



# Working Knowledge

*People & Roles*

## The Hybrid Academic

by

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**'The Hybrid Academic'**  
A Project Short by Jen Grove, Sanja Djerasimovic and Jenny Crane

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## Abstract

Across UK universities new Early Career Researcher (ECRs) posts have recently emerged which involve a significant responsibility for supporting public engagement and impact, within specific projects and universities more widely. This Project Short addresses how the 'Hybrid Academic' role developed with the support of institutions and funders, and considers the advantages of having dedicated resources for embedding external engagement. The authors are all currently ECRs in a 'hybrid' role, working in the medical humanities - and humanities more widely - however, their perspectives and interests broaden out across disciplinary boundaries and the reflections in this piece should be applicable to the academic sector as a whole. The authors ask what hybrid roles might mean for the future of research and higher education careers, and comment, from their own experiences, on the challenges of these multi-skilled, collaborative and interdisciplinary positions, which trouble boundaries between the 'academic' and 'impact/engagement professional'.

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# The Hybrid Academic

## Policy Background

The Research Excellence Framework (REF) is the UK higher education assessment exercise which determines how the bulk of public funding for research (so-called 'core' funding) is distributed amongst university departments. In 2014 the REF included, for the first time, the socioeconomic impact of research as a metric of overall research quality and power. While initially twenty per cent of a department's grade would be attributed to 'impact', it was recently announced that this figure will rise to twenty-five per cent for the next REF in 2021. The latest decision indicates that reaching beyond the academy walls is increasingly important to the UK Government's definition of research excellence. Grant-awarding bodies, both **public** and **charitable**, are placing a higher value on impact and public engagement in their funding decisions. Universities' orientation to the public, (their 'third mission' after teaching and research), has long featured as an inextricable part of academic discourse. Even before the introduction of impact measures, many academics considered the purpose of their research work within the context of its social usefulness (see Box 1).

**However, what has changed is the transformation of the intrinsic aspects of the research process and purpose into an official, centrally defined, policy directive. Existing engagement activities across the sector are now centrally valued, but also more strictly evaluated.** Institutions and individuals have consciously sought to make research more demonstrably 'impactful'. To an extent, a focus on processes of engagement has been replaced by concern about output. This shift has made existing engagement work more visible, though not necessarily more rewarded. This policy context has also led to the development of new academic roles, which we call 'hybrid academics'.

## What is the 'Hybrid Academic'?

We intend the term 'hybrid academic' to reflect a range of new roles which have developed over recent years, such as the Public Engagement Research Fellow, the Engaged Research Fellow, and the Impact Research Fellow. These positions

### Box 1

Examples of research designs which involved the public, predating the modern 'impact agenda':

- ◆ Action research
- ◆ Participatory research
- ◆ Collaborative research
- ◆ Practitioner research
- ◆ Patient involvement
- ◆ History from below
- ◆ Oral history



are designed to marry research work with responsibilities for supporting public engagement and impact within projects and institutions. As a part of her study on the production of new academic identities in the response to the impact agenda, one of the present authors, Sanja Djerasimovic, has analysed over 30 advertisements for 'hybrid' academic roles that appeared on jobs.ac.uk in 2017. These primarily postdoctoral roles were almost always fixed-term (only one position was permanent), and funded either through external grant income to particular projects or internally by institutions. A great variety of job duties and requirements, sometimes vaguely defined, tended to include academic alongside professional or administrative work. Interestingly, adverts for hybrid positions rarely required specific professional experience, skills in public engagement, knowledge exchange, or engaged research. **Thus, employers are potentially capitalising on the scarcity of postdoctoral positions by adding new and inadequately formulated duties to already busy roles. In less cynical terms, this could also reflect the rapid metamorphosis of the academic job market without the accompanying professionalization and role-definition.**

## Case Study 1: Dr Jenny Crane

### **Public Engagement Research Fellow, Wellcome Senior Investigator Award Project, 'Cultural History of the NHS', University of Warwick**

*The Cultural History of the NHS project explores the multiple public meanings inscribed on this key public institution. My project is led by two Principal Investigators and supported by two Research Fellows and two Public Engagement Research Fellows (five are from History, one is from English). While the overall project runs for five years, the postdoctoral staff will work for three (2016-2018). As a Public Engagement Research Fellow, I conduct my own research about activism around the NHS and also gather public memories relating to our project's overarching mandate: constructing a 'cultural history' of the NHS. Further complicating this, my team's public engagement work is labelled a 'people's history' of the NHS. This effectively engages many audiences, but also broadens our analysis potentially to include everyone who has interacted with the NHS over the past 70 years!*

*While a big job, I am lucky to build on the expertise and partnerships established by my University, research centre, and Principal Investigators, all of whom have worked with hospitals, museums, and local communities for over a decade. Within my broad mandate, I also have a lot of support to decide which type of events I want to organise, and how much of my time I spend in research and engagement. My job description defined my outputs broadly: one methodological article, one research article, and one popular article. I thus have flexibility, but also need to reflect in order to decide which activities will most helpfully inform my research, and those of my project colleagues, as well as which will interest the public and answer our central project questions.*

*These questions are particularly pertinent in 2018 - the 70th anniversary year of the NHS - as numerous academic, health, and community groups are planning celebratory events. We must decide which collaborations to form, while also thinking about how to approach this year as researchers, analysing and historicising the excitement around this moment. This moment exemplifies, I think, the unavoidable, important, and valuable relationships between research, engagement, and reflexive work, which we all conduct as a researchers, engagers, and members of communities. I am keen to continue to work at this interface, and to continue the collaborative approach of my current project, in my future work.*

## The advantages and challenges of hybrid roles

### Advantages

Combining research and engagement has much potential to enrich the public contributions of Universities and enable expertise and perspectives beyond academia to challenge and enhance research. Including a specific engagement/impact dimension as part of an academic post (rather than a professional services one) brings advantages for institutions and individuals. In addition to supporting and championing engagement work across their project, department or institution, 'hybrid' academics are able to develop and pilot engaged research approaches within their own work, and share findings across the sector. **A unique perspective is achieved when working at the interface of research supporter, community engager and scholar which can help break down barriers between these areas.** Individuals in such posts develop a broad range of skills such as in communication, collaboration, management and evaluation, working with a range of groups (e.g. community, heritage, health), as well as across academic Departments. Such experience can positively impact career development as hiring practice begins to significantly value engagement and impact experience.

### Challenges

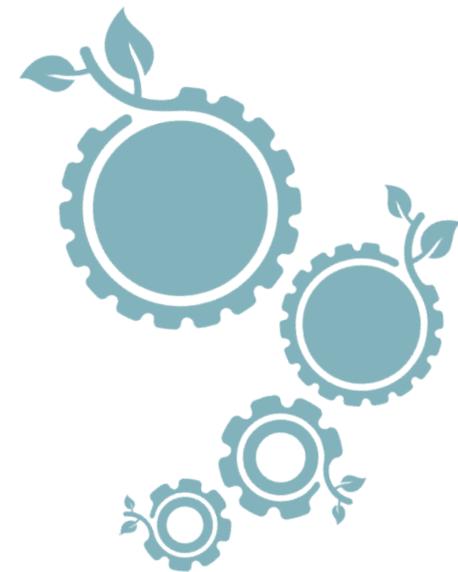
These roles come with many challenges, especially as they remain in development.

“Engaged researchers embark on a risky and uncharted career path.”

Engaged researchers embark on a risky and uncharted career path. The lack of a coherent framework for assessing engagement work means that key tasks may not be highly valued, for instance, producing ethical reviews, creating budgets, and media work. These tasks are time-consuming, and require legal, commercial, and analytical understanding. While having a person with dedicated time to commit to engagement/impact can be invaluable, there is a risk that this person will be expected to 'relieve' her colleagues (especially senior ones) of all such duties. Some hybrid academics are also tasked with a complete 'culture change' in their workplaces; a highly challenging task to enact, given that engaged research remains at times controversial within academia, although this varies across departments or disciplines. For projects creating fixed-term 'hybrid' roles, the short-term nature of these roles brings challenges in building meaningful relationships with external partners, who may have fundamentally different timescales to academic researchers. Without established evaluation of the efficacy of engagement, there is a risk that engaged researchers are pushed towards projects which may be seen as 'easier', in which diversity and inclusion may be neglected, and care is not taken to ensure that their practice maximally benefits the communities with whom they work.

### Box 2

Many terms which appear in hybrid academic job titles, such as 'public engagement'/'engaged research'/'impact' have definitions that are shifting across the academic sector. We are not providing definitions here but direct readers to these [resources](#).



## Case Study 2: Dr Sanja Djerasimovic

### Impact Research Fellow, College of Humanities University of Exeter

*I have been an Impact Research Fellow for almost two years, working in support of impact activities across the College of Humanities and (theoretically) its 300+ academic staff. My role was created primarily with the view to providing research support to academics whose work is envisaged as a potential impact case study for the next REF, but has since extended to provide impact training, assistance with project proposal development, grant applications peer review, and participation in strategic planning and decision-making at the discipline- and college level. Originally a two-year contract, my role has recently been made permanent.*

*My role involves a variety of activities. I work with individual colleagues on developing ways of engaging with the non-academic sectors, researching both the background to the potentially impactful work and the impact that can be claimed as emerging from any such interactions. Here, my social science background in higher education policy complements my colleagues' humanities-based disciplinary approaches. At the same time, I work with colleagues working in impact and public engagement professional research support services, departmental directors of impact and research, and the college Associate Dean for Research (who is my line manager) on various-level impact strategies. Finally, one day per week should be reserved for my own projects in the field of higher education. I am also involved in the organisation of public engagement events, such as the Exeter's branch of the Being Human festival.*

*Whilst I enjoy the great diversity of my work portfolio, the opportunity to pursue my many interests, a great degree of flexibility in working on my own research, and an extraordinarily high degree of institutional visibility for an ECR, the lack of a peer and disciplinary community does make for an isolating existence. The established career progression routes and requirements designed for a full-time researcher do not entirely account for the type of work in which I am engaged daily (most of which will not result in publications or grant proposals). If pathways for career progression are a work-in-progress, perhaps as a necessary consequence of organisational and institutional innovation, I would like to think that a lot will also depend on my own vision and initiative in creating new roles in the future.*



## Advice

Four issues seem key to the success of the hybrid academic role; we include proposals aimed at senior managers, PIs, departments, universities and funders.

## Flexibility

Flexibility is vital for the hybrid role, which moves constantly between research and professional duties, and may have unclear criteria for promotion, or moving timescales of employment. This may act as a barrier to career progression, but may also enable the intellectual freedom to negotiate these complex positions.

### Proposals:

- ◇ PIs looking to employ Engaged Researchers should consult with people who have held their roles, helping them to hone job descriptions.
- ◇ Hybrid academics should be allowed to take ownership of their own work within these highly collaborative roles yet must also be supported as key members of their projects/departments.
- ◇ Funders could provide specific grants for engaged researchers and for 'bridging' individuals between projects on this unique career path. One year or even nine-month contracts cause severe stress for ECRs, particularly for those also balancing engagement or teaching.
- ◇ **The responsibility for permanent cultural change in institutions cannot be delegated to a few temporary staff alone.**

## Selectiveness

While these roles have broad mandates to work across sectorial, disciplinary, and national divides, there is also a need for selectiveness. No individual nor small group can carry out or support every type of engagement. Engaged researchers face an extremely tough task in managing their time with a varied and heavy workload, multiple deadlines, and in particular often struggle to conduct their own research.

### Proposals:

- ◇ **Engaged researchers should be supported to find a balance between**

**the different aspects of their roles and may need to be relieved of certain "traditional" duties.**

- ◇ Open sharing about different types of engagement is to be encouraged by funders and projects, especially of negative results and challenging encounters.
- ◇ Long-term and in-depth external collaborations should be valued, as well as transient engagement events.

## Welfare

These roles bring specific challenges given the emotional labours of engagement work, and of working across sectors and in new types of employment.

### Proposals:

- ◇ **The welfare of this group of workers may need to be regularly assessed by Departments, with support offered for maintaining a work-life balance and protecting mental health.**
- ◇ Funders could make this career path more accessible through measures such as proper pay during periods of sickness; upfront funding for travel and couriering of PE equipment.
- ◇ Listening exercises could allow 'hybrids' to ask for what new resources they need; peer networks should be highly valued but not replace institutional support.

## Reflexiveness

These complex, messy roles complicate the boundary between researcher, community member, and engagement professional.

### Proposals:

- ◇ Critically assessing the hybrid role should be integral to their very function, not seen as a sign of their weaknesses; this can productively develop thinking around effective 'research' and high-quality 'engagement'.
- ◇ Reflexive work, whether at conferences or in publications, should be valued within metrics created by funders, Universities, and projects.

### Case Study 3: Dr Jen Grove

#### Engaged Research Fellow, Wellcome Joint Investigator Award Project 'Rethinking Sexology', University of Exeter

*I am employed on a research project investigating the cross-disciplinary origins of sexual science from 1890-1940. With a five year position, I am part of this project from its beginning to completion, which allows me to fulfil aspects of my 'hybrid' role on top of those required of a 'traditional' three year postdoctoral fellow. As an Engaged Research Fellow, I spend a significant portion of my time supporting and delivering engagement activities with my interdisciplinary team, all of whom are committed to finding ways for research into the history of sexuality, gender, science and medicine to make a positive impact on health and wellbeing today.*

*In addition, I carry out my own research (on the modern collection and reception of ancient erotic artefacts). However, in making this practical distinction between activities, I am consolidating a conventional view which keeps 'research' and 'engagement' as separate work streams. One of my aims in this role is to trouble this division, for instance by exploring co-production methods to involve young people as researchers.*

*In this position I see myself as regularly moving between the following "personas" (examples of work tasks are in brackets):*

- ◇ *Administrator (making bookings; organising meetings);*
- ◇ *Project manager (planning workloads; monitoring progress);*
- ◇ *Coordinator (managing websites and communications; coordinating data storage);*
- ◇ *Community practitioner (organising community history events/festivals; training teachers);*
- ◇ *'Traditional' Researcher (researching in archives; writing publications and grant proposals);*
- ◇ *Engaged researcher (carrying out research in conjunction with non-academic partners e.g. young people and sexual health practitioners);*
- ◇ *Engagement/Impact professional (joining research support colleagues in initiatives which strengthen engagement across the university/sector).*

*It is a substantial practical, intellectual (and sometimes emotional) challenge to manage the many competing demands in this role. There is a risk of spreading yourself too thin, and in particular that the heavy administrative load is prioritized over other tasks, especially research. However, it is an extraordinary opportunity to be able to carve out a new type of postdoctoral fellowship. I am extremely grateful to my project PIs, institution and funders who have given me the support and freedom required to shape my role and gain the skills, experience and connections of benefit to my future career, which may lie outside of academia, e.g. in brokering relationships between museums and universities.*

## The future

The future for hybrid academics is unclear. Certainly, **this role must not function to allow other researchers to 'discharge' their social responsibilities**; its intention is to support, not to replace, broader engaged practice. However, although 'hybrids' can act as examples of excellence, they cannot alone bear the burden a culture shift in which the much-maligned concept of 'impact' becomes meaningful, even positive. Institutions, disciplines, funders and assessment

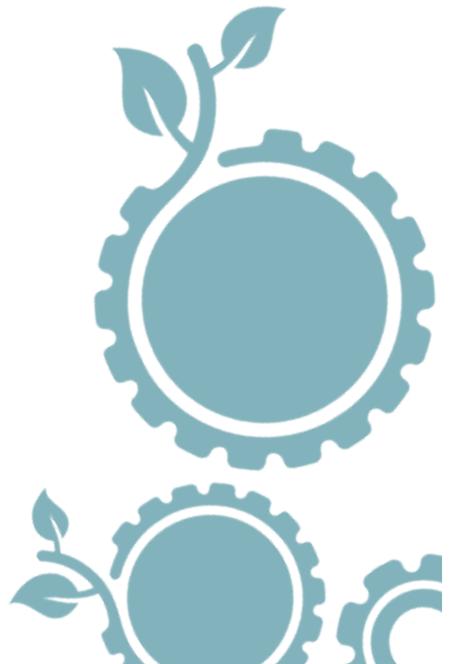
“ *These complex, messy roles complicate the boundary between researcher, community member, and engagement professional.*”

organisations must ensure that established and rising academics understand the possibility for engagement to substantially enhance their research, without foisting unwilling academics onto the public, and ensuring that time and interest of our audiences, as well as academics, are protected. 'Research-led engagement' must be seen as a genuine possibility, not a mere buzzword, perhaps with a professional accreditation and proper metrics in place, and recognised by those with hiring power as having as much value as traditional research performance.

In addition to institutional and sectorial support, practice must be shared better across and between engagement professionals and academic researchers. We can draw lessons from those working in different fields of engagement – such as science communication and public history – and also from those undertaking different types of professional roles within engagement, such as administration, digital work, and arts projects. Hindering researcher engagement, currently there are few academic journals which focus on publishing accounts of engaged research specifically. This has resulted in community interventions based around Humanities and Arts research published in Social Science journals. The creation of **the methodological journal, *Research for All***, is a positive development. **Hybrid academics can work to bring professional and academic groups in to contact, being aware of long-standing tensions, cynicism, and exasperation on both sides, as well as ongoing partnerships.** At the same time, hybrid

academics must also recognise that we ourselves are often perceived with a level of confusion and cynicism by many in both professional services and in academia, at times finding ourselves excluded from both communities.

The focus on impact may herald a bright future for hybrid academics. The plethora of positive engagement activities across University departments – led by all types of academic, not only ones named as 'engaged', suggests a future whereby all research may be engaged research. To do this we must share, support, and critically reflect together.





*Working Knowledge is a collection of accessible and user-friendly resources dedicated to the practical ins and outs of interdisciplinary research.*

*Covering everything from managing a research project's social media presence to conducting experimental design 'hackathons', the series is a must-read for anyone considering funding or embarking on interdisciplinary research.*

**Series editors:** *Charles Fernyhough, Angela Woods and Victoria Patton.*

