ECR KE Skills, Workshop 1

Understanding your audience; implementing change

Summary of discussions (world café) aimed at exploring the process of understanding the audience and how to implement change within individual research contexts to support better communication.

1. Identifying critical characteristics of your audience

Need to identify the ‘hook’ for engagement. This will vary with the audience, but can then be used to focus the narrative. And recognise that the audience, and therefore the ‘hook’, will change as the research evolves from initial interest, through co-working to final outputs.

How much do you know about your audience in advance? Take time to get a quick briefing, do some research on areas of interest and current activities, think about any previous engagement with that audience

Think about what has brought the audience:
  - Could be a specific event looking at your research
  - Or a more general event (conference) where your research may not be the key reasons they are there – but could provide opportunities to make links, expand interest.

Audience characteristics:
  - Any bias
  - Likely level of interest
  - Diversity within a single audience
  - Age, culture, socio-economic group, education

Identify the power and influence within an audience (who are the key players?) and think about the appetite/opportunity for change.

In many cases the audience is self-selecting and you have little control over participation – means they are engaged but maybe not be the audience you need, consider groupings within the audience and identify which you can best influence/engage with

Think about the response:
  - Is your message going to be welcomed by the audience?
  - Do you want to be provocative?
  - Do you have time/flexibility during the event to respond to unexpected changes?
  - Do you need to balance the message to reflect majority interest, or would a more specific approach be useful

Consider most effective mode of communication: verbal, written, interactive, passive

Within the Built environment and infrastructure sectors, the audience is generally more applied, and tends to be conservative, risk averse and looking for incremental change. But everyone has an interest in these sectors, so communications can often build on existing experiences, whatever the level of audience knowledge.
2. Identifying what stakeholders need to know?

Industry, government, other end users, colleagues, funding agencies

Need to recognise that knowledge requirements change with time and are often dependent on the stage of interaction (inspire, shaping, critique) and the need to respond to changing policies and practice needs. Maintaining a dialogue wherever possible helps ensure mutual understanding of where co-benefits can be achieved.

Emphasise specific benefits where possible, particularly social and economic benefits.

Provide the honest truth – they value the independence of researchers. But be aware of the potential impact and how the research might be used.

Need to understand which areas researchers can/should influence

Need to know they are integral and can add value to the research process

Recognise that:

- They may not know what they need to know
- Research will probably not be able to answer all their questions – need to manage expectations
- Sometimes they are not that interested or have vested interests
- Often they don’t need to know everything. Be selective

Expect new hurdles and barriers to arise.

Take time to explain how the research process works (long-time scales) and to understand how this fits in with the different organisational remits, business models, working practices.

Consider whether it is sensible to release unpublished or preliminary data and information. Research findings may change with greater research. How can we explain that? Limits of what can be shared.

3. What are you hoping stakeholders will do with the information?

Knowledge exchange must be a two-way process which evolves as individual research projects progress. Effective on-going communication strategies will take account of the fact that the role of stakeholders will change depending on the stage of research.

Added value may be achieved in many ways with opportunities to work with stakeholders to strengthen and broaden knowledge exchange activities:

- Co-define the research question and scope
- Provide new perspectives, drive further investigation
- Provide data, scenarios, expert input, guidance
- Intellectual input, comment, provide feedback at all stages
- Respond constructively, positive criticism
- Invoke and inform constructive debate
- Recognise where impact may be added and work towards this
• Provide network opportunities
• Disseminate to other stakeholders, advertise work, champion the cause
• Act upon it to make well-informed decisions to improve policy/practice – drive impact

From the research perspective, it may be hoped that discussions will:
• Inspire new research questions/agenda
• Suggest new approaches to tackling an issue
• Lead to the commissioning of more research
• Lead to collaborative activities, formal collaborations
• Provide examples of impact
• Help confirmation that researchers have performed to brief
• Advertise you, your work, department’s contribution etc.

4. Ways to improve pathways to impacts

Recognise the various types of impact: engagement, influence, innovation and the need to identify pathways for those that are applicable in a specific research context. Understand the need for flexibility throughout the research process to be able to respond to changing policy/practice requirements.

For the built environment and infrastructure sectors, the nature of the work tends to lead to a focus on policy and practice stakeholders; this should maybe be broadened out to include public engagement/education through schools etc. to help influence the curriculum, inspire people to follow a career in research etc.

Stakeholder mapping at intervals is a useful way of scoping current potential interest across both broad and targeted audiences

Take time to choose the right combination of approaches/pathways/messengers’ and consider the relative value of investing time and resources in each strand

On timing
• recognise that impact takes place over different timescales for different audiences
• impact often occurs after project completion – consider seeking follow-on funding if appropriate

Build on existing capacity
• Build on existing pathways where there is expertise in the research group
• Understand the skills of the team; recognise the need to add specific skill sets
• Demonstrate prior impact, proven track record
• Use existing channels which seem to be well-regarded e.g. The Conversation
  http://theconversation.com/uk
On content

- Make it relatable and comprehensible, define problem in appropriate language.
- Scale models and gamification can help demonstrate potential
- For complex research, cartoon films, you tube clips etc. can all help get the message across
- For every academic paper, write a complementary summary for a non-academic audience

Evaluating impact (a difficult problem)

- What is a viable measure of the success of impact strategies?
- How can you measure impact – set some evaluation criteria if possible. Define the scale to measure impact