

Opinion Piece: Disseminate to invigorate!

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If ever there was a time for greater engagement, that time is now.

Testing economic times have placed huge pressure on universities to find new funding streams to support their activities and make a greater contribution to UK plc. In tandem with this, there's pressure to demonstrate the impact of research, whether that be socially, culturally or economically.

It's clear that knowledge transfer has a significant role to play in both these areas. But the current financial situation has seen many marketing budgets slashed – just at a time when increased visibility could make a real difference to an institution's ability to compete in tough market conditions.

Impact is as much about stimulating new partnerships and increasing networks as it is about licensing and spin-outs. Through our work with university researchers over the past ten years, we've seen a huge shift in attitude towards raising the profile of their work to new audiences – whether through the mainstream media, trade and technical press or directly through projects which bring together partners from a range of backgrounds.

In many quarters it's recognised that in communicating what you do, you're providing evidence of the impact you're telling people about. If you're targeted about who you're telling about your activities, the knock on effects can be incredible. For example, we've seen new relationships formed, international studentships funded and the seeds of new collaborative ventures sown, all as a result of securing publicity in specialist media.

Over the past year, we've had meetings and discussions with research councils about the role communications plays in demonstrating impact. It's been encouraging for us to learn first hand that communicating research and knowledge transfer is high up on their agendas, as they themselves are looking to demonstrate the impact of their own work in supporting the very best research and initiatives in higher education

In addition, we're increasingly finding individual academics opening their minds to this. We've had approaches from researchers who are now seeing communications as integral to what they want to achieve. Crucially, they're also considering communications at a much earlier stage than previously.

In our experience, communications was something that was only considered after a grant proposal had been secured. A case of "great, we've got the money, let's tell people what we're doing" – which often resulted in a somewhat reactive and piecemeal approach to communications (and an inadequate budget)

It's early days, but we are finding that many academics are thinking about communications from the start. What this means is that we're being brought in at the earliest stage of a project to advise on the best way forward, and in some cases, draw up communications plans that cover the life of the project. These can set objectives, show how and why work will be disseminated to targeted audiences and how this can be measured.

Clearly not every project will be funded – and not every project needs a full communications strategy, but it's something worth considering, particularly bearing in mind the dividends that we've seen good communications can bring. We know that budgets are being squeezed, but really, can you afford not to?

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