- stigma
- focus on academic publications
- de-politicising science

OVERCOMING BARRIERS FOR RESEARCHERS

- funding
- training
- motivation
- incentives - recognition, e.g. promotion
- practice
- novelty
- impact
- opportunities to profile
- workload mgmt
- support, e.g. logistics
- starting small and scaling
- policy around research
- accountability
- opportunities for transfer/ innovation/ exchange



IMPRESSUM

Berlin School of Public Engagement and Open Science

Museum für Naturkunde Berlin
Leibniz-Institut für Evolutions- und Biodiversitätsforschung
Invalidenstraße 43, 10115 Berlin
www.museumfuernaturkunde.berlin
www.publicengagement.berlin

CONTACT:

Dr. Mhairi Stewart
mhairi.stewart@mfn.berlin

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