

WHITE PAPER

Making the grade: Communication strategies for achieving REF impact

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Universities face immense pressure to enhance their visibility, improve internal communication, and promote their groundbreaking research effectively

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FOREWORD

Jo Sutherland

Managing director of Magenta Associates



I've had the privilege of working closely with numerous universities across London and the South East throughout my communications career.

In recent years, I've seen first-hand the immense pressures faced by academics to ensure their research has a tangible impact on society.

Today, research funding is often dependent on its practical application and

potential to drive social and environmental impact. As a result, academics are increasingly tasked not only with conducting their core research but also with communicating its value beyond academia – through industry talks, community engagement, or maintaining a presence on social and traditional media. This type of outreach is now critical in performance appraisals and career progression. Still, promoting oneself and one's work often falls outside the comfort zone of

many academics, who may not see PR as part of their natural skill set.

Academics aren't the only ones under pressure. Research Excellence Framework (REF) and Impact teams also face the significant challenge of helping researchers translate their work into real-world outcomes. These teams are responsible for ensuring that research not only achieves academic excellence but also delivers measurable societal benefits, whether by influencing policy, driving innovation, or enhancing

community wellbeing. Meeting REF's stringent criteria, while securing ongoing funding, often means balancing multiple demands – impact evaluation, reporting, and stakeholder engagement – all while navigating the constantly shifting landscape of higher education and research policy.

This reality shaped the creation of this guide. Rather than focusing solely on the importance of PR, which academics already recognise, we've chosen to also explore the practical ways in which universities can better amplify their research and societal contributions. We've drawn from our work with institutions such as King's College London and the University of Sussex, where we led the charge with stakeholder engagement, internal communications, and external research amplification. We hope this offers UK universities valuable insights and practical approaches to showcasing the significant impact they are making in fostering a progressive and innovative society.

One in five UK universities changing leaders as problems mount

Exodus of experienced hands in midst of financial crisis leaves institutions seeking new generation of 'risk-takers'

Universities are in crisis

Experts believe it is already "too late" to avert the oncoming funding disaster: "all everyone can do now is brace".

Britain's universities are in freefall - and saving them will take more than funding

If recent headlines concerning higher education are anything to go by, universities face immense pressure to enhance their visibility, improve internal communication, and promote their groundbreaking research effectively.

Academic institutions are more than just centres of learning – they are hubs of innovation, constantly adapting with new technologies,

shifting societal needs, and changing student expectations.

Universities must prioritise research promotion and effective internal communication so they can thrive in a competitive environment, shape their reputation, attract top students, and secure vital funding. Below, we delve into how these strategies can be implemented and why they are essential in the current higher education landscape.

PART 1

Bridging the gap between research and public engagement

Academics are renowned for producing world-class, cutting-edge research. However, once published in academic journals or written up as PhD theses, this research often remains confined to niche academic circles. The wider public, policymakers, and potential collaborators rarely hear about the game-changing work being done across campuses. This gap hampers public understanding and limits the impact of these discoveries.

A strategic PR campaign can bridge this gap, bringing research to the attention of a broader audience. Here's how:

- **Reaching new audiences:**
Communications

specialists can translate complex research into engaging stories that resonate with different audiences. By highlighting societal impacts or positioning research in industry media, universities can extend their reach far beyond academic publications.

- **Enhancing reputation:**
Effective PR can establish researchers and universities as thought leaders. Media coverage, speaking engagements, and digital visibility enhance the profile of both academics and institutions, reinforcing their position in a competitive environment.

- **Supporting funding and collaboration:**
Demonstrating public engagement through PR can showcase the broader impact of research. This attracts potential funders, collaborators, and industry partners, a particularly valuable outcome with universities facing growing financial pressures.
- **Attracting high-calibre students:**
Students are more selective than ever, looking to enrol in institutions that lead in innovation and have a real-world impact. Promoting research helps universities stand out, making them more appealing to prospective students.

How to reach new audiences and build your reputation

Understand your audience segments

Start by identifying the different groups you want to reach—this could be policymakers, grant bodies, industry partners, potential students, or the wider public. Research what matters to them, their pain points, and how your research could provide solutions. Then, tailor your messaging to address the specific needs and interests of each group.

Develop tailored content

Not all audiences will respond to the same message. For example, policymakers may be interested in research with clear public policy applications, while international students may be more attracted to stories that highlight your university's reputation as one of the best in Europe. Customise your communication to address the needs and interests of each audience.



Customise your communication to address the needs and interests of each audience



Leverage storytelling

Humans connect with stories. Transform your research findings into engaging stories that illustrate human-interest and real-world applications. Show how your research is solving problems, benefiting communities, or pushing the boundaries of knowledge. Personal narratives, case studies, and practical examples work especially well.

Maintain momentum

Building a reputation isn't a one-off task—it's a continuous effort. Regularly update stakeholders and the public on new developments, breakthroughs, and research applications. Keep the conversation going by consistently sharing content through various channels like blogs, social

media, newsletters, or media interviews. Establish a rhythm so your audience knows when and where to expect new insights.

Monitor public engagement:

Public engagement should be seen as an ongoing dialogue. Pay attention to how your research is being received by the public—track media coverage, social media mentions, and feedback. Use tools like surveys, social listening platforms, or even focus groups to gauge audience sentiment and refine your communication strategy.

How to unravel what resonates with different audiences

Analyse research trends

Review industry reports,

media trends, and societal conversations to identify areas of research that align with current public concerns, such as sustainability, health, or technology. Understanding what the public and policymakers are already discussing will help you align your work with what's top of mind for them.

Engage in dialogue

Connect directly with potential collaborators, community groups, and businesses. Invite feedback during early-stage research, and adapt your projects to address real-world issues. This participatory approach ensures that your research remains relevant and impactful.

Targeted outreach for international students

International students are often drawn to universities with strong global reputations. To appeal to this group, highlight any international partnerships, research that addresses global challenges (like climate change or public health), and successful alumni stories. Consider creating multilingual content or offering virtual events in different time zones to engage international audiences.

PART 2

Building a thriving campus culture



While external communications are crucial, universities must also focus on internal communication to maintain a vibrant and inclusive campus culture.

In an environment where constant change is the norm—whether through technological advances or shifts in educational models—effective communication within the institution is key to fostering cooperation, engagement, and a sense of belonging.

Navigating organisational change

Change is inevitable in any large organisation, and universities are no exception. Whether restructuring departments, adopting new technologies,

or promoting sustainability initiatives, change can be met with resistance if not communicated effectively. Clear, transparent communication strategies that involve all stakeholders help ease transitions, fostering a sense of inclusion and cooperation across the campus.

Supporting hybrid learning and campus design

The rise of hybrid and remote learning models has prompted universities to rethink how physical and digital spaces work together to support education. This requires a reimagining of traditional communication strategies to ensure both in-person and remote members of the university community remain connected and informed. Effective communication can help students and staff navigate these hybrid spaces, ensuring inclusivity and accessibility. Regular updates on progress and platforms for feedback ensure that new spaces, physical or virtual, meet the needs of the university community.

Embedding DE&I

Diversity, equity, and inclusion (DE&I) are at the heart of any modern university's mission. However, embedding these principles throughout an institution requires more than just policy — it requires active communication. Universities need to communicate their DE&I initiatives consistently and amplify the voices of underrepresented groups. Regularly communicating about DE&I efforts, such as inclusive recruitment practices, accessible learning environments, and community engagement programmes, helps build a more inclusive campus culture. By integrating DE&I into all communication channels, universities can ensure these values are supported and understood by the entire campus community.

How to effectively communicate with students and faculty

Use clear messaging
Avoid jargon and overly technical language in both internal and external communications. When sharing complex ideas,

break them down into digestible messages that are easy for everyone to understand. This will prevent misunderstandings and make your messages more accessible to a wider audience, including students from diverse academic backgrounds.

Develop internal influencers

Identify key individuals within your institution—professors, student leaders, or administrative staff—who can act as influencers. These individuals can help disseminate consistent messaging through formal channels like newsletters or informally via social media. Internal influencers can also provide valuable feedback on how communication is being received and suggest improvements.

Be consistent

Ensure that your messaging aligns with the university's overall strategy, values, and identity. Consistent communication over time helps build trust and clarity, especially during times of change. Keep all stakeholders informed of updates regularly, not just during major initiatives, to avoid confusion and build ongoing engagement.

Invite feedback

Create channels for two-way communication. Faculty and students should be able to voice their opinions, concerns, and ideas. Feedback loops—like surveys, open forums, or suggestion boxes—allow the university to check the pulse of its community, address issues early, and involve diverse voices in decision-making.

Use multiple channels

Different stakeholders prefer different communication formats. Some may favour newsletters or email updates, while others prefer video content, podcasts, or social media. Use a range of platforms—blogs, intranets, video briefings, social media groups, and even in-person meetings—to engage as many people as possible in the way they prefer.

Measure effectiveness

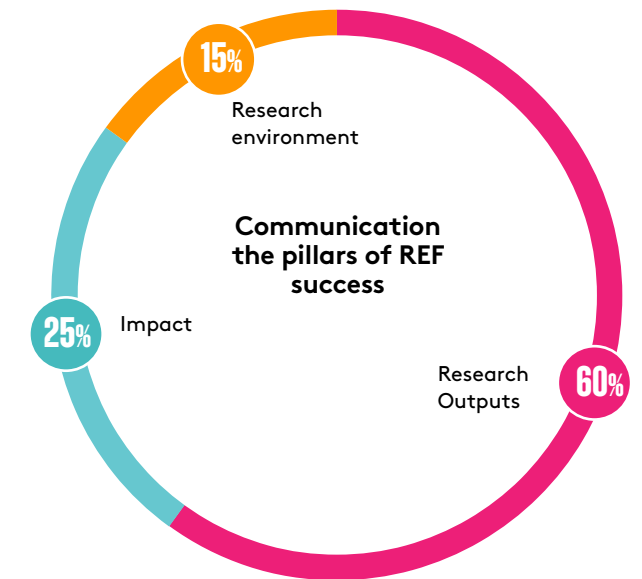
Regularly evaluate how well your communications are being received. Ask students and faculty for their opinions on the clarity, style, and usefulness of the messages being shared. Track engagement metrics on digital platforms to see which formats work best, and adapt based on the feedback you receive.

How Magenta can help boost your REF success

In the highly competitive world of academia, where Research Outputs (60%), Impact (25%), and the Research Environment (15%) are the pillars of REF success, it's crucial to not only deliver world-leading research but also tell the story behind it. The narrative of how your work drives societal change, informs policy, or contributes to sustainability

can make or break funding opportunities and partnerships.

At Magenta, we understand the unique pressures facing REF and Impact teams. You're balancing the need for tangible impact while engaging a wide range of stakeholders—all under tight deadlines and complex reporting requirements. We're here to help you shine by crafting the kind of stories that will bring your research to life for funders, collaborators, and the public.



Here's how we can support:

- **Grant applications and funding:** Our storytelling expertise can help you craft compelling narratives that demonstrate the broader societal value of your research, key for securing grants. We've worked with clients to build persuasive impact stories, the kind that resonate with both funders and the public.
- **Engagement and outreach:** Need to engage industry, policymakers, or the community? Magenta can help create powerful communication campaigns that amplify your research impact through reports, media, and partnerships—just like we've done for clients in their ESG and impact reporting.
- **Impact evaluation and reporting:** We've supported organisations with ESG reports, annual reviews, impact assessments, and even materials for B Corporation assessments. Magenta's experience in showcasing ethical business practices can help your institution

present its societal impact in the strongest possible light, ensuring your case studies meet REF's high standards.

With sustainability storytelling at the heart of many REF impact case studies, we know how to craft narratives that resonate, communicate complexity with clarity, and highlight your institution's commitment to creating lasting change.

How to master sustainability storytelling

Tie sustainability to real-world outcomes

When communicating about sustainability, go beyond abstract concepts. Showcase how your research contributes to measurable outcomes—whether it's reducing carbon emissions, improving biodiversity, or enhancing social sustainability in communities. Highlight specific projects or partnerships that demonstrate your university's commitment to sustainability.

Participate in sustainability initiatives:

Join or initiate sustainability projects within the university or in

collaboration with external organisations. Promote your involvement in initiatives like the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals or environmental certifications. These activities show a tangible commitment to sustainability and can be woven into your storytelling.

Engage students and staff

Invite students and staff to participate in sustainability projects, such as campus greening initiatives, energy-saving competitions, or research into sustainable technologies. Their involvement can generate additional content for sustainability storytelling, creating a sense of community while demonstrating your impact.

Use data to support your claims

Sustainability storytelling is most effective when supported by data. Share statistics, metrics, and visual aids that demonstrate the positive environmental impact of your research or initiatives. Numbers add credibility and make your stories more compelling to a wider audience.

Stakeholder engagement

When a major UK university outsourced its facilities management, catering, conferencing, and banqueting services for the first time, Magenta was commissioned to run a series of focus groups. These sessions aimed to explore the strengths and areas for improvement in the existing FM and catering provisions. The goal was to gather authentic feedback from stakeholders and incorporate their ideas into the contract procurement process, ensuring that stakeholders felt their input was valued. Magenta facilitated eight workshops with volunteers and nominated participants, leading to the creation of a comprehensive report. This report was presented to the university and shared with prospective FM and catering partners.



You can find out more in our blog, [What is sustainability storytelling and why is it important?](#)

Lessons in impact

Magenta has worked with prestigious universities such as the University of Sussex and King's College London, delivering strategic communication solutions tailored to the unique challenges of these higher education institutions. From running focus groups to revamping internal communication platforms, our work ensures universities reach and actively engage their target audiences.



TESTIMONIALS

Get in touch

Our blend of PR, internal communications, and sector-specific insights uniquely positions us as the ideal partner for universities looking to enhance their visibility, reputation, and impact. By choosing Magenta, universities can confidently navigate the challenges of today's educational landscape and secure their place as leaders in their field.



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Internal comms to support campus modernisation

Magenta has supported a prestigious London university with various internal communications initiatives. Working closely with the estates and facilities team, Magenta assisted in developing a refreshed internal intranet and creating external web pages. The project included staff workshops to gather input before copywriting to ensure the communications platforms were accessible, easy to understand, and engaging.

Additionally, Magenta supported the university in promoting the modernisation of one of its campuses, including the development of new student accommodation. Magenta helped communicate the project's goals to key stakeholders such as students, parents, and academics, ensuring broad support for the initiative.

Our projects have led to higher engagement, streamlined processes, and enhanced brand visibility for our clients. Whether it's designing workshops to capture meaningful insights or promoting new campus facilities, Magenta supports universities in aligning their research and operational goals with effective communication strategies.



Nick O'Donnell MRICS MCIBSE IEng, director of estates & facilities, King's College London

"We are very grateful to all at Magenta who helped us shape our own brand and our unique 'Fit for King's' customer service ethos across a wide range of materials. For 13 years, Magenta has been on hand to help. While we have been fortunate to develop and build our own internal communications skills, together with our corporate communications colleagues, we know that sometimes sector specialists are just so much better—for storytelling and critical editing through to partnering on award submissions and thought leadership in the FM and built environment space."



Dr Tanya Kant, senior lecturer in media and cultural studies, University of Sussex

"Magenta's expertise in bridging the gap between academic research and public engagement has been invaluable. Their ability to translate complex ideas into accessible narratives has greatly enhanced the visibility of our work, attracting new collaborators and funding opportunities. Magenta's tailored communication strategies have helped position the University of Sussex as a leader in innovation and cultural impact."



Dr. Rodrigo Lucena, senior lecturer in marketing, MSc Marketing Course Leader, University of Brighton

"I am very grateful for the collaboration between the University of Brighton and Magenta. Jo Sutherland's lectures for MSc Marketing students have been a transformative experience for them, providing invaluable insights into the world of branding and communications. The expertise and passion she brought to each session not only enriched our curriculum but were also very inspirational for our students. Many of them have now decided to pursue a career in PR. I look forward to continuing this partnership and witnessing the positive impact it has on our academic community."



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