R&D and Universities

Participants

- Arc Universities Group
- Eastern Arc
- GW4 Alliance
- Midlands Innovation
- Million+
- National Centre for Universities and Businesses
- Russell Group
- University Alliance
- Universities UK
- Yorkshire Universities

Introduction

CaSE's Discovery Decade project aims to create a more outward-facing vision for R&D in the UK. By helping R&D organisations and advocates to connect with a broader base of public supporters, we can ensure that R&D investment remains a political priority.

We're working closely with organisations across the R&D sector, including through a series of targeted workshops, to collate and share what's already known about reaching public audiences.

Workshop aim

To understand the role R&D, innovation and technology play in engagement with the public around universities' role in society.

What's working?

Universities are ideally placed to act as the front-door to R&D for public audiences; with more than 170 higher education institutions across the UK, there is much scope to build up local links. Indeed, the Arc Universities Group, of institutions between Oxford and Cambridge, noted universities' role as civic anchors.

The sector is keenly aware that it needs to demonstrate the benefits and relevancy of R&D activities. The National Centre for Universities and Businesses emphasised the need to talk about the real, tangible benefits for people, while the Russell Group of research-intensive universities recommended cutting through abstract concepts and jargon to show impacts or make clearer links between R&D and key public moments.

> "It's the 'so what?' factor. You've done all this multi-million pound research, but so what? What's in it for me? That's a perfectly human reaction."

Midlands Innovation, a collaboration between eight research-intensive universities in the Midlands, pointed to projects that bring these elements – a local focus and R&D's benefits – together by designing research to make a difference to local people. For instance, the University of Nottingham-led Trent Basin project has created a community green energy scheme where residents can see their usage in real-time, showing how R&D is supporting their everyday lives, while also helping to generate clean energy.

Many participants had found success in engaging people outside of a university setting. The GW4 Alliance of four universities in the South West and Wales noted its activities around the European Researchers' Night as an example of fun and inspiring engagement. Arc Universities Group spoke about building a legacy for one-off events – for instance, the launch of the Chelmsford Science Festival in 2022 to build on the success of member university Anglia Ruskin hosting the British Science Festival the year before.

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What's challenging?

Universities have a range of roles in society, and public perceptions are complex to unpick, having been shaped by a range of direct and indirect experiences. Public opinion research from Universities UK indicates that the education role of universities typically obscures their R&D role, but positively the majority of the public believe that university research is essential for medical, technological and social innovation.

Finding the right messenger is vital. This role often falls to academics, but, as GW4 Alliance noted, a wider research culture problem – where academics don't get sufficient time or recognition for public engagement – can make it difficult to fulfil this role.

Others suggested looking beyond academics as R&D champions. University Alliance suggested activating those working in other roles at universities, while Midlands Innovation recommended boosting the visibility of technicians. Demonstrating the breadth of roles available in R&D could help demonstrate the range of opportunities created by degree-level education.

> "Universities have many staff who could be talking to the other people in their lives. How do we galvanise people to have those conversations?"

Participants discussed the risk of universities being seen as unapproachable and the need to dispel the idea that campuses are places local people can't go. Eastern Arc, a group of three South Eastern universities, noted that institutions without a city centre presence may find it harder to attract communities to campus, but that it is a two-way street: universities also need to actively go out into communities.

The diversity of the sector, and the size of many universities, can also pose a challenge for joined up working. Yorkshire Universities, of 12 institutions in the region, saw the potential for a disconnect between the corporate centre of a university and its researcher community, who may be engaging with the public, but could benefit from the skills and resources held centrally in the university.

What's next?

- **Build on local connections by opening up universities and demonstrating local benefits.** Universities should make the most of their large UK footprint to cement the idea that R&D is happening on people's doorsteps, through open days or showing how R&D benefits the community.

- **Identify and support non-academic R&D champions.** Making better use of different advocates for R&D will demonstrate the diversity of roles within the higher education research sector. Academics also need the right support so they can participate in public engagement.

- **Make stronger links between R&D and things that matter to the public.** Universities have a wealth of research examples, but need to spell out how they benefit the public in clear and tangible terms. Using high-profile moments like major sporting events could help capture the public's imagination.

- **Encourage cross-sector and local collaborations.** To cut through, especially with new public audiences, messages about R&D and universities need to be consistent across the sector. Institutions should embrace ways to work together and draw in allies from outside their sector.