Early Career Researchers and Public Engagement at UCL

A qualitative study for the UCL Public Engagement Unit funded via the Higher Education Funding Council for England

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report is the result of a Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) funded internship based at the UCL Public Engagement Unit. Building upon previous research for the UCL Public Engagement Unit, qualitative research was carried out to investigate the involvement of Early Career Researchers in public engagement at UCL. The report aims to respond to the following questions posed by the Public Engagement Unit:

- Are Early Career Researchers involved in public engagement? If not, why?
- What are the perceived or encountered barriers to involvement?
- Do participants have suggestions for promotion of public engagement?
- How might public engagement fit into a research career?

A sample of 17 semi-structured interviews of Early Career Researchers, drawn from various UCL faculties, revealed a largely positive view of public engagement.

Public engagement was found to be valued by Early Career Researchers on both professional and personal levels as exemplified in the following:

- Opportunity to inspire others
- Enjoyment of public engagement experiences
- Opportunity to reflect upon research
- Fulfilling a sense of duty to others
- Positive impact on research careers

However, mixed levels of awareness of public engagement opportunities were attributed to the influence of line managers upon Early Career Researcher activity. In career terms, the potential impact of the predisposition of individual researchers towards public engagement was notable.

The following key barriers (both perceived and encountered) to involvement in public engagement were highlighted.

- Time constraints
- A perceived lack of support either from line managers or broader networks within UCL

The resulting recommendations for the promotion and support of public engagement amongst Early Career Researchers are outlined below.

- Acknowledgement of the influence of senior members of staff.
- Provision of a support network for those wishing to get involved with public engagement.
- Visible and accessible sources of public engagement opportunities.
- Tackling the key limiting factor of time constraints.
- Enabling much needed culture change at research group and departmental levels.
- Set up and promote evaluation systems for public engagement at UCL.

It is expected that the above would entail motivation and therefore incentives for Early Career Researcher involvement in public engagement beyond the personal and more clearly in the professional domain.
1 Abbreviations
ECR Early Career Researcher
HEFCE Higher Education Funding Council for England
PE Public Engagement
PEU UCL's Public Engagement Unit

2 Context
This research report is the outcome of an 8 week HEFCE funded internship undertaken by the author shortly after graduating from the UCL Department of Anthropology. Working within the UCL Public Engagement Unit, the author undertook qualitative research to consider the following questions surrounding ECRs at UCL and their involvement with public engagement activities:

- Are ECRs involved in public engagement? If not, why?
- What are the perceived or encountered barriers to involvement?
- Do participants have suggestions for promotion of public engagement?
- How might public engagement fit into a research career?

The above questions were raised as a result of the 2008 baseline survey of public engagement at UCL (FreshMinds 2008) and were also prompted by anecdotal evidence provided by the PEU staff. This report aims to respond to the above questions using the insights gained from 17 semi-structured interviews of ECRs at UCL. Clearly the scale of this research does not enable this report to prove truly representative of views across UCL, but should provide some food-for-thought as a PE strategy is developed and the above issues are tackled in coming months.

3 Methods
Initially the following working definition of ‘ECR’ was established, drawing upon that found in HEFCE and UCL documentation:

‘Those with no more than 6 full time equivalent years’ relevant work experience since they started their university research career (i.e. PhD or alternative route). Note that there is no age limit here.’

Definitions and examples of public engagement were also gathered from PEU and HEFCE documentation and drawn from the framework used in the 2008 baseline survey (FreshMinds 2008).

A qualitative research strategy was chosen in order to complement and build upon the quantitative survey previously carried out by FreshMinds on the behalf of the PEU. Semi-structured one-to-one interviews were planned, taking an informal approach in order to encourage ECRs to share their experiences and, more importantly, voice their opinions.

In the brief time span of the project, it was estimated it would be possible to contact and interview approximately 15 ECRs (one interview of which would form a pilot). The relative proportions of UCL researchers and graduate students as reported in the most recent Annual Review (UCL 2008) were then drawn upon to create a weighted sample in terms of
the faculties from which ECRs originated. A sample weighted in this way was intended to capture a wider range of viewpoints. (See Figure A for the targeted and actual numbers of participants from each faculty).

**Figure A**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Faculty</th>
<th>Number of participants actual (target)</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>UCL Arts &amp; Humanities</td>
<td>2 (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UCL Biomedical Sciences</td>
<td>4 (3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UCL Built Environment</td>
<td>3 (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UCL Engineering Sciences</td>
<td>2 (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UCL Laws</td>
<td>0 *</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UCL Life Sciences</td>
<td>2 (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UCL Mathematical &amp; Physical Sciences</td>
<td>2 (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UCL Social &amp; Historical Sciences</td>
<td>2 (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>17 (15)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* denotes considerably low number of faculty classified as ECR, therefore not targeted in this study.

Although the small sample size clearly prevents the research sample from being truly representative, efforts were made to create a sample that was 50% male and 50% female as well as contacting a third of participants who were not already in touch with the PE unit and therefore deemed ‘less involved’ in PE. It was also intended to ensure that both UK and International researchers featured in the sample. Research participants were recruited through a combination of following up existing contacts of staff at the PEU and emails forwarded via the graduate school or individual departments explaining the research and requesting participants. The final interview sample consisted of 9 UK and 8 International; 8 male and 9 female ECRs.

Based upon the aims of the project, an initial set of interview questions were formulated. In addition a participant consent form (asking permission to audio record the interviews and detailing how to withdraw from the study) was prepared. After the initial pilot interview, these questions were reviewed and refined such that a more complete and hopefully effective set of interview questions was established.

The interview recordings were anonymised (names and other key identifiers were omitted from recording) and transcribed so that the text could be analysed using Atlas (version 5.2) qualitative analysis software. A coding system for analysis was developed from existing documentation (namely the PEU Evaluation Classification System in development at the time of writing) within the PE unit and in reference to the previous baseline survey of PE at UCL (FreshMinds 2008). Please refer to the appendix for details of the coding system applied to interview transcripts.

A draft of the results and analysis aspects of this report was also circulated to all participants prior to completion to allow for their feedback and ensure those contributing felt that their views were well represented and their anonymity remained.
4 Results
The following presents the results of the interviews, dealt with as responses to each of the questions posed. Please see appendix for full details of the questions and information sheets provided at interviews.

4.1 What words come to mind when you hear of ‘public engagement’?
Some participants offered their own definitions of PE, such as that below:

“I always think of universities as being quite secular, sort of knowledge within that doesn’t get out there. So... PE meaning, taking that knowledge out there.”
(UCL Engineering Sciences ECR)

“...not about ‘telling’ people about things or about research at UCL but... about a dialogue and sharing expertise, about an exchange.”
(Social & Historical Sciences ECR)

Interviewees most frequently responded to this question in terms of the audience or the method of PE. Here the most frequently mentioned aspects of PE were ‘telling the public (about research)’ and ‘nurturing’ (i.e. providing support). Many references to the ‘general public’ were made, with the most attention given to ‘local schools’ as a key audience.

Concepts of PE were also presented in response to this question. These concepts varied from the broad “anything where you interacting with people who are not researchers in your domain” (Built Environment ECR), to those considering the potential impacts of PE and where their research or academia is sited in society as well as how such efforts relate to researchers on a more personal level:

“I think of impact and the extent to which your work plays role in society.”
(Social & Historical Sciences ECR)

“if we can get across ...these ideas then it can actually change the way they think about the world, which is quite a profound thing to get involved in.”
(Built Environment ECR)

“I think self validation more than anything. In a way we are up in our ivory towers when we are doing this research, but then in a way if you can’t relate to people then what good is that to humanity?” (Mathematical & Physical Sciences ECR)
4.2 These are the definitions used by UCL and the HEFCE. How well do you think they fit with your ideas?

The interviewee was shown two definitions of PE (see Section 8.2) and asked to talk about their own interpretation of PE. This question was intended as more of a talking point, to get interviewee thinking about PE and to ensure that there was at least some concurrence between what the interviewer and the interviewee were intended to discuss. This question also allowed some initial insight into evaluations of what PE could or should be.

Whilst a majority of interviewees were happy to accept the definitions provided, some brought up queries or criticisms. These related to ideas around knowledge exchange and the construction of knowledge:

“I wouldn’t say public engagement is about letting people know what we do, it’s all about new knowledge and building knowledge I suppose…” (Engineering Sciences ECR)

“New channels of communication and mutual understanding, I think that’s the main thing... but new channels of communication could still be a bit one way.” (Social & Historical Sciences ECR)

One participant noted how seeing these definitions in fact broadened his idea of what PE was about:

“I generally assumed PE was experts communicating their ideas downwards towards layman society, whereas the definitions here are more synergistic and mutual. I didn’t think of it from that angle.” (Biomedical Sciences ECR)

4.3 What public engagement are or have you been involved with?

Listed below are the types of PE mentioned (separate mentions of activities or projects were counted individually), from most to least frequently stated across all interviews.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Public Engagement</th>
<th>Number of Mentions across all interviews</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Media</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collaborative research</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Presenting</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Event</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Open day</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Writing/publications</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Training or mentoring</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Workshops</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fair/ exhibition</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interactive websites</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultural activities</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summer school</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Competition</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Debate</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use of public buildings</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Action learning activities and advisory processes were conspicuous in their absence, although a lack of clarity amongst participants in the definitions of these terms may explain this.

Of the audiences specified in response to this question, and aside from ‘the general public’ local schools featured heavily. Academics, students and community groups were not raised in terms of the PE that participants had been involved with.

The potentially ad hoc nature of PE was also raised by one participant at this point as follows.

“When we were doing fieldwork ...we had a crowd of passers-by gather and watch and ask us what we were doing...” (Engineering Sciences ECR)

### 4.4 Why did you get involved/ what motivated you to get involved with public engagement?

Key motivators raised here included: the opportunity to inspire others that PE can provide (35% of participants); an enjoyment of PE experiences (24%); a positive impact on careers (18%) (see also sections 5.9- 5.12); and encouragement from senior colleagues or line managers (18%).

“I enjoyed explaining things in a way that I wish they were explained to me”
(Biomedical Sciences ECR)

The opportunity for reflection upon research that is enabled by PE was raised as a motivator for 35% of participants. This is exemplified in the following:

“It’s more interesting seeing what happens in people’s minds when I’m talking to them about things and they aren’t trained in the same way I am.” (Arts & Humanities ECR)

A sense of duty to do PE was a commonly held motivation for involvement. 29% of participants highlighted that a sense of duty towards various groups had motivated their involvement in PE, ranging from colleagues in their department to future generations of researchers and society as a whole:

“Some of the public engagement I carried out, basically just to help out the colleagues who are leading other projects and they needed my specific expertise”
(Built Environment ECR)

“[some of] my close friends work in banks and hate it. So I’m there thinking that... well it’d be kind of difficult for them to switch now, but part of the reason that they work in banks is because they didn’t really like their degrees. So they are very intelligent guys, but they didn’t really have anything academic that really grabbed...” (Arts & Humanities ECR)
them and I think it’s kind of sad as there are a lot of subjects that people do at school that in their current form aren’t that exciting. So people pick one then go on and do it at university - fair enough. But there is lots of other stuff out there and I think it rests on the shoulders of people who are then doing that at a higher level like graduate study, who have been lucky enough to find their way into that, to then explain to kids in schools that there are other options at university and in fact there’s a million options.” (Biomedical Sciences ECR)

“I think it is important, because just at a societal level, people pay taxes to fund people like us to do research. So at the end of the day, you do have to kind of make sure that you are doing it not for yourself, but also for like the wider community on the whole. So reality check is probably it…” (Biomedical Sciences ECR)

4.5 What (if anything) would you like to do in terms of public engagement?
Responses to this question indicate that the most desired PE activities included:

- Collaborative work with people outside of academia
- Dialogue about the direction of research
- Telling the public about research
- Writing or publishing

There were, however, some reservations about carrying out such activities for example:

“I’m a big fan of the New Scientist. I would love to be able to write things for it, but it tends to be more like proper journalists who do that” (Life Sciences ECR)

One participant clearly specified dialogue as a desired aspect of the PE they would like to be involved with:

“Doing public engagement where the public says what they want and then we fulfil that, rather than us saying ‘we want to teach you about this’.”

(Mathematical & Physical Sciences ECR)

Where audience groups were highlighted in responses to this question, local schools and or young people were most often raised. Only one individual in the entire sample group specified adults as a group they would like to target in PE.

4.6 What do you consider to be ‘good’ or ‘bad’ public engagement?
There was a common theme in responses outlining ‘good’ PE as both interesting and relevant. For example:

“It wasn’t teaching people things, it was having a conversation with them about something which was relevant to them.” (Mathematical & Physical Sciences ECR)

There was also a call for transparency such that, for those involved, there are under “no illusions why they are there and what they are doing it for” (UCL Mathematical & Physical Sciences ECR).
Effective communication was raised as a key feature and also a major challenge of PE:

“Making the message simple but also communicating all the ‘ifs and buts’ effectively without completely alienating people. Which I think is sometimes nearly impossible.” (Built Environment ECR)

Conversely, perceived ‘bad’ PE was characterised as activities in which the needs of an audience were not met and a lack of understanding was therefore propagated. One participant made it particularly clear that a lack of two way dialogue characterised ‘bad’ PE:

“…plugging the university without listening to things coming back…” (UCL Arts & Humanities ECR)

Specific experiences of ‘bad’ PE were often linked to work with the media, such that one participant even went on to describe television and radio work as “an awful experience” (Built Environment ECR).

Indeed negative experiences for the ECRs themselves (i.e. beyond the public groups targeted by engagement) were also highlighted as an aspect of ‘bad’ PE as follows:

“I was there to do something that I wasn’t asked to do. I was a bit like ‘I don’t know guys; I’ve got work to do’. It could be bad for the researcher as well as the public I suppose.” (Engineering Sciences ECR)

The ultimate outcomes of PE were also raised in terms of its evaluation as ‘good’ or ‘bad’. One participant noted that the potential changes that PE can bring were an important aspect:

“I think it is important to make people think in a new way but I think to make people act in a new way is really, kind of, the litmus test of a public engagement.” (Social & Historical Sciences ECR)

4.7 Would you say that your viewpoint is typical of your dept / UCL/ broader public?

A number of key negative views of PE amongst colleagues, within departments or across UCL as a whole were observed in the responses to this question.

Speaking about views in their department, one participant explained: “I wouldn’t shout it from the treetops that I was doing it.” (Biomedical Sciences ECR)

Indeed the views of line managers were reflected upon a great deal in interviews, painting a picture of highly varied attitudes. Although undoubtedly there were some very positive indicators of line manager and departmental support of PE, there were very clear concerns that support was lacking and participation in PE could have a negative impact on working relations. Some examples are featured below:

“I wouldn’t say my supervisor was annoyed that I was doing it. When I kind of ran it past him, he was almost like joking about it and saying ‘oh yeah you’re neglecting your work’ and I was like ‘oh I’m fine’. There was a negative undertone to it. But I think that does vary across supervision. I think that mine is a lot more lenient than others in the building.” (Biomedical Sciences ECR)

“Theres one guy who’s really very, kind of, pro public engagement. He does alot of that stuff. So he very much actively promotes people in his group doing it. Apart from him - and he’s kind of an exception to the rule- there’s a feeling that you’re better
served doing your PhD, doing proper science, not spending your time - and it does take a lot of your time- dumbing it down. Which, ‘cause thats how a lot of people view it.” (Biomedical Sciences ECR)

“One frustrating thing is that its kind of.. almost frowned upon.” (Biomedical Sciences ECR)

“It represents a strong [positive] current of opinion in my department, but I would definitely not say it’s representative of the department.” (Social & Historical Sciences ECR)

“Our own group we all have time to sort of do this, some kind of public engagement.” (Life Sciences ECR)

4.8 In terms of your ideas, what do you think might prevent you from getting involved with public engagement?

All 17 participants raised the issue of limited time as a factor that may prevent their involvement with PE.

There was also a clear sense of a lack of opportunities to participate in PE. Further still, one international student specified that their status also prevented awareness of opportunities at UCL:

“I think mainly I am not from the UK so I don’t know the opportunities from the UK.” (Built Environment ECR)

This may highlight some PE issues specific to non-UK members of staff and students. Similarly, some participants stated that a lack of people or a network to draw upon in terms of PE prevented their involvement, and reaching that point was also time consuming:

“Building up a network I guess of like minded people and that takes time.” (UCL Mathematical & Physical Sciences ECR)

In addition a fear of failure in PE efforts and a perception of having little to offer was highlighted:

“So I think it’s a case of time and also of being allowed to fail. Sometimes that can be a difficult thing on me. I don’t allow myself to fail.” (Mathematical & Physical Sciences ECR)

“Well if you’re starting something, like a new project, you should be allowed to fail. And people can say well it was a good experiment, it was a failed experiment or whatever. Sometimes you feel that well I’ve got a stake in this’ and I can’t let it fail..... You know it can put you off a bit more. So you don’t want to start off a big project and talk to people, get people involved and they be disappointed.” (UCL Mathematical & Physical Sciences ECR)

“..often a problem of confidence. Just like they think that they haven’t got anything to tell anyone and then you realise, just by virtue of osmosis and kind of being around the subject and things for such a long time, you have got a lot to tell people. So long
as you can be like confident and go at it in the right way, you can be just as good as someone ten, twenty years older than you. So I think there’s a problem at the level of PhD students in them not thinking that’s an option because they are not experienced enough” (UCL Biomedical Sciences ECR)

There was a perceived lack of organisation and coordination, both in terms of having a central point of contact for PE opportunities and also in the PE activities themselves, such that a poorly organised PE activity could in itself prevent participation.

“I think sometimes there’s often like, no unified organisation where I can be interested in this.” (UCL Mathematical & Physical Sciences ECR)

“Probably a bad organizational team, for example if you are organising a press conference, you have a lot of people involved. If the organisation is a mess it isn’t fun - because then you are just trouble shooting all the time. I haven’t seen that at UCL. UCL is well organised. But that would definitely put me off.” (UCL Biomedical Sciences ECR)

The influence of senior colleagues, to the ECRs, was reflected upon a great deal in response to this question. The following responses were quite typical:

“so if you tell my supervisor and he doesn’t push you and encourage you to do it... If I give my supervisor an idea and he’s not pushing you to do it I’ll just leave it. It’s not worth the hassle to fall out with my superviser over something that is not work related.” (UCL Built Environment ECR)

“And it depends on your supervisor. They might be like ‘what are you doing wasting all your time messing around with high school kids...get on with your work!’.” (UCL Social & Historical Sciences ECR)

“I think PhD students are a bit inhibited - they can only go so far as their boss will allow them...” (UCL Biomedical Sciences ECR)

4.9 Have you encountered any specific barriers to involvement?
Second only to time constraints, lack of funding was specified as an encountered barrier to involvement with PE. Within this, funds being prioritised for research were also noted:

“Funding is an issue, so usually funds will be spent on more research directed things.” (UCL Biomedical Sciences ECR)

Concerns related to career stage were present in some participants, perhaps linking in with a fear of failure as described previously.

“Because I am a really ECR you have to have your own ideas formulated to some extent I think before you can...” (UCL Mathematical & Physical Sciences ECR)
4.10 What do you think could be done to promote public engagement?

Participants provided a variety of suggestions for the promotion of PE. Popular suggestions included making PE compulsory at various levels, from undergraduate (i.e. prior to the start of a research career) through to stipulating PE activity as part of the recruitment and promotion process. The targeted promotion of PE was also suggested as below:

“What do you think could be done to promote public engagement? Participants provided a variety of suggestions for the promotion of PE. Popular suggestions included making PE compulsory at various levels, from undergraduate (i.e. prior to the start of a research career) through to stipulating PE activity as part of the recruitment and promotion process. The targeted promotion of PE was also suggested as below:

“Bypass the top level. Because....I’m not sure it would work directly contacting some professors and their departments. Well maybe it would for some others but it wouldn’t work for ours.” (UCL Biomedical Sciences ECR)

Ensuring that PE opportunities are identifiable and accessible formed a major concern in responses here. Several clear calls were made for online resources to indicate available PE opportunities and to enable ECRs to register their interest, including the following:

“I think one thing that would help would be to have some kind of website, something to enable you to find some kind of links....you could have a list of sort of, you know researchers from UCL who would be happy to do talks on the research that they work on and they could go on it and say ‘oh well that person seems to be quite good’.” (UCL Life Sciences ECR)

“if there were something where you could kind of register and say, I’m interested in doing public engagement ..” (UCL Life Sciences ECR)

One participant did suggest that a predisposition to PE influenced engagement:

“I think it depends what your eye looks out for. I think that the emails that come round from the public engagement unit are regular, clear. You know there’s a public engagement unit, you know they offer money for things, you know they are there to support you. But I think you wouldn’t necessarily see them if you don’t care. I don’t think there’s necessarily more that the public engagement unit could do in that way, it’s just if people aren’t interested then they won’t know. But people who are interested will see them.” (UCL Mathematical & Physical Sciences ECR)

It was also suggested that promotion of PE at departmental level would require a consideration of the role of staff within each department:

“we need to have someone embedded who actually takes control of it - whose role is to take control of it and do admin and things. And to coordinate to it.” (UCL Mathematical & Physical Sciences ECR)

In broader terms, a culture in favour of PE was called for:

“You also need a culture change in that if you took time out and did this public engagement and then you applied for a job, would people see this public engagement as a good piece of work? Would they care?” (UCL Biomedical Sciences ECR)

This is clearly in contrast to comments that illustrate the presence of an existing culture that holds PE in low esteem:
"You do get something back, it becomes very valuable. But I don’t think a lot of academics would see it that way or think it was very valuable." (UCL Mathematical & Physical Sciences ECR)

4.11 Are you aware of other people doing public engagement activities in your department/ UCL/ elsewhere?
A limited awareness of other PE activities across UCL was highlighted. Of the PE activities known to participants, the ‘lunchtime lecture series’ featured most prominently. Issues with communication and a limited awareness beyond individual subject areas were noted in responses here:

"in my department one of the problems is there’s not very good communication" (UCL Arts & Humanities ECR)

“But I have not idea what’s going on in terms of public engagement in terms of the sciences for example.” (UCL Arts & Humanities ECR)

4.12 How do you feel public engagement relates to your future career path?
The relationship between PE and research career path was generally portrayed as a positive one by the ECRs interviewed.

“I think it’s important in the sense that certainly if you do not engage with the public, you are not perceived as an expert in that area. You really do need to put your name out there in all sorts of fields...” (UCL Built Environment ECR)

Other drivers of PE involvement, linked with a research career, were also highlighted:

“...certain funders that are pro public engagement and you will have to do it, so it will have to be part of your career. Whereas if you take up other funding it is going to be less of a requirement.” (UCL Built Environment ECR)

“In my subject ... there’s a big drive to make it relevant to peoples lives” (UCL Arts & Humanities ECR)

However, where this was not the case, issues such as a lack of incentive or a negative view of PE within the participant’s discipline were cited, as echoed in responses to question 9. The prioritisation of research was also a strong theme in responses.

“My subject currently values public engagement at almost zero if not negative, because it is a signal that you are not serious about your work, especially at early career stage...” (UCL Social & Historical Sciences ECR)

Regarding early career stages “The incentive is not to do any public engagement at all...” (UCL Social & Historical Sciences ECR)

“If you are a researcher, your job is to get the research done....” (UCL Built Environment ECR)
The latter is perhaps well summarised by one response:

“So if I wanted a research career, I could do no public engagement and it wouldn’t affect my career whatsoever.” (UCL Mathematical & Physical Sciences ECR)

4.13 Do you envisage any changes in your potential involvement with public engagement as your career progresses?

Larger proportions of participants expected an increased involvement in PE as their career progresses, but for some this was dependent upon the general shared views on PE in relation to research careers as well as other key factors such as time:

“I guess it will depend on the cultural change... I guess if I find I’m getting nothing back and I’m banging my head against a brick wall, then I think I’d regret in 20 years time, spending my time on it. I think there is a slow change…”

(UCL Biomedical Sciences ECR)

“I think you have more possibility to do it, as in you have more of the decisions in your hands. But then you have less time to do it. So as one increases, the other decreases.” (UCL Built Environment ECR)

A perception of a relationship between career stage and levels of PE was evident in a number of responses, for example:

“...if you are starting to get your own research group, then you just can’t do it. Because you have just begun with your own research group. When you have got say one or two PhD students, like thats what you have to focus on. There’s a period there where I don’t think you can do it at all. Then there’s a period a bit later when you got it kind of ticking over, when you probably can a bit more. Then you go a bit higher up. I reckon very early lecturing tenure positions they probably can’t. Then when they’ve been there for a little while... I don’t know. I’ve got no experience of it myself, but that’s the impression I get.” (UCL Mathematical & Physical Sciences ECR)
4.14 Calls for evaluation

Five participants raised specific concerns over a need for evaluation and feedback from PE activities. The following are examples of their requests:

“Because there isn’t so much of a clear path of how.. what the gold standard is for this to be done... If there are standards or outcomes set... it focuses your mind a bit.” (UCL Biomedical Sciences ECR)

“When you’re involved in some quite fun event... listening in that case could just be ‘what did they like about it or not like about it and what could we do better next time?’. I doesn’t have to be a profound dialogue, but that conversation does have to lead to some change in the way things are done.” (UCL Arts & Humanities ECR)

“I would be interested to know whether theres a bunch of participants sitting there thinking, yeah we got exactly what we wanted out of it, or whether they are sitting there saying we did all these workshops and attended all these things voluntarily and they have gone and done exactly what they intended to in the first place. So it’s that kind of feedback thing - does it actually change the [research] agenda?” (UCL Built Environment ECR)

Clearly there is a perceived need, not only for evaluation of PE activities, but also a clarification of what the PEU deems to be effective PE.
5 Discussion
Overall the interviews revealed a strong sense of the value of PE to ECRs, both on a personal and professional level (e.g. enjoyment of PE and benefits to research respectively), regardless of individuals’ levels of involvement. The further value of PE to those within and outside the UCL community was also touched upon in the interviews.

There were no notable divisions along lines of faculty, gender or stated stage as an ECR in approaches to and experiences of PE. However, at the departmental and research group level, there were varied attitudes to PE and in turn varied barriers to involvement. Indeed, involvement in PE was generally reflected upon very positively, such that negative views of PE were largely attributed to other influencing factors beyond the ECRs themselves. The attitude of line managers was the most commonly mentioned of these factors. However, whether or not the attitude of the line manager necessarily forms a distinct barrier to PE involvement amongst ECRs is debatable.

There does appear to be a pattern of ECRs who are open to PE, seeking out workplaces and managers in favour of it. This may be described as a predisposition towards PE, often ensuring that the barriers to ECR involvement in PE, in the form of line manager opposition, are avoided from the start. Problems arise when an ECR becomes interested in PE and finds themselves working against a culture of non-involvement in PE at research group or departmental level. In such cases, the need for a network of support beyond line managers as well as clearly available opportunities is highlighted.

Further still, the issue of a lack of a support network in terms of PE can be linked to a lack of awareness of PE opportunities. A number of participants noted how they had found out about PE opportunities on an ‘ad hoc’ basis, often via their line managers or peers. Those who could potentially be involved with PE may struggle to find the opportunities they are seeking as they are not made aware of them via their colleagues and are unsure where else to seek support, opportunities and ideas. As noted in the results section, this was exemplified amongst international staff and students who were new to the UCL research community and therefore lack a network of potential PE resources.

A rather more obvious key barrier to PE involvement is a lack of time that ECRs can commit to activities. Beyond limiting how much PE activity is possible for those already involved, time constraints also put off those who could potentially be involved in PE. Coupled with a perception that PE activities consist of large time consuming projects that may be unsuccessful, involvement can be perceived as a risk to the ECR. Risk here was delineated by participants in terms of impact upon research time and hence career prospects. Clearly ECRs working in a culture that is positive towards PE found such risks to be largely outweighed, even whilst research remained the priority.

Those involved with PE did highlight the positive impact and influence on research that PE can have, such that there is great potential for positive attitudes towards PE at departmental level. The more pragmatic concerns of funding, impact upon research and effective evaluation of PE activities would however need to be tackled for such an attitude change to be enabled. Positive impressions of PE cannot be expected to replace the more tangible and research career orientated incentives for a positive culture surrounding PE.
Participants provided a number of suggestions for the promotion of PE which have been incorporated into the recommendations below.

6 Recommendations
The following recommendations arise from the findings of this research project:

- Acknowledge the likelihood that ECRs who have an interest in PE are more likely to seek to work in research settings in line with their interests from the outset. Those less inclined towards (or even less aware of) PE and therefore less likely to be managed in settings that favour PE do, however, remain a potential pool of involved researchers.

- Consider ways to ensure that, regardless of the attitudes towards PE at departmental level, potential candidates for PE can easily identify and access a network of people and resources to support their efforts (this may work well in conjunction with the previous recommendation).

- Make opportunities for involvement in PE more visible and accessible for all researchers, using online listings or networking for example.

- Seek ways of overcoming the key barrier of restricted time. Perhaps by enabling and promoting activities that are less time-consuming. This could also help overcome the problem of larger projects that may appear too daunting for some interested ECRs.

- Consider the options to help promote a culture change in favour of PE, whether this be with a focus on line managers and senior research staff or alternatively on those potentially embarking on a research career (i.e. at undergraduate or early postgraduate stages) such that a positive approach to PE is established. Research career related incentives, such as specification of PE involvement at recruitment or promotion may be advisable.

- Set up and promote evaluation systems for PE at UCL.

7 Sources

8 Appendix

8.1 Interview Questions

- Involvement (or not) in PE (if not why?)
- Perceived or encountered barriers to involvement
- Suggestions for promotion of PE
- If and how PE fits into career
- Department/ Faculty
- UK/ International

1. What words come to mind when you hear of ‘public engagement’? Freelist

2. These are the definitions used by UCL and the HEFCE. How well do you think they fit with your ideas? [provide UCL+ HEFCE definitions]

3. What public engagement are/ have you been involved with? [list from fresh minds report to refer to if still not sure]

4. Why did you get involved/ what motivated you to get involved with PE?

5. What (if anything) would you like to do in terms of public engagement?

6. What do you consider to be ‘good’ / ‘bad’ public engagement?
   - 6i. Would you say that your viewpoint is typical of your dept / UCL/ broader public

7. In terms of your ideas, what do you think might prevent you from getting involved with public engagement?

8. Have you encountered any specific barriers to involvement?

9. What do you think could be done to promote public engagement
   - 9i. Amongst ECRs like yourself?
   - 9ii. Within your department/ setting?

10. Are you aware of other people doing public engagement activities in your department/ UCL/ elsewhere?

11. How do you feel public engagement relates to your future career path?

12. Do you envisage any changes in your potential involvement with public engagement as your career progresses?

13. Any questions for me? Other comments you’d like to add?
8.2 Public Engagement Definitions

"The UCL Public Engagement Unit works to support activities which encourage a culture of two-way conversations between University staff and groups outside the University."

What does this mean?

- Telling public groups about our work.
- Supporting communities with our expertise.
- Nurturing a society in which the next generation want to take part in research, teaching and learning.
- Letting people outside the University contribute their research and knowledge to our programmes.
- Taking part in dialogue about the direction of our research and teaching.
- Creating knowledge in collaboration with communities and interest groups outside the University.

The UCL Public Engagement work is funded by the Beacons for Public Engagement project of HEFCE, RC-UK and the Wellcome Trust:

- To work with audiences that UCL does not traditionally talk or listen to, including the socially excluded.
- To situate UCL in London better, through work with our local communities and creative organisations around us.
- To find new models for public-academic dialogue in all of UCL's subjects, especially those outside science and medicine.
- To increase the amount and quality of public engagement work undertaken at UCL.

We work primarily with adults, experiment in the hope of learning lessons that can be shared with other Higher Education Institutions, and aim to change the culture of the University and the sector.

Higher Education Funding Council for England

“public engagement” means bringing together HE specialists and non-specialists to develop new channels of communication and mutual understanding. The ‘public’ includes individuals and groups who do not currently have a formal relationship with an HEI through teaching, research or the existing programmes of community or business engagement.”

http://www.hefce.ac.uk/econsoc/buscom/bpe/
8.3 Examples of Public Engagement Activities

Presenting to the public
Deliberative processes
Judging competitions
Co-production processes
Advisory processes
Taking part in chat forums etc. which relate to your subject

Working with museums and other cultural venues
Participation in other open days at your university
Seeking public input into your research
Promoting public engagement activity
Taking part in a public event/ debate
Attendance at fairs/ exhibitions

Working with teachers/ schools
Media work aimed at a non-specialist audience

Writing for the non-specialist public
UCL podcasts
Columns/ reviews in newspapers
Public-facing Blogs, websites and web fora
Appearances on radio/ television

Talking to Media Correspondents to help broaden awareness of research breakthroughs
UCL website
Publishing books
Speeches at the Bloomsbury
Plays at the Bloomsbury
Student societies' outreach programmes
Scientific anniversaries
Extra-mural courses
Concerts
Work with UCL Museums
Work with Widening Participation Unit
Open displays of student work
Organising/ participating in alumni-related events
Summer schools
Entering students into competitions
Lunch Hour Lecture series
Open days
<table>
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<tr>
<th>Code Term</th>
<th>Definition</th>
<th>Subcategories/ codes</th>
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<td>Anticipated changes in involvement in PE.</td>
<td>Career Stage</td>
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<td>Dependent</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Increased Involvement</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Decreased Involvement</td>
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<td>No Change</td>
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<td>EVALUATION</td>
<td>Views expressed on evaluation.</td>
<td>Example of bad PE</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>Example of good PE</td>
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<td>Experience of Evaluation</td>
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<td>Expressed desire for monitoring/evaluation</td>
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<td>EVALUATION VIEWS</td>
<td>Evaluations of other parties described.</td>
<td>Colleagues or peers</td>
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<td>Other</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Public</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Supervisors or line managers</td>
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<td>FUTURE</td>
<td>Views on future career and involvement with PE.</td>
<td>Negative relationship</td>
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<td>Positive relationship</td>
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<td>prizes</td>
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<td>desire to inform others</td>
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<td>enjoy it</td>
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<td>Funding</td>
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<td>inspire others</td>
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<td>help with career</td>
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<td>public need/ request</td>
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<td>Recognition</td>
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<td>Reflection</td>
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<td>senior/ line manager support and</td>
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<td>encouragement</td>
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<td>Research requirement</td>
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<td>SPECIFIC BARRIER</td>
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<tr>
<td>SUGGESTIONS</td>
<td>Suggestions for change made by participant.</td>
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## Coding categories: Type and audience of PE

| The audience(s) – group(s) in which the project aims to impact upon | Local schools  
Young people  
Older people  
Socially excluded groups  
Community groups  
Academics  
Students  
Local residents  
General public |
|---|---|

| The type or model of public engagement undertaken | Informing  
Consulting  
Researching  
Involving  
Supporting action  
Devolving decisions |
|---|---|

(In what sense does it engage the public with HE?)

| Creating knowledge in collaboration with communities and interest groups outside the university  
Taking part in dialogue about the direction of our research and training  
Letting people outside the university contribute their research and knowledge to our programmes  
Nurturing a society in which the next generation want to take part in research, teaching and learning  
Supporting communities with our expertise  
Telling public groups about our work |

| The methods/activity used to support public engagement | Presenting  
Writing / publications  
Media  
Working with teachers and/or schools  
Event  
Debate  
Collaborative research  
Open day  
Fair / exhibition  
Use of public buildings (museums, libraries or archives)  
Cultural activities  
Competition  
Advisory processes  
Summer school  
Interactive websites, blogs and/or forums  
Training or mentoring  
Conferences or seminars  
Workshops  
Action learning activities |
|---|---|

| The key barrier(s) to public engagement | Time needed to be spent of research/teaching  
Lack of opportunities  
Lack of skills and knowledge  
Funding  
Limited resources for p.e.  
Recognition  
Limited support (senior level / department)  
Coordination  
Representativeness of the audience (i.e. a wide cross-section of the public)  
Access to information  
Improve the quality of p.e.  
Situate UCL within local community  
New models of p.e. |