

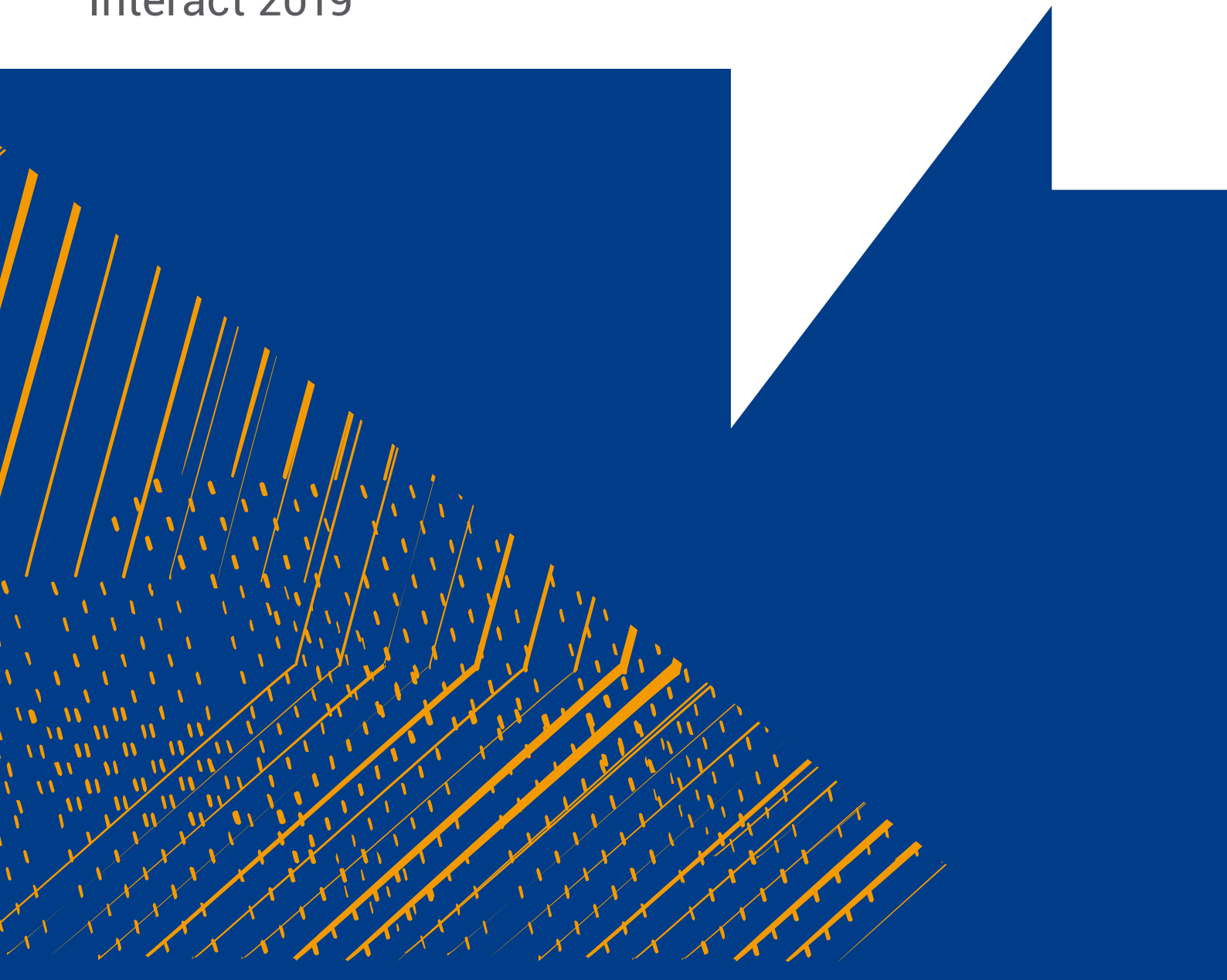


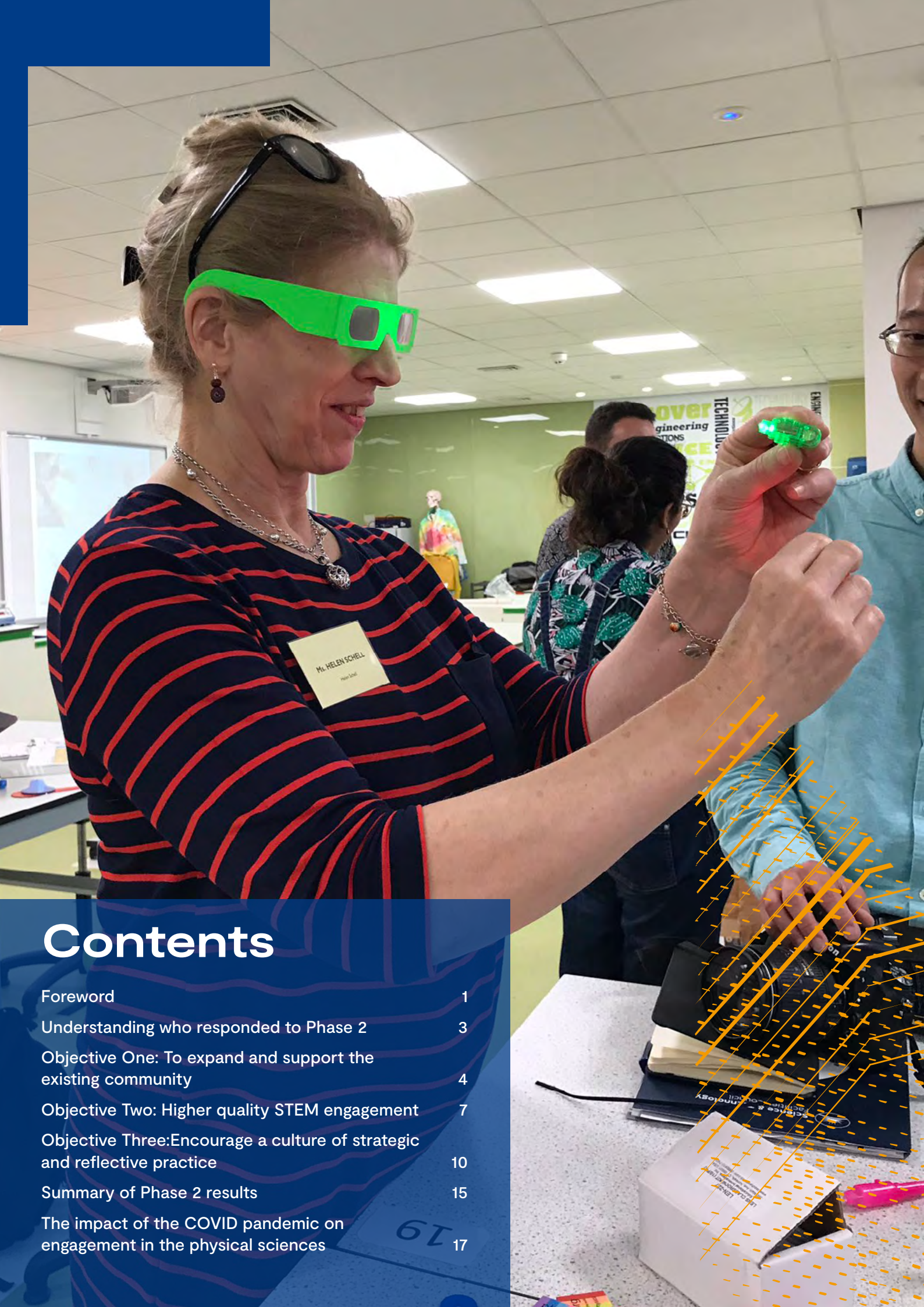
Science and
Technology
Facilities Council



Evaluation Report Phase 2

Interact 2019





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Foreword

The Interact 2019 symposium was a partnership between the Science and Technology Facilities Council (STFC, part of UK Research and Innovation) the Institute of Physics (IOP), the South East Physics network (SEPnet), the Royal Astronomical Society (RAS), the Ogden Trust, the Royal Society of Chemistry (RSC) and the University of Central Lancashire (UCLan). It followed the Interact 2017 symposium which was designed as the first in a biennial engagement symposia series targeted at those involved in engagement in the UK physical sciences community. Over the previous ten years the engagement landscape in the UK has seen a positive shift in understanding and attitudes, and the culture has moved towards engagement being valued, rewarded and encouraged; the symposia series was designed to build on these changes in the UK STEM community. Interact 2019 was the second in this series. The third was planned to take place in September 2021, hosted by Cardiff University, but due to the ongoing coronavirus pandemic this has been postponed to September 2022. Additionally, there will be a one-day online 'V-Interact' event held in September 2021 to explore the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on our community, and to maintain our connection with Interact attendees

The aim of Interact 2019 was to expand and support the existing community of engagement practitioners within the physical sciences who develop higher quality STEM engagement and encourage a culture of strategic and reflective practice.

After Interact 2019 an evaluation report was produced. This was based on the record of attendees, registration data, the workshop selection process, and the post-symposium evaluation survey (Phase 1). A year after the symposium a follow up evaluation survey (Phase 2) was conducted, the data from which has been used in this report. The same process was conducted for Interact 2017, with the aim of the evaluation programme being to build up a longitudinal study of the state of physical sciences engagement landscape and to measure the impact of the Interact symposia series.

For the Interact 2019 surveys the response rate was a lot lower for Phase 2 than Phase 1. This is unsurprising – people are more likely to respond when the event is still fresh and, due to the pandemic, many people had moved roles or been put on furlough at the time the follow up survey was circulated. Additionally, due to university teaching having been moved online and the need to develop different systems for supporting and assessing students researchers have been under considerably higher workloads and pressures over the last year. Similarly, attendees across all career types have experienced additional pressures from the pandemic, both within the working and home environments. From Phase 1, 89 of the 204 conference attendees responded to the survey, equivalent to 44% of attendees. For Phase 2, a year later, 33 responses were received, equivalent to 16% of conference attendees.





This has fallen from Interact 2017 where approximately 70% of attendees responded to Phase 1 and 30% responded to Phase 2. One reason for this is that although Interact 2019 attracted a significantly larger attendance (204 vs 129) a similar number of these were engaged enough with the symposia and follow up communications to respond to the evaluation survey – the raw number of respondents is extremely similar. As mentioned above, the Phase 2 evaluation was conducted during COVID-19 which we suspect will have impacted the response rate. To attempt to counter this we delayed the circulation of the evaluation survey (to avoid the start of the academic year) and also left the survey open much longer than previously, sending regular reminders.

This report will focus on how the intention to act as a result of Interact 2019 ('intent') compares with actual actions ('completed'). This comparison ('overall') will allow for rich discussion into how the project partners can support public engagement in the future.

It should be noted that due to the pandemic many of those actions intended to be completed by attendees have not been possible, due to lockdowns, social distancing and other restrictions. We will explore the effect of the pandemic in this report, and added in a specific section to the follow up survey to explore the impact of the pandemic on physics engagement.

In both Phase 1 and Phase 2 evaluation surveys we asked attendees to generate a unique, anonymised code. The aim of this was to allow us to link Phase 1 and 2 responses without identifying any individual respondents. We found that only 11 respondents appeared in both the Phase 1 and Phase 2 data, which is an interesting insight as our previous assumption was that those completing the Phase 2 survey were highly likely to have also completed the Phase 1. In reality one third of Phase 2 respondents also responded to Phase 1. Those who responded to both surveys were reasonably evenly split across career categories, with five being researchers, three OPE professionals and three others. None of these had changed jobs or institutions from the previous year, which is perhaps unsurprising as we were able to reach them at the email addresses they had provided a year earlier. Due to the low number of linked responses, and the fact that the Phase 2 survey asks questions which link back to the symposia we were unable to draw any additional insights from having this linked data and mindful of burden on respondents we do not propose to repeat this process.

Understanding who responded to Phase 2

As can be seen from Figure 1 there are differences in the career types of respondents to the Phase 2 survey compared to Phase 1. These are not huge but will help to contextualise some of the results later in the report. We must also note that around a third the number of attendees responded to Phase 2 compared to Phase 1 (33 vs 89). These career types can be combined into three broad

categories; academic (academic, ECR and PhD), OPE professionals and other (everyone else). When response rates for Phase 1 and Phase 2 are compared for these categories we see that response rate is roughly consistent (44% vs 48% for academic, 31% vs 30% for OPE and professionals and 25% vs 21% for other).

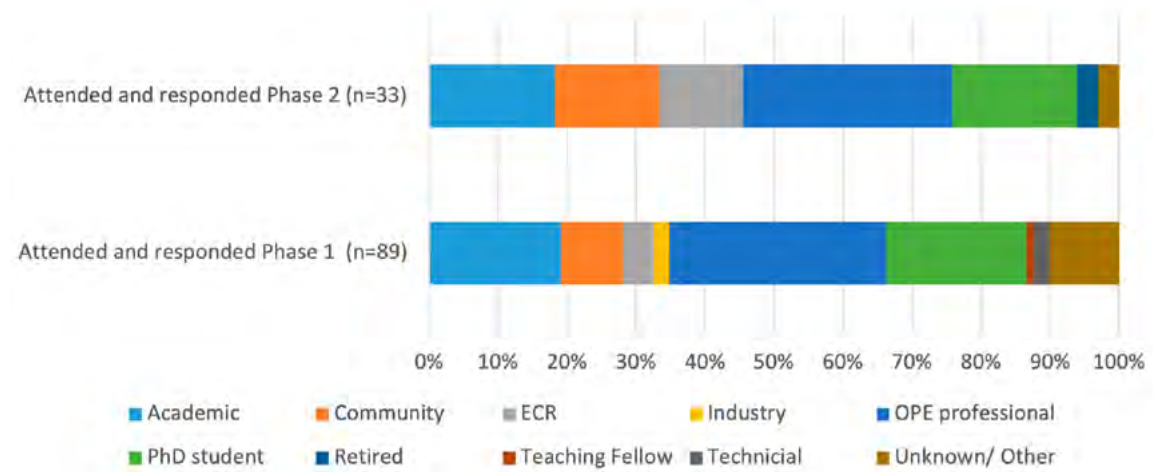


Figure 1. Respondents career type. The top bar shows the reported career types from respondents to the Phase 2 survey, whilst the lower bar shows Phase 1.



Objective One: To expand and support the existing community

(a) Run a symposium with 200 people attending, where 50% of those attending will be researchers in the physical sciences who carry out engagement activities alongside and as part of their research.

The aim of this objective was to encourage and foster a community of researchers and practitioners to engage and share good practice, their learning experiences and to network.

204 people attended Interact 2019 on the day, which met our target number of 200. Using the same 'academic' category as above (combining those selecting career types of academic, ECR and PhD student) 46% of those attending were researchers. This is just below our target of 50%, however 44 (17%) did not select a career category meaning the proportion of academics may be higher than reported. For further analysis please see the Interact 2019 Phase 1 report.

(b) Over 95% of the content of the programme will be generated by those attending the sessions. Over 40% of these sessions will be delivered by researchers.

The aim of this objective was to ensure we had a programme which was relevant to attendees by going through a process of co-creation. We want to encourage researchers to share their expertise and experience of PE to facilitate peer learning.

Five of 27 parallel sessions were generated by organisers rather than attendees, which equates to 82% of sessions being generated by attendees. The organisers chose to add in extra sessions, which were not voted on by attendees. This was due to low registration rates from certain audiences as we felt that there was not enough targeted content yet included to attract these audiences or address topical issues for the sector. Three of the additional sessions were in the evaluation, impact and REF 2021 category and were targeted at senior academics who were involved in REF impact case studies. The other two were in the sharing best practice category and focused on supporting early career researchers in starting their engagement journey.

To measure who was delivering the sessions we asked for the career category of the person submitting the session proposal. Six of the sessions were submitted by academics, which equates to 22% of the sessions. If we remove the five sessions added by the organising committee this proportion rises to 27%. This is below our target of 40%. In some sessions there was an academic delivering alongside an OPE professional and not all of these were captured in the session submission data. Figure 3 shows the number of sessions in each category broken down by career type. This shows the dominance of OPE professionals delivering sessions across all categories. Academics delivering sessions were reasonably evenly split across the 'reaching underserved audiences', 'schools outreach' and 'sharing practice', with 3, 2, and 1 academics delivering in each theme respectively. Only OPE professionals delivered sessions in the 'evaluation, impact and REF 2021' category, and most of these sessions were those added in by the organising committee. This highlights something that wasn't taken into account when setting the objectives; the sessions in this category were added due to demand from the academic community, however they perhaps currently don't have the confidence or expertise in that community to deliver the sessions. This means that if we continue to aim for a programme that is almost entirely co-created we risk not including valuable material which needs to be delivered from experts external to that community. This is something we will take into account when planning Interact 2021, and we will re-frame this objective accordingly.

(c) Over 50% of those attending will have networked and created links with others who have similar engagement interests to them.

The aim of this objective is to foster and support a community of engaged professionals in the physical sciences.

61% of respondents to the second phase of evaluation said that they had networked with someone they met at the conference. The response data can be seen in Figure 3.

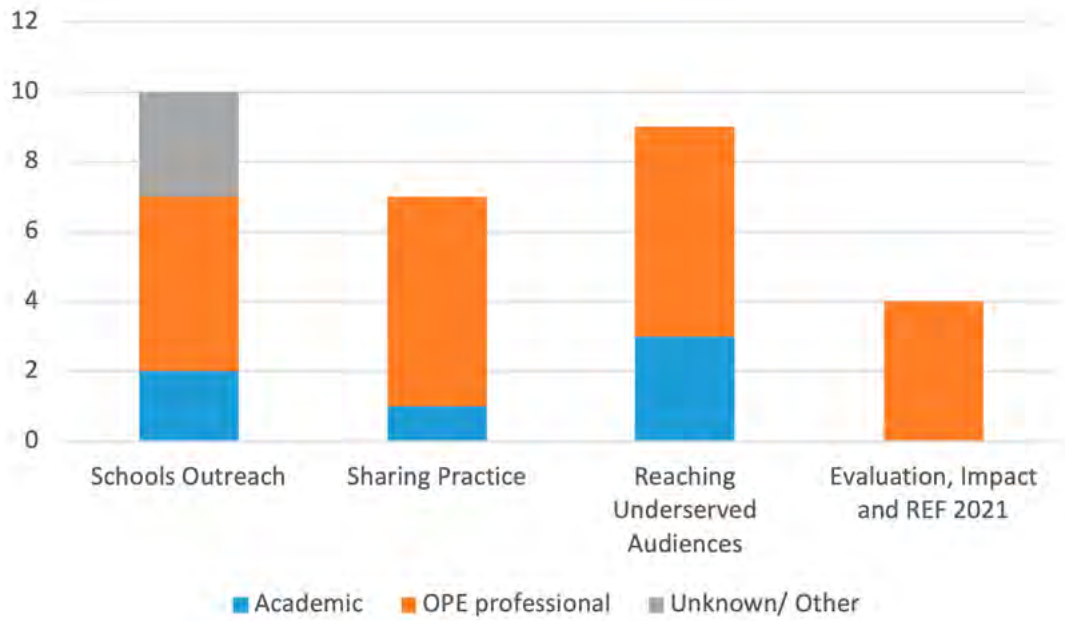


Figure 2. Number of sessions in each category split by career type.

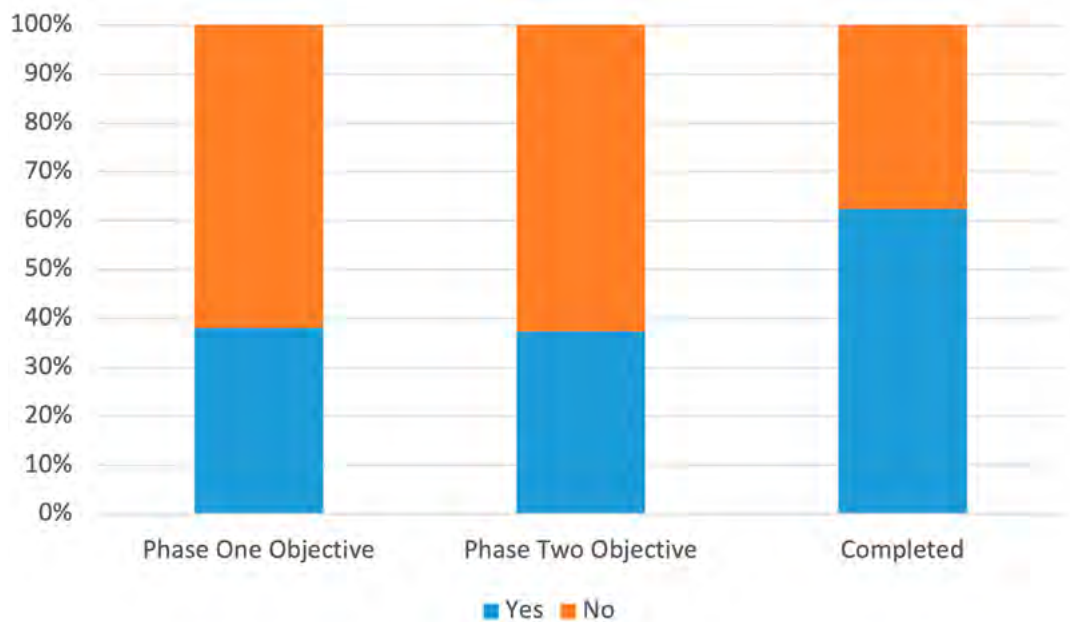


Figure 3. Those who reported networking during the conference. From left to right the bars show; the proportion of Phase 1 respondents who reported networking as an objective, the proportion of Phase 2 respondents who reported networking as an objective, and the proportion of Phase 2 respondents who reported having networked as a result of the conference.

This analysis can be further broken down by career type. Figure 4 shows that the number of academics who set networking as an objective was larger than that for other categories (58% compared to 8% for OPE professionals and 33% for others). This may be because OPE professionals are already part of the engagement community so may not feel the need to set networking as an objective, whereas many academics may be attending hoping to make new

connections. 45% of the same academics reported having networked, as did 30% of OPE professionals and 25% of others. If we look at the raw numbers, however, this is because the number of respondents who reported having networked was higher in all categories than the number that set this as an objective. Overall 25% of those who set networking as an objective reported having networked.

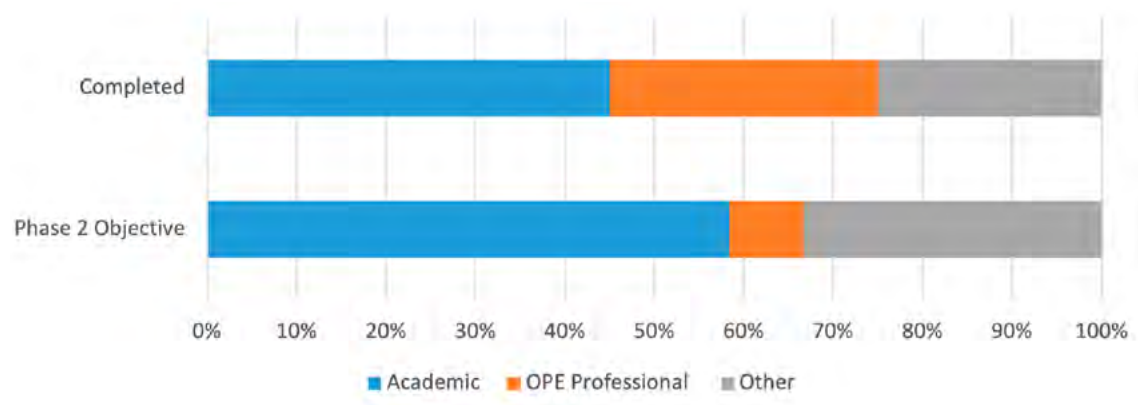


Figure 4. Proportion of those who reported setting networking as an objective (bottom bar) and having networked (top bar) split by career type.

(d) Have another symposium within 2 years of the current symposium.

The aim of this objective is to ensure we run a sustained series of symposia to grown and support the physical sciences engagement community.

The next Interact symposium was scheduled to take place during September 2021 at Cardiff University, however this has been postponed due to the coronavirus pandemic and uncertainty over ongoing restrictions. The next Interact symposium will now take place at Cardiff University in September 2022, with a smaller online event being held in September 2021 focusing on online engagement and COVID recovery.

(e) Over 15% of attendees will not have attended another public engagement conference or symposium in 2019.

The aim of this objective is to reach those who don't currently attend other similar events.

Of those who responded to the phase 2 survey 67% had not attended another public engagement conference or symposium in 2019. This demonstrates that we are more than meeting this aim as we are engaging members of the community who do not attend other similar events.

Objective Two: Higher quality STEM engagement

(a) Over a third of those attending will change how they approach a current project based on learning from Interact.

The number of participants who report that they have changed how they approach a project is consistent with the number reporting setting this as an objective in the Phase 2 survey, and higher than the number who reported setting it as an objective in the Phase 1 survey. 64% report having

changed how they approached a project based on learning from Interact, compared to 54% reporting this as objective in Phase 1. This is significantly higher than the third of participants which was our aim. Therefore, the objective that over a third of respondents changed their approach to an existing public engagement project based on learning from the symposium was reached. This can be seen in Figure 5.

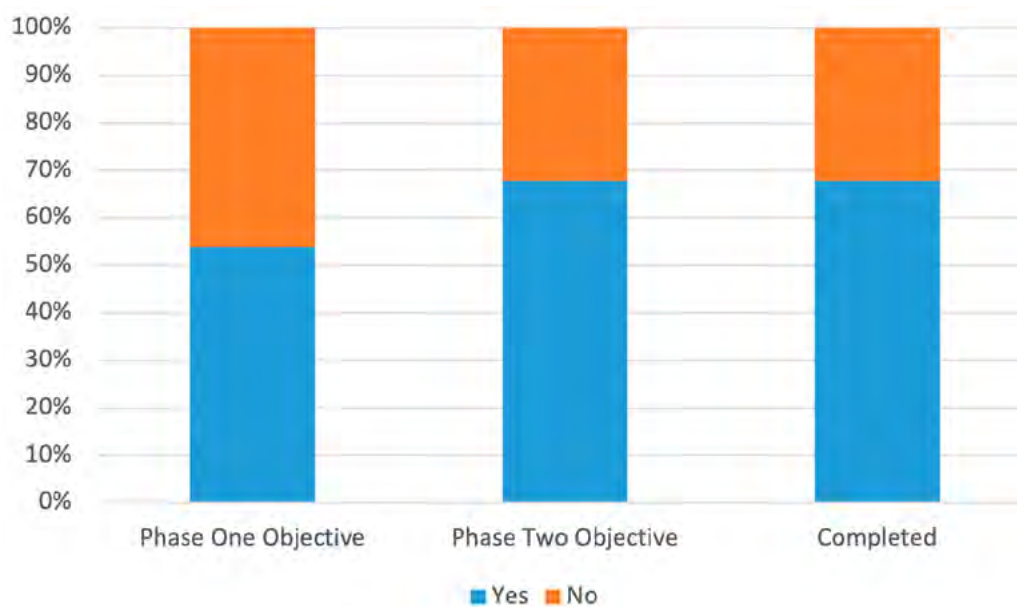


Figure 5. Those who reported changing a project due to learning from the conference. From left to right the bars show; the proportion of Phase 1 respondents who reported changing a project as an objective, the proportion of Phase 2 respondents who reported changing a project as an objective, and the proportion of Phase 2 respondents who reported having changed a project as a result of the conference.

Some attendees gave explicit examples of how their practice has changed as a result of Interact 2019. Key themes emerging included improved evaluation practice, partnerships forming as a result of the symposium and learning about and making links with funders, leading to two reported successful grant bids. Additionally a couple of attendees mentioned having attended a session on online engagement, which allowed them to adapt projects to be run virtually when the coronavirus pandemic happened.

This data can be further broken down by career type of attendee. Figure 6 shows those who aimed to change a project as a result of Interact, and those who reported completing this aim. It is interesting to see that both in terms of setting this as an objective, and completing changing a project, the largest category by proportion is academics, with 52% setting it as an objective, and 62% having changed a project as a result of the symposium.

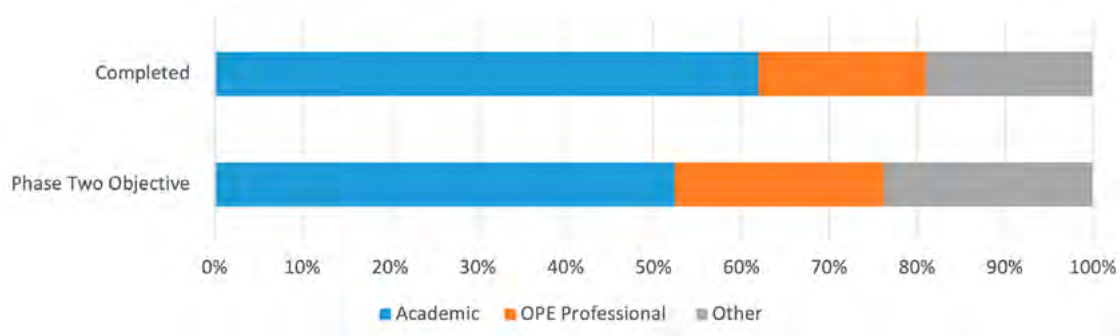


Figure 6. Break down by career type of responses to whether attendees had changed a project as a result of attending Interact.

(b) 20 new public engagement projects will be initiated as a result of symposium. Over half of these would have gone through a competitive process such as the IOP Grant Scheme and the STFC Spark Awards throughout 2019 and 2020.

Figure 7 shows that 33% of respondents started a new public engagement project a year after attending Interact. This is equivalent to 11 individuals and 11 new projects however if scaled

to include the 204 attendees this is equal to 67 projects. The sample size may be too small to extrapolate this data, however 38 respondents shared that they intended to start new projects in the first phase of the symposium evaluation. As mentioned above, two respondents reported successfully applying for funding for a project as a result of the symposium; one doesn't name the body this is from and the other is an STFC award.

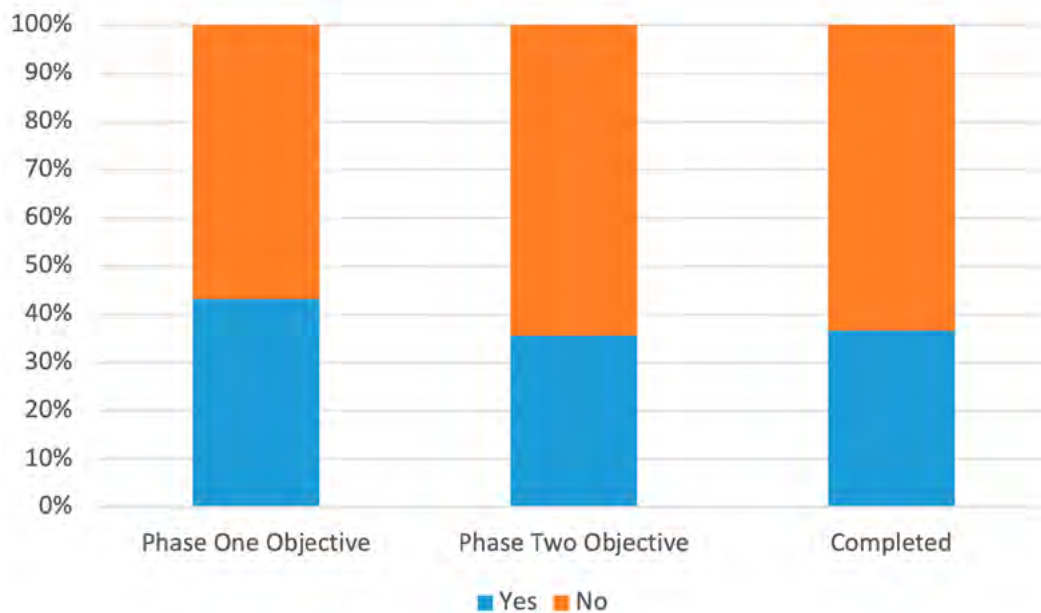


Figure 7. Those who reported starting a new project due to the conference. From left to right the bars show; the proportion of Phase 1 respondents who reported starting a project as an objective, the proportion of Phase 2 respondents who reported starting a project as an objective, and the proportion of Phase 2 respondents who reported having started a project as a result of the conference.

In Figure 8 we have broken down these results by career type of the attendees. More researchers than OPE professionals reported an intent to start a new project (64% of researchers compared to 18% of OPE professionals). Similarly, more academics reported completing this aim than OPE professionals (73% of those who completed this aim are academics and 9% of OPE professionals). The reasons for this are unclear and likely complex, however it is likely to reflect both grant funding criteria constraints and issues arising from furlough and changes to working patterns/remits during COVID.

(c) One of these projects will be awarded an engagement award. This could be from the NCCPE, SEPnet, IOP etc.

The intention of including this objective was to track this over a longer time period. In this survey we did not ask specifically about recognition awards received for public engagement projects. In the comments we collected some information around funding awards.

One respondent commented that they have been nominated for a recognition award.

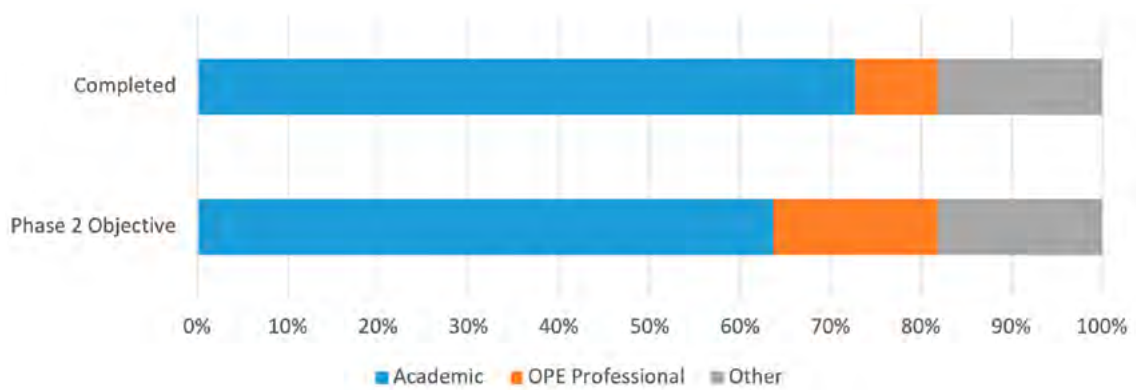


Figure 8. Those who intended to start a new project against those who reported completing this intention. The data is split by career type of respondent.



Objective Three: Encourage a culture of strategic and reflective practice

The following three objectives all aim for participants to make a change to their personal approaches to public engagement, including their approach to evaluation and knowledge exchange. This report has looked at participants' views of how embedded public engagement is within an individual's department using the EDGE tool¹. The EDGE tool was developed by the National Coordinating Centre for Public Engagement as a method of assessing an institution's approach to embedding public engagement. It allows the user to rate their institution's approach as either 'Embryonic', 'Developing', 'Gripping' or 'Embedded'.

Figure 9 shows a small shift in the role of public engagement within attendees' departments in just a year. More participants said public engagement was

gripping or embedded in their department a year later, than embryonic or developing. In Phase 1 51% rated their department as gripping or embedded, compared to 55% in Phase 2.

We can compare this to Phase 1 and Two data from Interact 2017, to monitor this across the Interact symposia series. In Interact 2017 Phase 1 data 34% rated their department as gripping or embedded, compared to 44% in Interact 2017 Phase 2. This shows a steady increase in how highly attendees rate the embedding of public engagement in their departments over the time the Interact symposia have been running. This is something we will continue to monitor over the course of the symposia series.

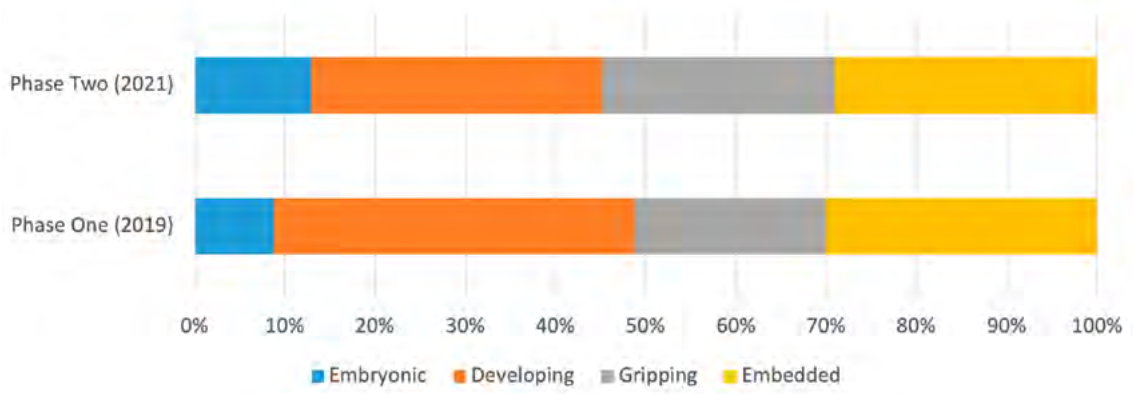


Figure 9. Respondents rating of how embedded public engagement is in their institutions using the edge tool. Data is split by Phase 1 and Phase 2 responses.

1. <https://www.publicengagement.ac.uk/support-engagement/strategy-and-planning/edge-tool/introducing-edge-tool>

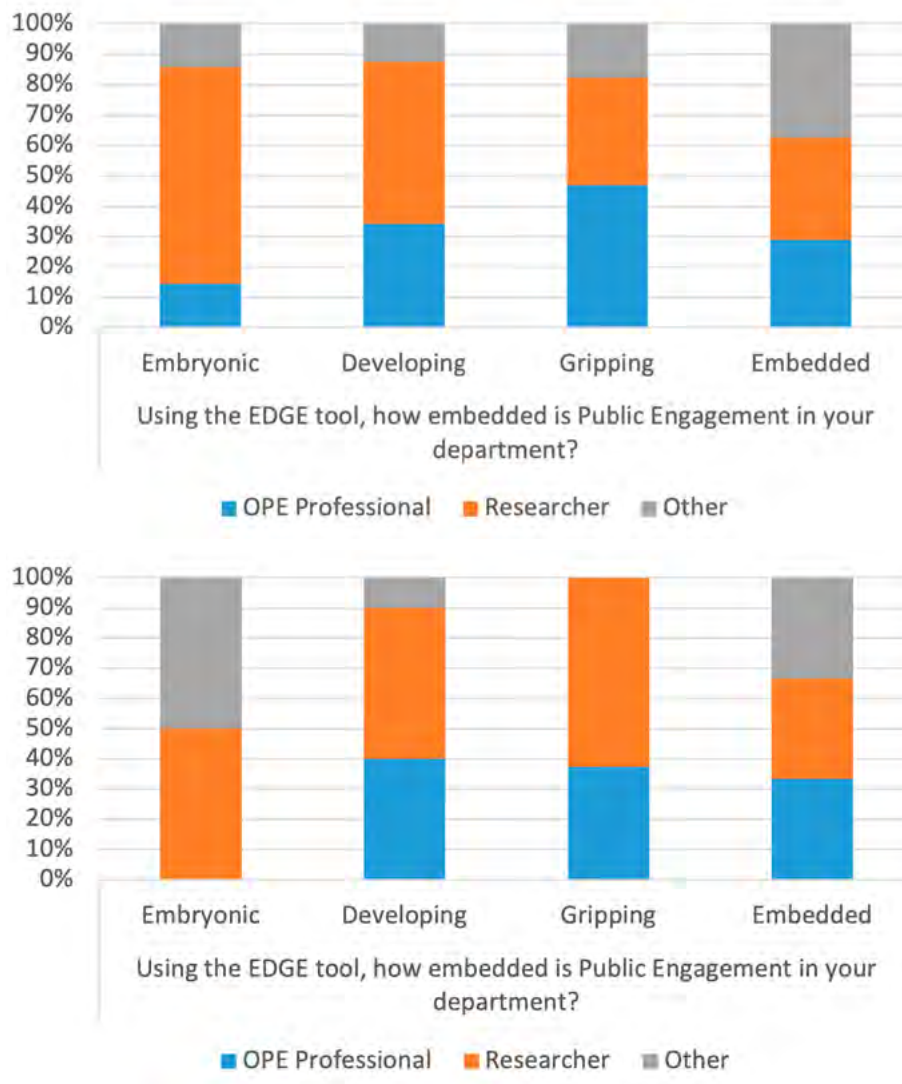


Figure 10. Phase 1 (top) and Phase 2 (below) data on how the respondents rated their institution using the EDGE tool.

Figure 10 shows the Phase 1 and the Phase 2 data on how respondents rated their department using the EDGE tool. This is split by career type. Here we can see that in Phase 1, 41% of OPE professionals and 47% of researchers rated their institution as ‘developing’, whereas in Phase 2, 40% of OPE professionals and 33% of researchers said this. We see a similar trend in the data for the ‘gripping’ rating – in Phase 1 30% of OPE professionals and 17% of researchers gave their institution this rating, compared to 30% of OPE professionals and 33% of researchers in Phase 2.

The ratings in these categories are more or less unchanged for OPE professionals, whereas academics report a positive shift towards engagement becoming more embedded between Phases 1 and 2.

In Phase 1, 26% of OPE professionals and 22% of researchers gave their institution this rating, whereas in Phase 2 this shifted to 30% of OPE professionals and 20% of researchers. In both categories this stayed largely flat, demonstrating that most departments have not yet managed to fully embed engagement.

The level of support reported from departments is largely flat between Phase 1 and Phase 2 data, with nearly 40% reporting receiving plenty of support in both surveys. This can be seen in Figure 11.

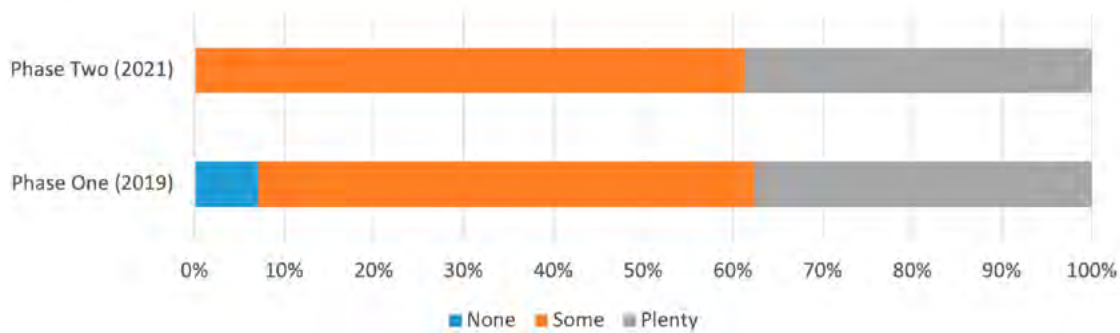


Figure 11. Level of departmental support. Data is split by responses from Phase 1 and Phase 2 of evaluation.

Our specific aims related to encouraging a culture of strategic and reflective practice are listed below.

Over half of those attending will:

- (a) Change how they view their PE activities, thinking of them as part of a wider strategy rather than one-off activities.**
- (b) Take more of their Public Engagement time to reflect on their engagement activities, including evaluation, dissemination and reflection.**
- (c) Take more of their Public Engagement time to look for evaluation reports from previous activities similar to those they are planning.**

Following on from report one the Phase 2 survey asked a single question based on each of the behaviours in aims 3 a-c. We then asked if these behaviours had changed due to Interact. Figure 12 shows those who set changing one of these behaviours as an objective in Phase 1 and Phase 2 data, and the number that reported successfully changing one of these behaviours. Based on Phase 2 data 55% of respondents reported having changed a behaviour as a result of the Interact conference. This met our aim of 50% and was broadly consistent with the proportion setting this as an objective in Phase 1 and Phase 2.

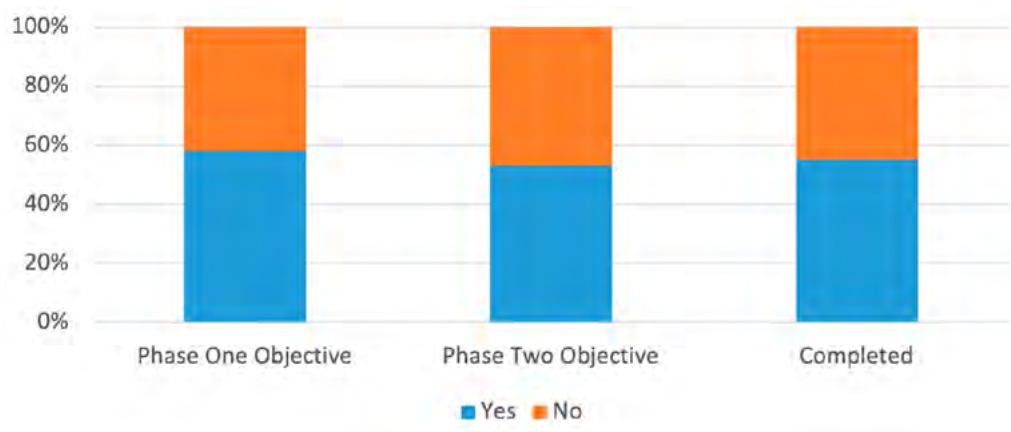


Figure 12. Number of respondents reporting changed behaviour following the Interact conference. The left two bars show how many set this as an objective split by Phase 1 and 2 data, and the right-most bar shows the overall number who reported that their behaviour had changed.

Figure 13 shows this data split by career type. This shows that most people who reported successfully changing a behaviour were academics. One reason for this may be that more academics responded to the Phase 2 survey than other career types, and also because many OPE professional roles were repurposed during the coronavirus pandemic (e.g. to focus more on student support and recruitment in universities). Additionally, many doing OPE roles will have more PE specific expertise, so may be more likely to be more confident in their current approach than those in other categories.

Figure 14 shows data on the level of perceived change in how embedded public engagement is in the respondents' institutions. 36% those who classified some/nearly all of their public engagement as embedded in their institutions said

that these behaviours had changed as a result of the symposium. This compared to 36%, the same proportion, who reported no change. All of those who said that none of their public engagement activities were embedded in their department also reported that this has changed, which shows progress is being made to embed activity in departments.

46% reported a change in how embedded public engagement is in their department, which is a little below our 50% target. This compares to 43% reporting the same change in the Phase 2 data from Interact 2017, showing a small positive trend. It will be interesting to keep monitoring this at the next Interact symposium and beyond, to see how this changes further over time.

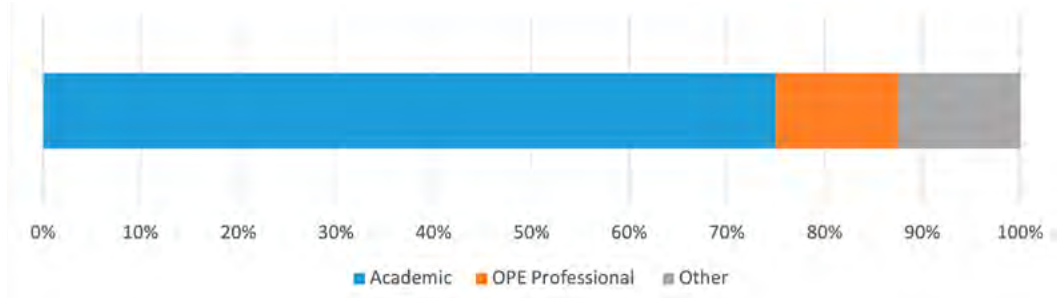


Figure 13. Those who reported changing a behaviour as a result of Interact. The data is split by career type of respondent.

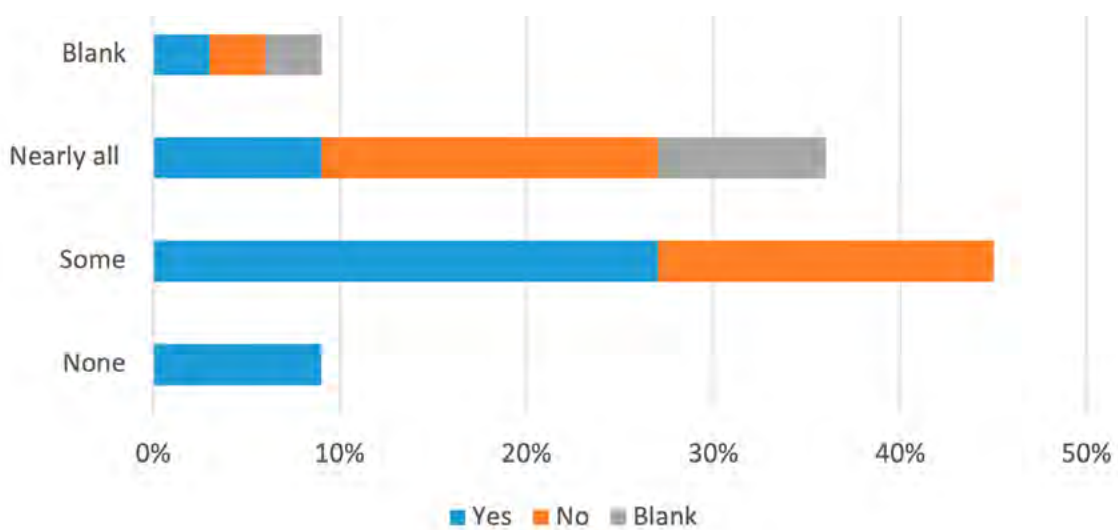


Figure 14. Answers to 'How embedded is your individual public engagement activity with the rest of your department's activities?' crossed with whether this has changed since the symposium.

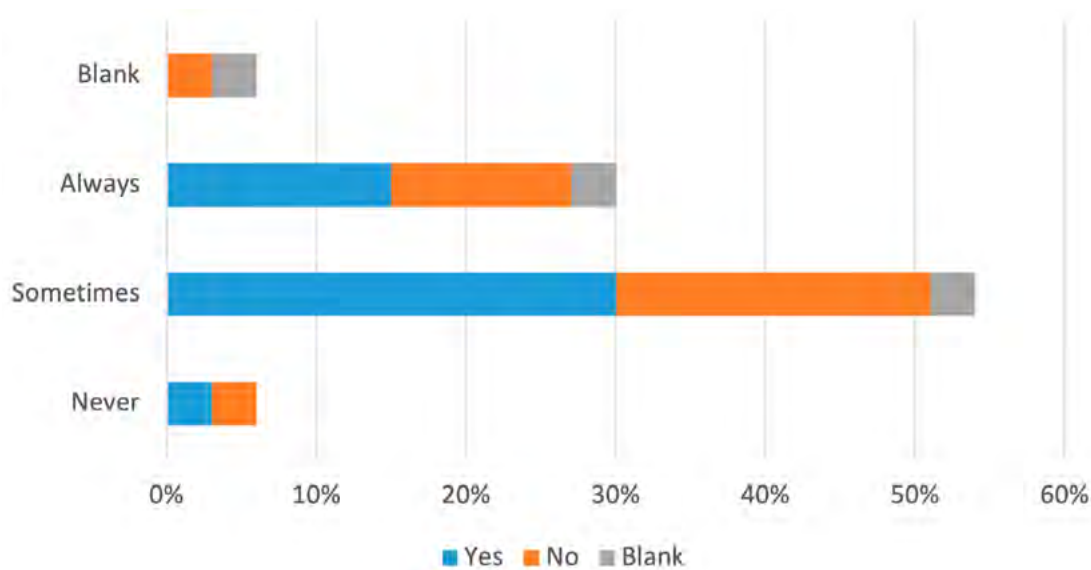


Figure 15. Answers to 'Do you take time to reflect on your own public engagement activities?' crossed with whether this has changed since the symposium.

We asked if respondents took time to reflect on their public engagement activities. The data is displayed in Figure 15. Only 6% said they never took time to reflect, with 84% saying they sometimes or always did (the remaining responses were blank). Overall 48% of respondents said there was a change in these behaviours after the conference, with 39% saying there was no change and the rest leaving the question blank. This is a bit lower than our aim that 50% of respondents would change this behaviour. This may be because more respondents say they were already taking time to reflect on their public engagement to some degree.

Figure 16 shows the respondents assessments of how often they reflect on wider practice in the public engagement community crossed with whether this has changed since the symposium. Everyone who responded said they do this already, with 63% saying they sometimes do and 33% saying they always do. Overall 57% of these said that their behaviour had changed since the symposium. As this is above 50% we have met our target of half of attendees changing this behaviour as a result of the symposium.

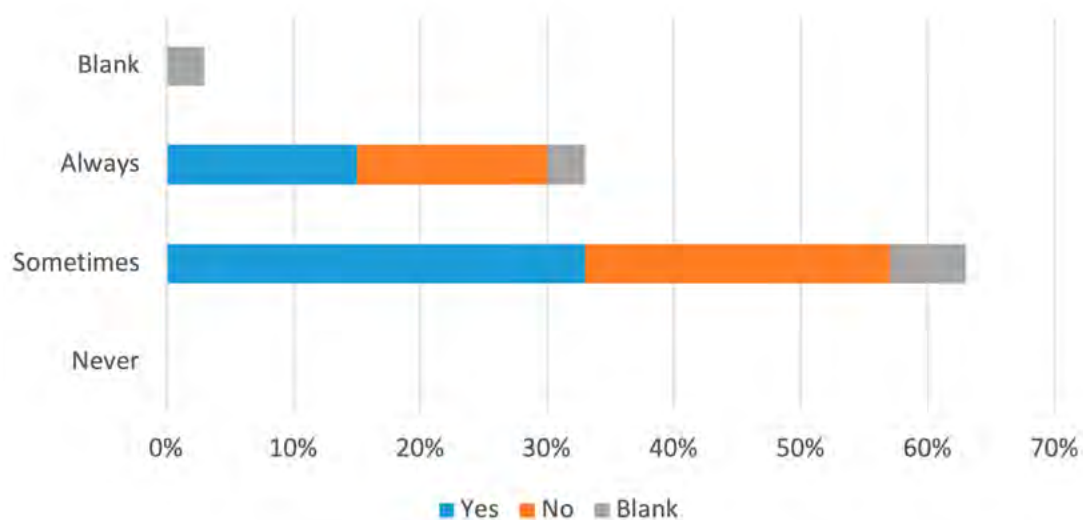


Figure 16. Answers of 'Do you take time to look at wider practice in the public engagement community?' crossed with whether this has changed since the symposium.

Summary of Phase 2 results

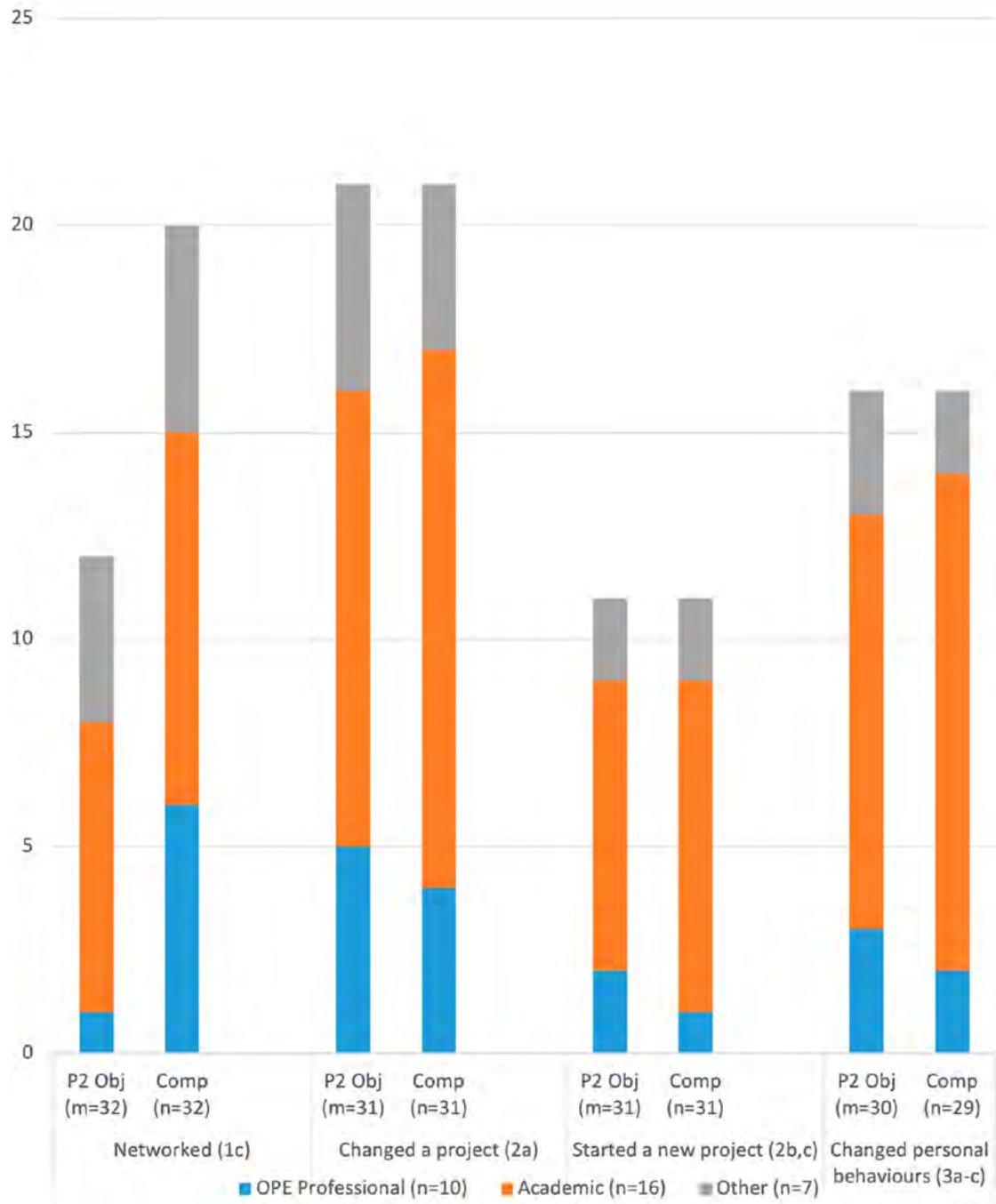


Figure 17. Summary plot showing each aim of the Interact symposium. These are broken down by number of respondents who set this as a Phase 2 objective and those who reported meeting it. The data is also split by career type.

Figure 17 summarises the data collected during phase 2 evaluation on each of the Interact objectives.

Objective 1c was **'Over 50% of those attending will have networked and created links with others who have similar engagement interests to them.'** In the phase 2 data 61% of attendees reported having networked.

Objective 2a was **'Over a third of those attending will change how they approach a current project based on learning from Interact.'** In the Phase 2 data 64% of attendees reported having changed how they approached a project.

Objectives 2 and c were **'15 new public engagement projects will be initiated as a result of symposium. Over half of these would have gone through a competitive process such as the IOP Grant Scheme and the STFC Small Awards throughout 2017 and 2018'** and **'One of these projects will be awarded an engagement award. This could be from the NCCPE, SEPnet, IOP etc..'**

Of those who responded to the Phase 2 survey 11 said they had begun new projects. Two respondents commented that they had applied for funding and been awarded it.

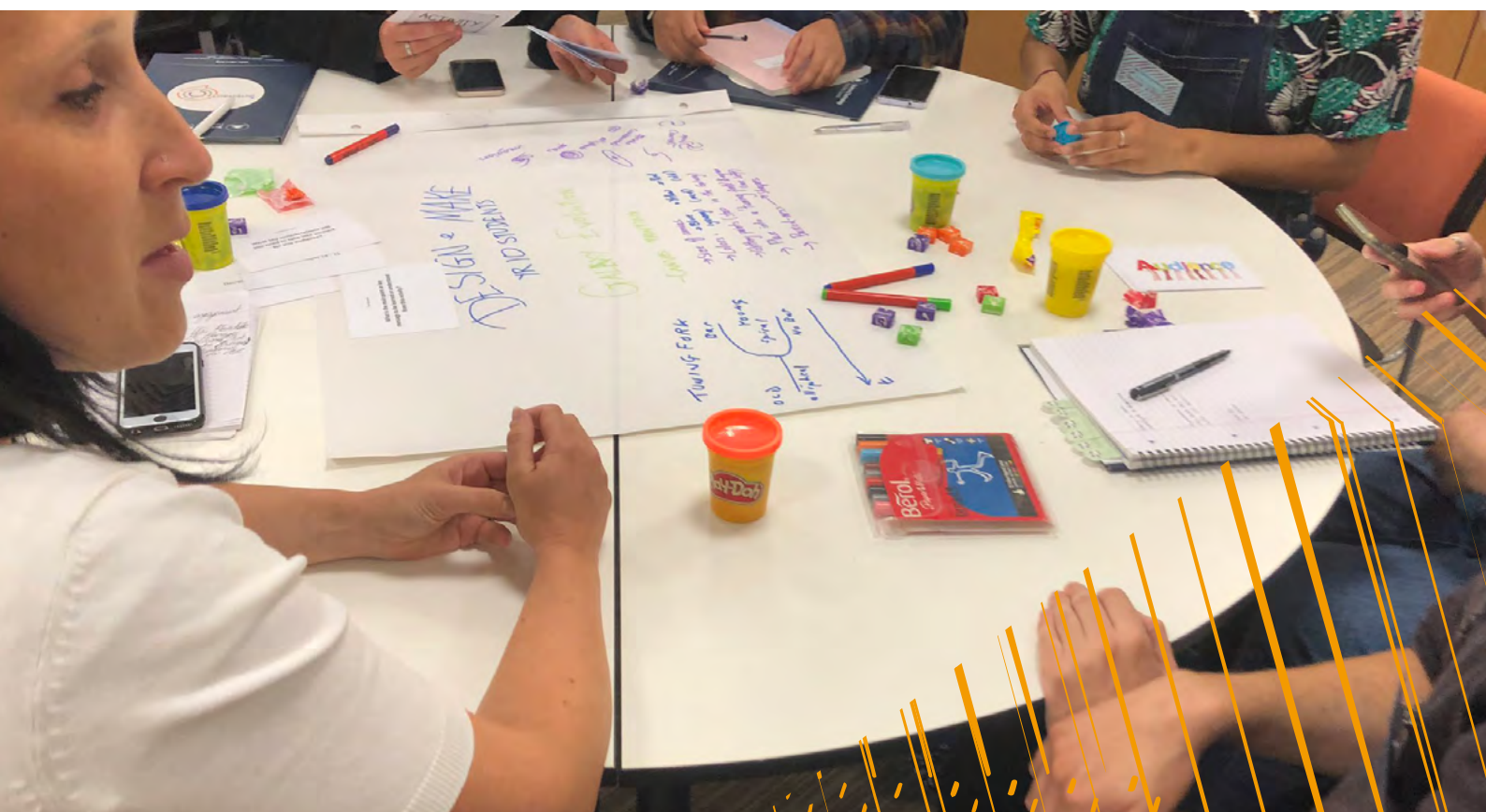
Objectives 3 a-c were **'Over half of those attending will:**

(a) Change how they view their PE activities, thinking of them as part of a wider strategy rather than one-off activities.

(b) Take more of their Public Engagement time after to reflect on their engagement activities, including evaluation, dissemination and reflection.

(c) Take more of their Public Engagement time to look for evaluation reports from previous activities similar to those they are planning.

Analysing these collectively 55% of those who responded to the Phase 2 survey said they had made a change because of the Interact symposium.



The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on engagement in the physical sciences

This year we asked an additional set of questions to get a measure of how Interact attendees' roles and work have been affected by the pandemic. This both allows us to get a picture of the impact on the sector, and allows us to identify ways in which we can support the sector as we move towards a new version of normal.

Changes to roles

Firstly, we wanted to know if attendees' roles had changed due to the pandemic. Overall 19 people said their roles had changed compared to 14 who said they hadn't. In our sample both OPE professionals and researchers were reasonably likely to have experienced a change to their role, with 60% and 62.5% respectively reporting this. For the 'other' category 43% reported a change to their role.

We asked respondents to provide further information on how their roles have changed. A key theme was the shift to working from home and therefore to only being able to interact with others online, rather than face-to-face. Researchers overwhelmingly reported that the shift to online teaching was dominating their time and priorities, and that outreach had largely been pushed out. Concerns over funding, pressures on community groups/ partners, and stresses and uncertainty affecting schools were all reported as reasons that roles had shifted away from outreach/ changed focus. Another key theme emerging is the pause in delivery meaning a larger focus was placed on strategy and resource development.

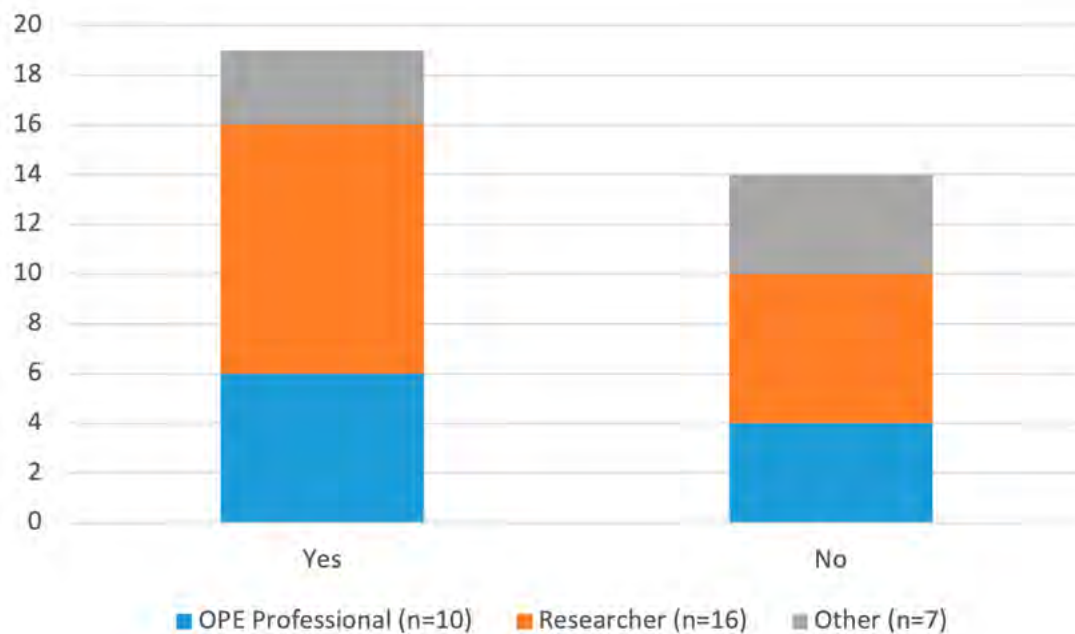


Figure 18. Responses to the question 'Has your role changed in response to the COVID pandemic?' broken down by career type.

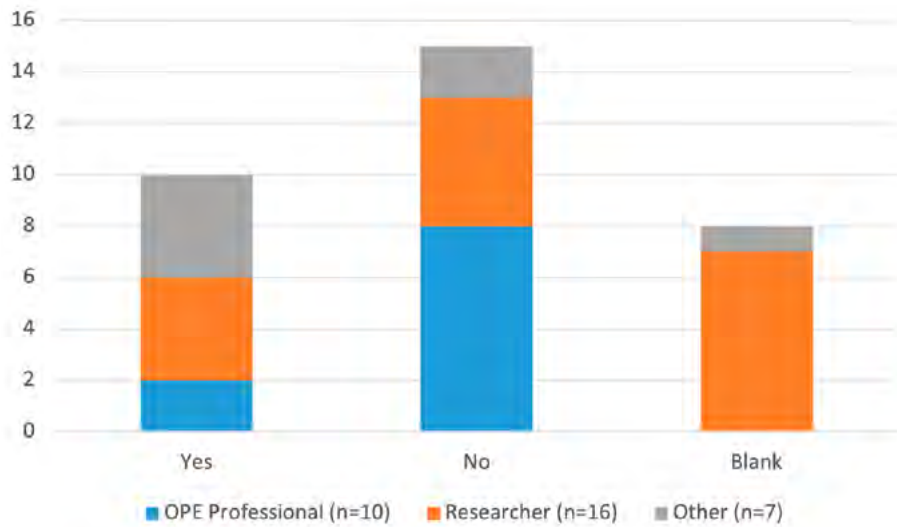


Figure 19. Responses to 'Have you or your employer taken advantage of any of the government backed employment schemes?', broken down by career type.

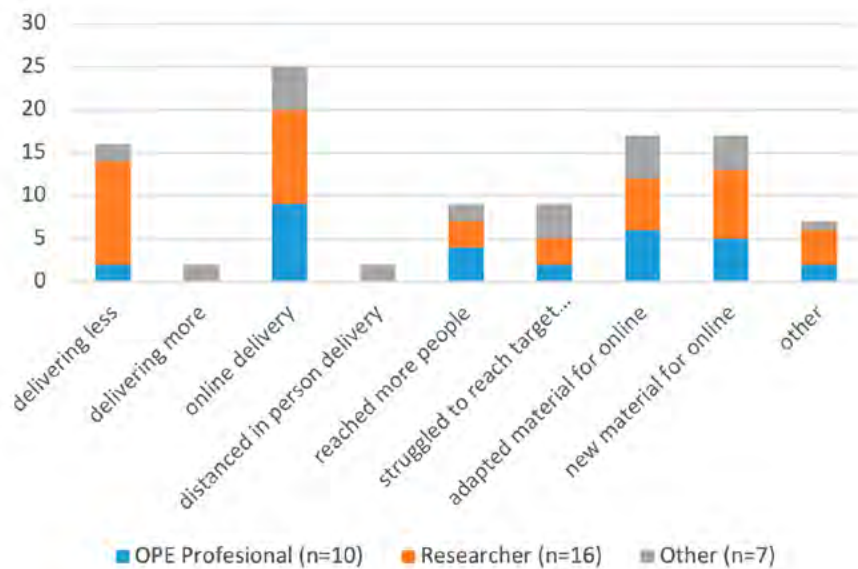


Figure 20. Responses to the question 'Has the lockdown and the continuing pandemic affected your engagement in any of the following ways?' with the options provided presented on the plot.

Uptake of government-backed schemes

We wanted to understand the uptake of various government backed support schemes across the sector, and how this differed between employment sectors or across roles. These schemes were varied and include the furlough scheme, business support grants and support for self-employed workers. Figure 19 shows responses to the question 'Have you or your employer taken advantage of any of the government backed employment schemes?', broken down by career type.

Proportionally these schemes were accessed most by those in the Other career category, with 57% reporting having used them, compared to 25% for

Researchers and 20% for OPE professionals. Those in the Other category report their organisations having used the furlough schemes, as well as small business grants and emergency support from funding bodies. In the OPE professionals and Researchers categories the furlough scheme is reported being used, as well as employers extending contracts due to the pandemic. One respondent commented that being based at a University they didn't know what schemes has been accessed, which may well be the case for others too. These results back up what the Interact organisers had heard anecdotally, being that universities seem to have accessed schemes such as furlough less than non-Higher Education organisations.

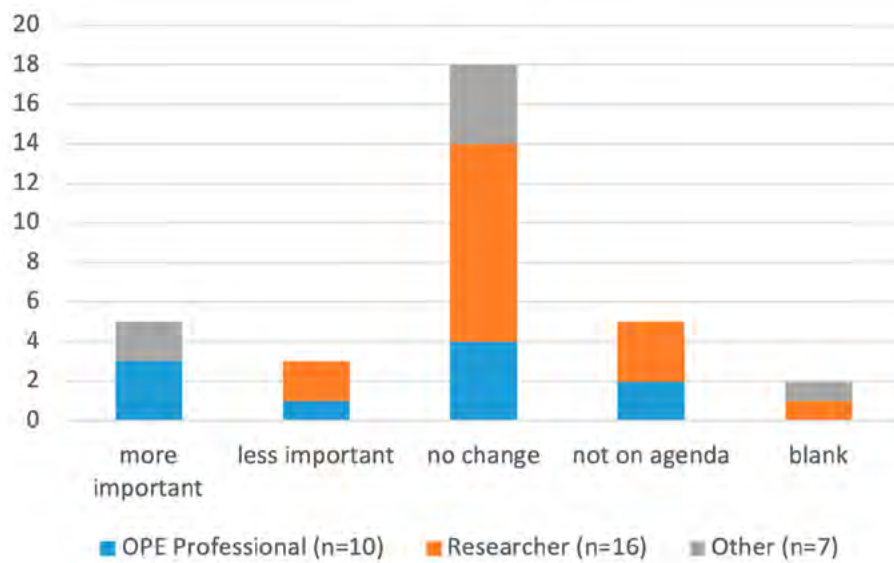


Figure 21. Responses to the question 'How has the COVID pandemic affected how engagement activities are viewed in your organisation/ department/ institution?' broken down by career type.

Reported effect on delivery of engagement

Pre-COVID the go-to delivery method for most engagement work was face-to-face with audiences in attendance, however this was not possible during the periods of national lockdown. We wanted to understand how the attendees' delivery had been affected by the pandemic. The majority, perhaps unsurprisingly, reported moving delivery online with a roughly equal amount of people having adapted existing materials to do this and having created new materials. Again, perhaps unsurprisingly the majority of people reported delivering less since the pandemic hit, although some in the Other category were delivering more. A range of additional experiences were raised in the comments. Researchers reported shift of focus away from PE due to time being taken up with the shift to online teaching, although also reported it being easier to get colleagues involved as they needed to logon/ make a video rather than travel to do outreach. There was a reported shift of focus from delivery to dissemination of practice and for those facilitating outreach there were more opportunities to deliver training online. One attendee reported working specifically on a project tackling issues caused by lockdown, and another adapted and developed resources to be distributed to communities.

It is clear from the question responses that methods of delivering engagement changed drastically in response to the pandemic, with respondent in all career categories being affected.

Reported effect on departmental/ institutional attitude to engagement

The next question was asked to gauge the impact of the pandemic on how the priority level of engagement may have changed during the pandemic. Reassuringly, the majority of responses noted no change in the importance given to Public Engagement in institutions. Where change was noted it was generally in higher education settings where engagement had been de-prioritised or fallen off the agenda entirely due to the need to adapt teaching to be online. Many report outreach work as still being important but there being a freeze on delivery, or there being less external opportunities for staff to get involved in. Organisations outside of HE with a community or member focus largely report the opposite – that engaging with their target audiences has been even more important since the pandemic hit.

Changes to be continued post-COVID

We were interested to know whether changes introduced to engagement during COVID would be continued after the pandemic, and found that overwhelmingly they would be. The most common theme in the comments was around keeping some engagement online going forward, and this allowing practitioners to reach larger audiences or those further afield. Generally the reported intention is to run events in parallel or create hybrid programmes in future with elements both online and face to face. There is also a focus on keeping an element of homeworking to improve flexibility, including many meetings continuing to be run online to save travel time and cost.

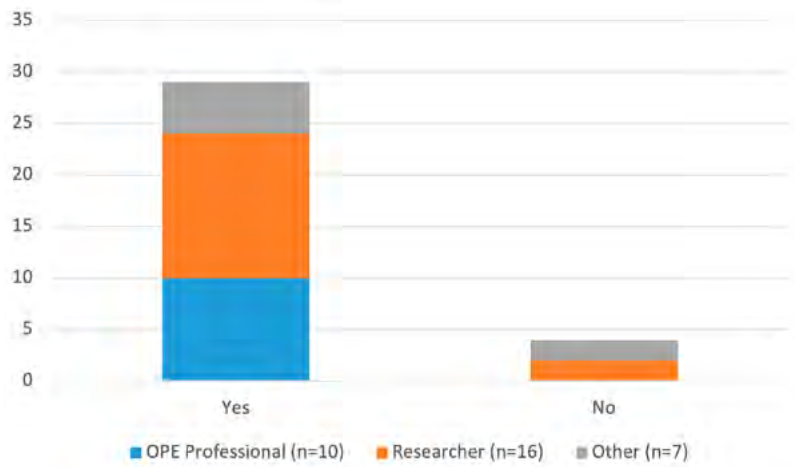


Figure 22. Responses to the question 'Have you made any changes to your work that you plan to continue post-COVID?' broken down by career type.

Support from networks/contacts formed through Interact

One key aim of the Interact symposia is to allow those doing engagement in the physical sciences to meet and to share expertise and ideas. We were interested in whether any of the connections made through the symposia series were useful to attendees during the COVID pandemic, and if so, how. Most of those who responded to the survey (60%) responded 'no' to the question 'Have networks or contacts formed through Interact 2020 helped you to navigate through COVID?' and 12%

responded 'yes' (with everyone else leaving this question blank). Those who answered positively mention leaders of workshops they attended becoming useful contacts to help navigate through the challenges of the pandemic, and Interact helping existing networks become more connected by providing an opportunity to meet up with colleagues pre-pandemic. Some of those who responded negatively added comments, which included the shift to online teaching in HE taking up so much time that connecting with Interact contacts wasn't possible and also attendees being on maternity leave during the COVID pandemic.

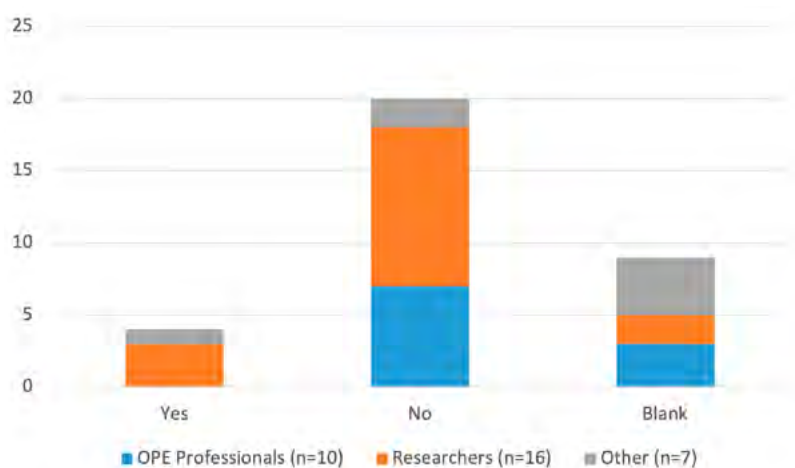


Fig 23. Responses to the question 'Have networks or contacts formed through Interact 2020 helped you to navigate through COVID?' broken down by career type.

Topics for V-Interact 2021 to support engagement post-COVID

Finally, in light of the pandemic we asked those completing the survey to let us know what topics they would like to see covered in Interact 2021 to support engagement post-COVID. Since sending out the questionnaire we have made the decision to postpone the next face-to-face Interact to 2022, which will be held in Cardiff 13-14 September 2022.

Additionally we have added in an online Interact event (V-Interact) which will take place on 14 September 2021. The core themes for this event have been chosen because of the feedback provided through this question in the follow-up evaluation survey.

Two core themes emerged very strongly in the answers to this question. The first was how to engage effectively online, and how to evaluate that engagement. There was interest in exploring best practice and lessons learnt by the community over the last year, as well exploring barriers to digital engagement. The second theme is around equitable COVID recovery – how do we as a community move forward with engagement post-COVID? How can we ensure we are reaching, and are supporting, audiences who have been hardest hit by the pandemic and what lessons can we take forward to make engagement more equitable in the future?

This question has been really helpful in allowing us to shape the V-Interact event around the needs of attendees, and we hope it will help the sector both reflect on the last year, and for us to consider how we move forward in future in building an equitable COVID recovery for engagement.





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