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'Bottoms up': A case study on integrating public engagement within a university culture

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Abstract

This study tracks the integration of public engagement within the systems, structures and culture of a university in Ireland. Public engagement, as an activity of research institutes, is gaining increased attention from policy and funding sources across Europe. However, little has been heard on the processes and practices which bring public engagement to the fore of conversations and activities in such institutions. In this practice case study, we track the evolution of a community of practice of public engagement in an Irish university over three years, through a bottom-up approach taken by a small group of faculty and staff, and organized through collective leadership to maintain momentum over the time period. With the support of key leadership figures, who provided top-down financial and structural support, we trace the narrative of defining public engagement within the university through stakeholder workshops, recording relevant activities with an institution-wide census, updating university public engagement reporting metrics, and establishing an active community of practice. Four key learnings are identified from this collective narrative: (1) the need for patience in attempting to instigate change within an institution; (2) the importance of establishing a shared understanding; (3) the importance of enacting collective leadership as a community; and (4) the necessity of leadership support with grass-roots activity. Reflection on these learnings suggests that the embedding of public engagement in institutions requires both personal and institutional investment.

Keywords: public engagement, collaboration, engaged research, universities

Key messages

- Grass-roots-led initiatives in research institutes can be successful when driven by a group that practise collective leadership, are engaged in a shared and clearly articulated joint enterprise, and have (or develop) a shared understanding of their goal.
- Harnessing the support of particular leaders in the research institute, by communicating objectives and goals in a way that aligns with the research institute, is key (and may take some time).
- Developing a shared understanding across the research institute, with input from various internal and external stakeholders through surveys and stakeholder workshops, can lead to a broader ownership of public engagement across the institute, and can add momentum to establishing an active network.

Background

Over the past decade, there has been an increasing international focus in policy, funding and practice on supporting and embedding public engagement within universities (Duncan and Oliver, 2017; Holliman and Warren, 2017; Mirnezami et al., 2015; Olwen et al., 2016). Many of these activities have been linked with impact agendas and with various mechanisms established to capture impact, such as the United Kingdom's Research Excellence Framework, the Excellence for Research in Australia, and Forschungsrating in Germany (Reed et al., 2018; Rowe and Frewer, 2005; Watermeyer and Chubb, 2019). The debate in the literature has also focused on why public engagement for universities matters, with links made to values, addressing grand societal challenges, and alignment with sustainable development goals (Collini, 2012; Cuthill et al., 2014; Ní Shé et al., 2018a). Additionally, there is growing evidence of monitoring and evaluating of public engagement activities in universities with, for example, the development of associated tools (Bastow et al., 2014; Burton et al., 2015; Murphy and McGrath, 2018). There is mixed evidence, however, about how this focus has resulted in the embedding of public engagement within the structures and on-the-ground activities of universities. Recent work undertaken in the United Kingdom by Burchell et al. (2017) found that while there were some indications that public engagement was part of the university research landscape, there was a disconnect between researchers' public engagement efforts and the broader institutional context of public engagement. This is particularly the case where institutions are overwhelmingly driven by a desire for funding (Burchell et al., 2017). Watermeyer (2012, 2015) highlights the gap between university staff wanting to undertake the work of public engagement and the lack of support available to them to enable this. University staff highlight the lack of reward and recognition, a dearth of data on public engagement activities, and lack of specific and relevant training as reasons why public engagement has failed to be integrated within their university culture (Watermeyer, 2012, 2015).

Universities in Ireland have not been immune to the international trends focusing on supporting, funding and embedding public engagement in university teaching, research and culture, but the pace of change has been slow (McIlrath et al., 2012; Munck et al., 2012; O'Shea, 2014). In 2006, Campus Engage, an organization within the Irish Universities Association, was established as a national umbrella agency to promote civic and community engagement activities in Irish higher education (Campus Engage, n.d.). Campus Engage has worked across Irish higher education institutions (HEIs) to embed, scale and promote civic and community engagement across staff and student teaching, learning and research (Campus Engage, n.d.). Much of their work has focused on embedding this engagement in HEIs by sharing best practices, tools and training for how to undertake civic and community engagement. They have stressed a number of priorities in HEIs, centred on managing expectations, building infrastructure, implementing policies, leadership for innovation and streamlining funding. Issues exist, however, in the varied expectations and meanings of what constitutes 'public engagement' and 'civic or community engagement', with the latter not always aligning with the features of engagement found in the international research literature. Irish funding agencies have also been active in nudging increased public engagement in universities. Science Foundation Ireland (SFI) have offered the 'Discover' funding programme call for public engagement activities since 2013. However, this funding separates public engagement activities from other research calls (SFI, n.d.). In 2017, the Health Research Board became the first national funder to develop an implementation plan to support public and patient involvement (PPI) in research (Ní Shé et al., 2018b),

and now issues the PPI Ignite Awards with the Irish Research Council, focused on institution-wide responses. Other drivers in Ireland have included the increased focus by the European Union on public engagement via Horizon 2020 (European Union, n.d.; Reed et al., 2018).

Despite the broad funding and policy focus on public engagement, little has been documented on how research communities within Irish universities are enacting or embedding public engagement within their regular practices. International case studies, such as the Beacons for Public Engagement programme in the UK and the associated Public Engagement with Research Catalysts programme, have examined the issue of creating a culture of public engagement within universities, recommending that initiatives and interventions to support, reward and recognize public engagement culture and activities are introduced (Olwen et al., 2016), and highlighting key enablers and challenges in developing university support for public engagement with research (Duncan and Manners, 2016).

Similar to other organizational culture changes, embedding public engagement across a university is a process that takes time, and can benefit from the collective leadership of committed individuals with multiple skill sets. In contrast to more traditional approaches to leadership, which focus on the individual, collective leadership utilizes skills and expertise that exist within a network of individuals (Zhu et al., 2018). Central to collective leadership is the ability of the network to activate different people and their skill sets as the situation changes or tasks arise over time (Friedrich et al., 2009; Yammarino et al., 2012).

This case study outlines how, over time, a community of practice of public engagement was established in an Irish university, namely University College Dublin (UCD). We present how we, the authors, used a bottom-up approach over a three-year period, driven by a small group of faculty and staff through collective leadership, and supported by key leadership figures who provided top-down financial and structural support. We present our learnings in a way that may be beneficial to other faculty and staff hoping to establish similar communities and to focus university practices on embedding public engagement in the work of higher education institutions.

Context of establishing a community of practice of public engagement

UCD is a research university in Dublin, Ireland, and is home to over 1,482 academic staff and 32,000 students. The three authors of this paper work within UCD in various roles, and across various departments and faculties. We have each, however, been involved in public engagement for many years over the course of our careers. Ní Shúilleabháin works as an assistant professor in the School of Mathematics and Statistics, and directs the STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) initial teacher education programme, while also engaging in science communication work on television, in print and in schools, and organizing and participating in local and national public engagement events. McAuliffe works as a public engagement manager at iCrag, the SFI Research Centre for Applied Geosciences. He is also a science communicator on television and radio, a science communication trainer, and a producer of local and national public engagement events. Ní Shé was, until October 2020, the UCD research lead for the Health Research Board public and patient involvement Ignite programme, and an advocate for patient involvement in research.

We each worked separately with our colleague Alex Boyd, a project manager for 'public engagement and outreach' at the office of UCD Research and Innovation, and

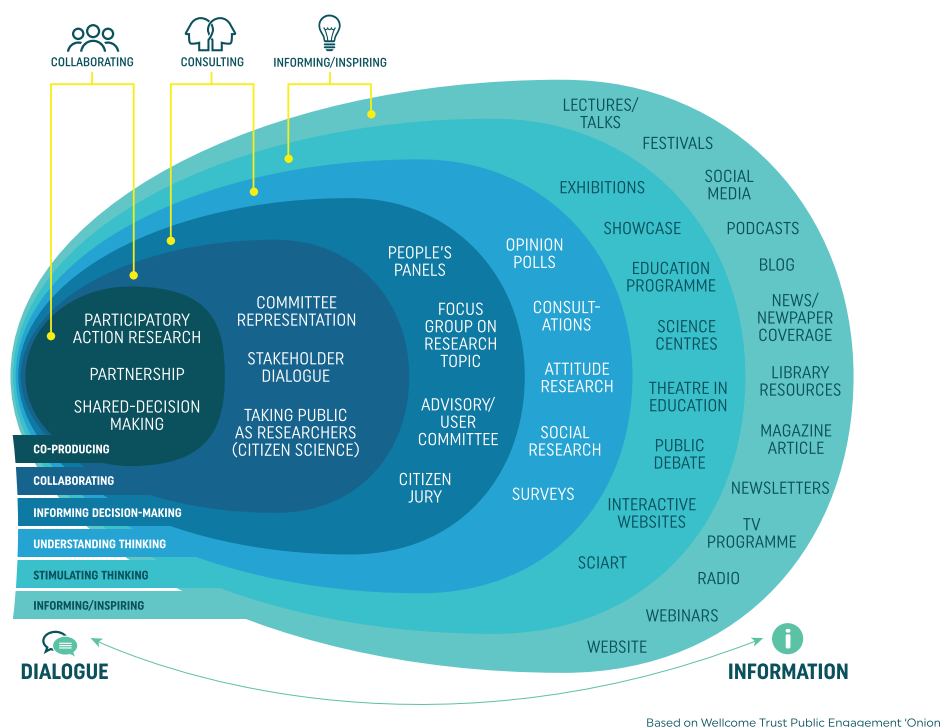
in 2017, we began informally discussing with each other how the university community might better connect and promote the very many public engagement activities under way across the campus. Each of us was individually aware of the large amount of public engagement work which was ongoing within the university community, but this knowledge was based on informal connections and networks. While the university strategy 2015–20 aspired to 'develop UCD's engagement both within Ireland and further afield' (UCD, 2015: 18), there were no mechanisms to find out what public engagement work was ongoing in the university, other than through personal relationships, and there were few opportunities to come together to share ideas, highlight best practices or coordinate public engagement activities. Furthermore, there did not seem to be a common understanding of 'public engagement' that was shared across the campus, with some staff members suggesting that it be part of the university communications strategy, and others equating it with the recruitment of new students. As a small, informal group, the authors wanted to establish a foothold for public engagement, in its full spectrum of activities, in the university. With this shared goal, we set out to attempt to define what public engagement already looked like in the university, and to establish a university vision of what a culture of excellence in public engagement might look like.

As a first step, we decided to concentrate this work on one faculty, and we focused initially on the College of Science, where the authors and several other members of faculty and staff engaged in public engagement were situated. Working with an external strategy consultant, funded through the Public Engagement Project Manager role, an initial Vision for Public Engagement stakeholder workshop was held with colleagues in the College of Science to capture the public engagement activities and views within the faculty. Following this workshop, the authors set out five proposals to develop a more supported, cohesive and encultured approach to Engaged Research & Public Engagement in our university. At this point, we considered it necessary to include 'engaged research' as a separate activity to 'public engagement', as neither had been defined within our university, but both had emerged from the stakeholder workshop conversations. It was our aim that the five key proposals, developed in 2017, would provide the faculty, and thereby the university, with concrete actions to enculture public engagement and engaged research within university life:

1. Include engaged research and public engagement activities in core criteria for recruitment and promotion of academic staff.
2. Establish an Engaged Research and Public Engagement Committee within the College of Science. This committee should include a representative from each School, members of the public and external stakeholders. The committee should report to the College Executive, and liaise closely with the science marketing and recruitment officers within the College of Science.
3. Establish Ireland's first Professor of Engaged Research and Public Engagement.
4. Create a central hub and identity for engaged research and public engagement in the O'Brien Centre for Science, making use of the excellent facilities already available.
5. Establish an award system to recognize engaged research and public engagement excellence within the College of Science.

We presented the document setting out these proposals to senior faculty management, who suggested that we expand our working group to align our recommendations to the wider university strategy (UCD, 2015). This action led to the establishment of a short-life working group, who later became the UCD Public Engagement Community of Practice founding committee, to define the meaning and vision of public engagement

Figure 1: UCD 'Avocado' of public engagement activities (source: UCD Public Engagement Working Group, 2018)



in UCD, and to undertake a scoping exercise of public engagement activities across the university. This working group, consisting of the authors and four other faculty and staff members listed in the Acknowledgements, went about researching the work of other universities and the National Co-ordinating Centre for Public Engagement (NCCPE) to create an enabling culture for excellence and innovation in public engagement at UCD. Inspired by the Wellcome Trust's public engagement 'Onion', the public engagement activities already visible within the UCD community were succinctly described as the UCD 'Avocado' of public engagement activities (Figure 1).

The typologies of public engagement that feature in the UCD Avocado are reflective of the three public engagement typologies outlined by Rowe and Frewer (2005), with, for instance, 'Informing/Inspiring' largely corresponding to 'Public communication'. Overlap exists between the 'Consulting' category of the UCD Avocado and Rowe and Frewer's (2005) 'Public consultation', with the exception of Citizen Juries, which the former places within the 'Consulting' category and the latter identifies as 'Public participation'. The UCD Avocado does not place PPI within the realm of public engagement, as these can be regarded as complementary fields (Holmes et al., 2019).

Establishing a definition and record of public engagement in University College Dublin

To begin drafting a definition of public engagement at UCD, the working group captured example definitions and terminologies of how other universities known for public engagement (for example, with a public engagement or science communication master's level course and/or a widely known culture of public engagement), public engagement support organizations and funders had defined public engagement (see Table 1).

Table 1: Examples of public engagement definitions from selected universities and organizations (sources: organization websites)

Organization	Public engagement definitions
University of Melbourne (Australia)	Engagement at the University of Melbourne encompasses the mutually beneficial relationships the institution has with wider society. It connects our teaching, students and research work with communities – locally, nationally and globally – to help us achieve our academic aspirations and create economic, social and cultural value.
Southern Cross University (Australia)	Engaging with our communities is at the heart of what we do at Southern Cross University. Through collaboration with our communities we create authentic learning experiences for our students and globally recognized innovative and relevant research.
Simon Fraser University (Canada)	The leading engaged university defined by its dynamic integration of innovative education, cutting-edge research, and far-reaching community engagement.
University of Bristol (England)	Engagement is defined as a two-way process of interaction and listening, with the goal of generating mutual benefit.
Imperial College London (England)	We define engagement with research as the wide range of ways of engaging specific members of the public with the design, conduct and dissemination of our scientific, engineering, medical and business research.
University College London (England)	The definition of public engagement which informs UCL's work is from the National Coordinating Centre for Public Engagement (NCCPE) which describes engagement as '... 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.'
University of Edinburgh (Scotland)	Public engagement involves higher education institutions and their staff and students connecting and sharing their work with the public. It generates mutual benefit through the sharing of knowledge, expertise and skills.
Queen's University Belfast (Northern Ireland)	Queen's University has a strong reputation as a university of Citizenship and Civic Responsibility and it is the role of public engagement to ensure the work of the University is reflected across the community in all civic and political spheres.
National University Ireland Galway (Ireland)	NUI Galway is committed to community and the development of lasting relationships for a positive impact on peoples' lives within society. We believe that the best learning takes place when students have many opportunities to engage their learning in real world contexts.
Science Foundation Ireland (Ireland)	An engaged public is one that understands the role of science, can judge between competing priorities and arguments, encourages young people to take science, technology, engineering and maths.
Wellcome Trust (England)	Public engagement involves conversations about science and health research in unexpected places and surprising ways.
Campus Engage (Ireland)	Public engagement and involvement captures the broad range of initiatives, activities and events which combine to create a culture of societal engagement with higher education. Public engagement is about the institution facing outwards and connecting as widely as possible to communicate the value of learning and research and to leverage institutional knowledge and resources for social good.

Themes that emerged from the analysis of existing public engagement definitions included an emphasis on wording for audiences outside the university or institution, for example, 'community', 'society' or 'public', and a focus on communication that was 'two-way' and for 'mutual' 'benefit', 'learning' or 'good'. An emphasis on erring on the side of inclusion was also common, with phrasing such as 'connecting as widely as possible' and 'all civic and political spheres'. Many of the definitions mentioned subject areas, such as science, technology, engineering, mathematics or business. For UCD, it was deemed important that the definition would work for the university as a whole, and not be construed as more relatable to, or inclusive of, one subject area over another. Furthermore, it was deemed important that the initial drafting of the UCD definition be cognizant of the many types of activities that the university undertakes, which ultimately led to the inclusion of the wording in the UCD definition of 'research, teaching and contributions to society' to reflect not only scholarly activity, but also additional forms of activities central to university life.

Following this desktop review, we began drafting a UCD definition of public engagement, which we would later develop in two stakeholder workshops with: (1) members of the wider UCD community; and (2) public attendees of an on-campus university festival, sampled at random during the event (described in more detail below).

The authors also engaged in several discussions with colleagues, both internal and external to UCD, about embedding public engagement within the culture and structures of UCD, and further establishing recognition and reward for those engaged in public engagement. It became clear from these discussions that there was a need to record the types of public engagement activities that members of the UCD community were leading and taking part in. No system to record public engagement had been established within the university, and we initiated discussions with the Research Office on recording public engagement activities through the university's research management system. While some information was available on public engagement activity in the university from a policy discussion paper published by the UCD Geary Institute (Nivakoski et al., 2015), there were no delineations between public versus civic engagement activities. For example, service on boards or committees was categorized as public engagement, which does not align with definitions in the literature (for example, Burchell et al., 2017). To fully record public engagement activities, and to establish a baseline for activities and engagement across the university, the working group carried out a university-wide survey. This was advertised as a 'census' of public engagement activity across the university, with a simultaneous goal of drawing attention to public engagement activities on campus.

The survey focused on faculty and staff members' participation in public engagement in the period 2015 to 2020. To encourage as much participation as possible, it was available online for a month, with a one-day 'census' event held as a visible activity in booths across campus, manned by volunteers, where members of the UCD community could fill in the survey in a physical format. Promotion of the census was done via targeted email communications, posters and on social media using the agreed term #UCDPECensus.

Within the time frame of the survey, the working group hosted a half-day participatory involvement workshop focused on several objectives, including: (1) drafting a definition of public engagement that was reflective of the university's activities and ethos; (2) identifying the structural supports needed to encourage more public engagement in the university; and (3) canvassing views on the development of a community of practice in public engagement within the university. Held on the census

day, and open to all members of the UCD community involved in public engagement, 55 members of UCD faculty and staff from numerous faculties and units participated. The workshop, facilitated by a consultant, utilized the Avocado of Public Engagement Activities (Figure 1) as a discussion point for each of the objectives stated above. As outlined in Kaner et al. (2007), the role of the consultant as facilitator was to encourage participation, promote mutual understanding, foster inclusive solutions and cultivate shared responsibility among attendees. Attendees were split into smaller groups of seven or eight people, ensuring a mix of role in each group (for example, senior and junior academics, research staff, public engagement practitioners, communications and central administration staff, and PPI practitioners), with each group containing a pre-identified participant with significant public engagement experience to act as rapporteur to the room.

In drafting the definition of public engagement, each group were given the full list of definitions from other universities (Table 1) and asked: (1) to consider the relevance of each definition to both the Avocado of Public Engagement Activities and UCD; and (2) to construct a working definition of public engagement in UCD. Each group of seven or eight individuals reported their suggested definition back to the wider room of 55 participants. Congruence between definitions was identified, and a unified definition was drafted, with wording and terminology tweaked by the workshop leader until agreement in the room was achieved.

To identify the structural supports needed to encourage more public engagement in the university, and to collect views on the development of a community of practice in public engagement within the university, each group of seven or eight attendees considered: (1) the structural supports needed to run public engagement activities across the spectrum of the Avocado of Public Engagement Activities; and (2) how a community of practice in public engagement within the university could be established and what its remit would be. Upon completion of this section, each group fed back to the room with suggestions collated by the workshop leader, and added to the submissions collected throughout the public engagement census.

The half-day workshop proved to be highly effective in canvassing views, identifying key supports needed for public engagement, and creating momentum for advancing public engagement activities and practice in UCD. The use of rapporteurs and representative groupings was helpful in steering the 55 attendees to a draft definition of public engagement with which they were in agreement, and to which they had contributed. Facilitation by the consultant as workshop leader, who was at a remove from public engagement per se, but who had significant experience in consulting on and managing culture change, proved to be very helpful in directing and managing the workshop.

A definition of public engagement in University College Dublin

The workshop culminated in an agreed working definition of public engagement for the university. To elicit external feedback from members of the public, the definition was then shared with, and feedback was sought from, a random sample of public attendees via a pop-up Dilemma Café at an on-campus university festival the following month. In addition, the UCD Public and Patient Involvement Ignite Executive Steering Group (inclusive of UCD staff and external NGO partners) also gave feedback on the public engagement working definition. This led to a final

definition for the working group to bring forward and share with the wider university community:

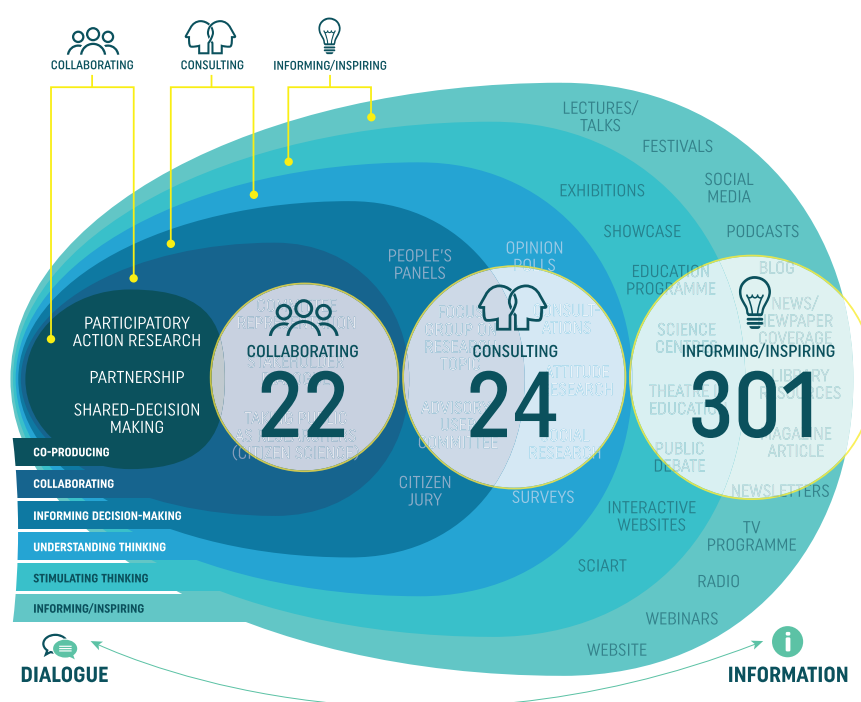
Public engagement describes the many ways that UCD's research, teaching and contributions to society are influenced by and shared with the public for mutual learning.

Developing a shared understanding of public engagement, with input from university stakeholders and members of the public, led to a broad ownership and understanding of public engagement across the institute. The activity of developing this definition also added momentum to establishing an active network of people interested and engaged in public engagement across the university.

Recording the different forms of public engagement in University College Dublin

A total of 322 submissions, both online and in person, were received in the census of public engagement and were subsequently analysed by the working group. A total of 57 of the submissions were omitted, as the projects could not be categorized as forms of public engagement (for example, being a member of a secondary school board), further emphasizing the need for a shared definition of public engagement. A further 2 responses were also omitted, as the majority of questions were unanswered and, consequently, no conclusions could be drawn. In total, 263 responses were included for analysis, and the Avocado of Public Engagement Activities was utilized as a framework to classify the different forms of public engagement under way in UCD. Some of the responses outlined more than one type of public engagement activity, and these were recorded as such (see Figure 2).

Figure 2: Number of references to different forms of public engagement under way in UCD, 2015–20 (source: UCD Public Engagement Working Group, 2018)



Based on Wellcome Trust Public Engagement 'Onion'

From the census data, a variety of important and relevant information became apparent on public engagement in the university. It was evident that the UCD community engages with a wide variety of audiences across all spectrums of society in their public engagement activities. There were 213 references to members of the public, with many projects being aimed at several groups, such as children, young adults and community groups. Many of these activities took place outside the campus, with 177 references made to off-campus settings, including hospitals, youth centres and festivals. Funding for recorded public engagement activities came from a wide range of sources, ranging from the European Union to personal sources. There were 58 references to government-based funding, including state agencies, state bodies and government departments. UCD supported a large number of public engagement activities, with 110 references to various faculties and units within the university. Some public engagement projects also engaged in partnerships with other HEIs (31 references), both in Ireland and further afield. Theatres, museums, galleries and charities (41 unique references) also featured as project partners, providing evidence of the social and cultural contribution that public engagement activities can make.

In both the workshop and the survey, participants were asked what was needed to sustain public engagement in the university. Funding was the most prevalent requirement cited in responses for sustaining and developing public engagement projects, with time and staffing support also stressed to develop, maintain and promote public engagement activities. The outcomes and findings of the workshop and census were compiled in a report by the working group, with several strategic priority areas identified for action (UCD Public Engagement Working Group, 2018):

1. Establish a university-wide understanding of public engagement in UCD through education, training and recognition.
2. Maintain an electronic record of public engagement activities in UCD.
3. Develop a web portal and resources for public engagement activities across the university.
4. Highlight a designated physical space on campus that can be a focus point of public engagement in UCD.
5. Develop the role of the working group to ensure the provision and development of such proposals.

These priorities were presented to the Vice President of Research, Innovation and Impact, who supported the recommendations by providing the working group with strategic funding to help enact these actions over the period 2019/20.

Embedding public engagement in the culture and structures of University College Dublin

With the findings of the survey and the definition of public engagement in the university established, the authors continued to work with stakeholders across the university to ensure public engagement was included in the promotions framework for faculty and, as of 2019, could be recorded in the university database through the research management system, thereby ensuring that both recognition of, and data about, public engagement were available to the university community. While the 2018 census of public engagement activities was well advertised across the university system, the 263 valid responses included for analysis were, at the time, deemed to under-represent the amount of activity taking place. This was borne out by the subsequent recording of public engagement activities in the university's research

management system, with over 620 instances of public engagement recorded in the two years 2019 and 2020. This suggests that once the second key objective of the working group was achieved (the maintenance of an electronic record of public engagement activities in UCD), the recording of public engagement activities was streamlined and data capture optimized.

In 2019, an informal community of practice mailing list was established and advertised to those who had attended the university stakeholder workshop described above. Furthermore, the working group was extended to further include members from other faculties and units across the university. A key decision for the working group was continuing an idea of collective leadership, where the chairing of meetings would be shared by all members of the group, and where all members were regarded as having equal value and making equal contributions, whether faculty, staff or postgraduate student. Utilizing the strategic funding, workshops around public engagement were organized by the working group (for example, developing strategies and applying for funding, public engagement evaluation, logic modelling, meaningful online engagement and stakeholder management), and could be attended by anyone in the UCD community. A web portal recording activities and resources of public engagement in the university was also established (www.ucd.ie/publicengagement/).

In January 2020, an event was held to officially initiate a formal university Community of Practice (Wenger, 1998) of Public Engagement, launched by the university Vice President for Research, Innovation and Impact. The event was attended by university members across all levels of faculty, staff and postgraduate students, and from all faculties and units. Public engagement activities were celebrated at the launch, with posters and presentations from a wide variety of projects.

Following this launch, the community of practice membership totalled 145 members, and it has since been even more active, with members of the community sharing their work and expertise with one another. Public engagement is now introduced to new staff during induction, and a number of training events have been held for members of the community throughout the year in a virtual setting (due to COVID-19 pandemic restrictions). The working group regularly meets and continues to work on the priority actions, with agreed timelines and terms of reference for members.

Critically reflecting on the experience of establishing a community of practice

At the end of a three-year period of working to recognize public engagement activities within the university and establish a culture of public engagement, an opportunity is presented to frame where we see that this work fits on various models of change. Taking Kotter's eight-stage change process (Kotter, 1995) as an example of a well-known approach to organizational transformation, the changes undergone in public engagement in UCD would be best placed between Stage 4: Communicating the change vision, and Stage 5: Empowering broad-based change. In relation to this model of change, extensive communication efforts across the university have been undertaken through the census day, the launch of the community of practice, the creation of an online web portal and publication of internal reports. Furthermore, some of the obstacles to change have been removed, for example, through the addition of public engagement to the research management system, the creation of a series

of training events to upskill staff in public engagement, and the addition of public engagement to the UCD Development Framework for Faculty. Using the EDGE Tool (NCCPE, n.d.), the authors found the university's support for public engagement to be at the 'Gripping' stage, indicating that supports exist, but that there is more room for further support and development.

Over the three-year period, the authors have learned a number of lessons about instigating change within a university. First, it takes time and many conversations to communicate and encourage change within an institution. Personal networks are key in this regard. Second, establishing a shared understanding as a group hoping to instigate change is hugely important, and equally requires much time for discussion to ensure that everyone is on the same page. Third, we found that enacting collective leadership helped us in our engagement with university management. Depending on the situation or task at hand, members of the collective leadership team used the skills available within the network to drive momentum. Examples of this include one author using their qualitative analysis expertise to lead on the qualitative analysis of the census data, and another author using their experience of running Dilemma Café for PPI to enact something similar, as outlined above. Collective leadership also helped with communicating with the wider university community, since it was not one person's identity or vision with which others had to identify, but rather it was a collective and collaborative vision which led to a shared sense of belonging. The importance of this collective leadership was demonstrated by the fact that one author went on maternity leave, and another member of the initial working group went on a career break, without the work of the group being diminished or lessened in any way. Finally, while it was the passion and drive of an initially small group of people that led the move to embed public engagement within the culture and administrative structures of the university, it would not have been possible to bring this grass-roots initiative to fruition without the support (both financial and otherwise) of key leaders within the university. Specifically, the support of the Vice President for Research, Innovation and Impact allowed other university leaders and members to come on board to highlight and celebrate public engagement within the university.

It is unfortunate, however, that a style of language is being used in the most recent university strategy which does not resonate with the shared meaning of public engagement developed by the UCD community. The present strategy (2020–4) notes 'engagement' as one of its core values, but this is phrased in a way which relates in a shallow form to the definition collaboratively derived:

We will consolidate our existing major partnerships and build further partnerships where there is mutual interest, enabling us to maximise our impact on society, and augmenting our student experience and researcher engagement. (UCD, n.d.: 25)

In this instance, our learning is that ongoing and sustained effort is required to ensure that the communication channels are in place that enable university policies to better reflect the vision and work of members of the university community.

A summary of progress against each of the five strategic priority areas is shown in Table 2. Significant achievements have been accomplished against four of the five key areas, with only the fourth area – 'Highlight a designated physical space on campus that can be a focus point of public engagement in UCD' – being set back due to COVID-19.

Table 2: Progress to date against five strategic priority areas

Strategic priority area	Status
(1) Establish a university-wide understanding of public engagement in UCD through education, training and recognition.	A 153-member-strong community of practice has been created, and has run nine education and training events for members as of April 2021. The UCD Development Framework for Faculty has been updated to specifically mention public engagement as an Indicator of Achievement: 'Participation in public engagement activities through which research, teaching and scholarly activity are influenced by and shared with the public for mutual learning.'
(2) Maintain an electronic record of public engagement activities in UCD.	UCD's research management system was updated in 2019 with the addition of a new category of Public Engagement to facilitate staff in recording their public engagement activities alongside grants won, papers published and other key indicators of achievement and output.
(3) Develop a web portal and resources for public engagement activities across the university.	Achieved with the creation of a website: www.ucd.ie/publicengagement/ .
(4) Highlight a designated physical space on campus that can be a focus point of public engagement in UCD.	Several consultations were had with key space allocation stakeholders before the effective closure of the university due to COVID-19. This issue will be revisited later in 2021, when it is envisioned that the university will be operating at closer to normal capacity.
(5) Develop the role of the working group to ensure the provision and development of such proposals.	The working group has expanded to include 10 members from across the UCD community: academic staff, public engagement professionals and administrative staff. The working group are responsible for enacting Areas 1 to 4 above, and operationalizing this through objectives and actions set out at the start of each calendar year.

Finally, we have learned that within our university we have a vibrant community of researchers, educators, science communicators, administrative staff and students who participate in a wide range of worthy public engagement activities and initiatives. We are delighted that this work is now recognized, rewarded and celebrated by the university. We are also hopeful that the newly created Department for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Moreau, 2020) will provide a direct mechanism to develop a support infrastructure across all institutions to embed public engagement for societal impact within the Irish higher education system.

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Conflicts of interest statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest with this work.

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