



UNIVERSITY OF  
BIRMINGHAM

Public & Cultural Engagement Strategy  
2025 – 2030

# We connect. We activate.



Our vision:

To make  
Birmingham  
the most

plugged-in

university in the world.

*Credit: A Place to Call Home launch  
event in partnership with Ikon.  
Photography by Greg Milner.*





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# 1

## Foreword







# Vice Chancellor's Foreword: Shaping the New Civic

**Welcome to the University of Birmingham's new Public and Cultural Engagement Strategy. This isn't just a document – it's an invitation and a call to action to connect, engage, and innovate with us.**

As we enter our 125<sup>th</sup> year we have been reflecting on our history, which is rooted in a civic mission to drive social and economic value and progress. Today, that mission is more important than ever. In an era of rapid technological and societal change, our university has a vital role to play in addressing the social, economic and environmental challenges we face – here in Birmingham, across the country and as a global community.

To continue to make a real impact, we know we can do more to bridge the gap between academia and the outside world. Too often, universities are portrayed as disconnected or elitist. Our new strategy aims to help shift that narrative by actively connecting with our communities through socially engaged education, research and co-production models. We believe our work should not only be guided by the needs and insights of our communities but that we should also share the benefits equitably with them.

Our new strategy aligns and embeds public and cultural engagement into the core of our university's work and purpose. By empowering and enabling every member of the university community to take the initiative and connect with the world, we aim to create a vibrant, collaborative environment that drives innovation and positive change from the inside out and the outside in.

Imagine a university where every discovery and piece of research is directly connected to the world, where socially engaged education, research and co-production models ensure the benefits are shared equitably, and where our cultural partnerships inspire and transform lives. This is the University of Birmingham we aspire to be: dynamic, inclusive, and thoroughly plugged in.



**Professor Adam Tickell**  
Vice-Chancellor and Principal





# Introduction



# The Light of Understanding: Alice Roberts, Professor for the Public Engagement with Science

**Imagine a world where architects design and build extraordinary, soaring creations; where people have developed ways of producing energy from water, wind and the heat deep within the ground; where they can transform sea water into fresh water to drink; where advanced medicine means that people live long and healthy lives; where advanced agriculture means people have plenty of nutritious food to eat; where technology exists to allow visualisation of the most minute structures, and to see distant stars; where there are vehicles for flying in the air and moving under water; where communication is possible over vast distances; and all of this possible because of efforts to expand our knowledge of the world and ourselves – and share that knowledge freely.**

It's not too hard to imagine, because – in the 21st century – in some places at least, it seems we're almost there. But, in fact, what I've just described is actually a vision of an advanced civilisation imagined by the English philosopher Francis Bacon in the early seventeenth century, in his unfinished utopian novel, *New Atlantis*.

In 1969, Sir Peter Medawar gave his presidential address to the British Society for the Advancement of Science – and he mused on how far humanity had come since Bacon's *New Atlantis*. Medawar looked back, comparing the philosophical landscape of the 1960s with that of the seventeenth century. When Bacon was writing this story, in 1623, Europe was politically unstable, to put it mildly. The Thirty Years War was raging, with more and more states being drawn into this battle between Catholic and Protestant hegemony, claiming the lives of millions. Bacon was going against the grain.

Against a background of pervasive philosophical gloom, he spoke up for the potential of humans to understand nature and to use that knowledge, that 'light of understanding' to effect positive change in the world. A new spirit of enquiry was taking hold. Looking back from his vantage point in the late 1960s, Medawar felt that society was perhaps even less hopeful in his time, despite great advances in research of all kinds, and a stunning increase in life expectancy. But Medawar argued that we shouldn't be despondent: that we should continue striving for knowledge, and for the application of that knowledge to make the world a better place.

In the 21st century, despite all the undeniable progress that has been made, our world feels politically fragile; our societies are vulnerable to famine, conflict and infectious diseases. And we now face huge ecological challenges in the form of climate change and loss of biodiversity.

We might not be able to picture the solutions yet, but that's absolutely not a reason to give up, to stop trying. Surely it is our duty, just as Bacon and Medawar urged us, to push ourselves forwards, employing all sorts of knowledge – that light of understanding – to make the world a better place, to effect what is possible.

That mission is something that organisations like the University of Birmingham should be leading. There are few organisations today better placed than universities like ours to offer that credible hope and a positive vision for the future. We need to grasp that potential. For the fruits of curiosity and enquiry to be translated into helping people and planet to make wise choices, we need to find synergy and consilience between different disciplines and we need to throw open the doors of the ivory tower. The University of Birmingham is a great generator of knowledge – but the real potential for that knowledge to transform lives will only be met through the open exchange of ideas: real dialogue, discussion and debate. We need that conversation to be as wide as possible, bringing in as many different people and perspectives as we can. We need to make the effort to connect with communities across all parts of society and to engage people with our work in ways that move and mobilise them. And we need to be prepared to listen, respond and adapt.

We must dare to imagine that we will find solutions to the challenges facing us.

**Professor Alice Roberts**  
Professor for the Public  
Engagement with Science







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**University of  
Birmingham & PACE**





# Our Civic Heritage, Our Global Ambition

**Birmingham is famous for being Britain's first 'civic' university. That's a word that means a lot of different things to different people and one that's changed its meaning over time. As we mark our 125<sup>th</sup> anniversary and look ahead to the future, it's worth asking what being 'civic' means to us.**

For Joseph Chamberlain, the driving force behind the university, the idea of civic was all about Birmingham. He founded the university to help fuel the political, cultural and economic growth of this powerful new city at the turn of the last century.

From the beginning 'civic' was a commercial mission but also a social one. The university should train people with the skills required for Birmingham's industries and provide the scientific research that would give them a competitive advantage. At the same time a focus on medicine and education, both research and training, benefited the local community in particular; and academic partnerships with groups like 'The Birmingham Settlement' would seek to address the challenges of poverty in the city. Later, the university expanded its civic mission into Birmingham's cultural life, bringing musical performance and the visual arts into play with the founding of the Barber Institute.

Birmingham was set up to challenge the older universities. Being civic was about offering a practical and accessible alternative to the likes of Oxford and Cambridge. But while we were never uptight about the idea of being useful or delivering an outcome, it's clear from our comprehensive approach to both teaching and academic enquiry that our conception of 'civic' was built on a fundamental belief in the intrinsic value of creating and sharing knowledge.

The final lesson we can learn from looking at our past is that, although 'civic' was definitely all about Birmingham, that didn't mean it was parochial in its scope or limited to the local. Birmingham in 1900 was a world city, plugged into the global economy and connected culturally to every continent. To be connected to Birmingham was to be connected to the world and the university was built to help drive those connections.

So, our founding civic mission was a rich mix of the economic and social, the local, national and international. It had a Humboldtian practicality and a Victorian drive to make and build. But it also had a spirit of public and cultural engagement at its heart right from the beginning.

125 years on, the world has changed and the university has transformed with it, but arguably that mix of impact and engagement, activation and connection, is still fundamental to what makes us who we are. And, we believe, vital to what the future holds.





# Why engagement matters

**Just as when we were founded, we're living in an era of accelerating technological, political, social and cultural change. The start of this century, as with the last, brings with it extraordinary opportunity and potential. Advances in science, engineering and medicine are transforming the human condition. New materials and energy sources are unlocking new possibilities and our exploration of space has entered a new phase.**

But all this change also comes with challenges. Uncertainty about the future – anxiety around tech disruption, the economy, geopolitics and the environment – is driving a growing sense of disempowerment and disengagement.

While, at the same time, fake news, AI and social media risk undermining our ability to discuss and agree an equitable way ahead together.

As we face this complex future, universities have a vital part to play. There's never been a greater need for rational thought, creativity, collaboration, evidence-based research and education. No other type of organisation today has the potential to look so far forward with such clarity and good intent.

But, for all the work that's being done, universities still need to do more. At a time when being engaged with the challenges and opportunities of our changing world and the hopes and fears of people across society is so critical the sector is perceived as disconnected and disengaged. We're framed as elitist and self-interested, the power of knowledge we deal in does not yet spread far or fairly enough and too many people in our communities can't see a reason to feel any affection for the sector.

That's why, the way we connect and engage as a sector is as important as our ambition to make the world better. If universities are not well understood by the broader community, if we don't make the effort to open up, engage, listen, respond and share, then we risk undermining our ability to effect real change. On the other hand, if we can build closer connections and deeper understanding with more people across society, we will build greater advocacy.

For us at the University of Birmingham, with our heritage and culture born of a spirit of deep civic engagement, we see an opportunity to step up and respond to this need for greater connection. We see it not just as the right thing to do in principle but also as critical to our ability to thrive as an organisation and to realise our ambition to be a global top 50 university.





Credit: Sankofa: Embracing the past, shaping the future - Africanize celebration event at The Exchange. Photography by Greg Milner

# What sector leadership looks like

We believe there is an opportunity for the University of Birmingham to lead a conversation about the role of public and cultural engagement in the higher education sector, in this country and beyond. There is an opportunity for us to signal the need for a closer connection between universities and the outside world and to lead by example by launching a new kind of public and cultural engagement strategy.

## Telling a better story

This new strategy seeks to unite existing and new kinds of public and cultural engagement activity from across the university around a clear and bold call to arms and call to action; making the most of our combined energy and investment while establishing a compelling narrative that can help change perceptions about our sector's relationship with the outside world.

By being seen to respond to the need for closer connection between the work that we do and the broader community, we believe we can lead the way in reframing the role that universities can play in our shared future.

The University of Birmingham is well placed to do this. We have a strong and established public and cultural engagement offering – from our research engagement and community outreach to our cultural venues, collections and creative links with Birmingham and Dubai. We have the energy and the ambition to go further, to innovate, challenge and create impact. And, as a leading Russell Group university, we have the profile and the standing to make people sit up and take notice.

## A bold call to arms

What makes Birmingham stand out from other great universities? From the beginning we've focused on the impact of our work, on how we activate our discoveries to create positive change. And that determination to play an active part in shaping the world around us has gone hand in hand with the drive and the need to connect and engage. We believe public and cultural engagement is more than a nice-to-have, for us it's fundamental to our character and our success. You could say **we connect: we activate.**

Our new public and cultural engagement strategy starts with a bold statement of intent, designed to inspire, surprise and challenge. We want to use language that can resonate beyond the walls of academia, to show our ambition and signal that engaging with the University of Birmingham is an energising, transformational and thoroughly human experience.



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## The proposition

*Credit: Stuart Hall Archive Project Launch.  
Photography by Paul Stringer*



Vision:

# To make Birmingham the most plugged-in university in the world

These days, it's not enough to say we're open and wait for people to knock on our door. It's not enough to create connections that inform our research, secure funding or draw in students. It's not enough to be an amazing source of inspiration and energy. If we're going to play our part in full, we have to be prepared to get up, go out and plug in.

At the university of Birmingham, we were born plugged in. Plugged into a moment in history. Plugged into a thousand trades. Plugged into an engine room city and, through it, to a world of change. That's why, today, we're on a mission to make Birmingham the most plugged-in university in the world, to step up and take the risks worth taking to help make sure we activate every ounce of positive energy we have.

Being plugged in works both ways. It means plugging ourselves into the world and plugging the world into us, connecting with people in the space of culture and ideas to stimulate new things, go faster, change states, magnetise and reboot. **Because we believe when we plug in, we light up.**

## Principles:

### Go deep and meaningful

Being plugged in is about going deep and meaningful. Building close and lasting relationships with people, communities and organisations and making the effort to create shared meaning between us.

### Break barriers, cross borders

It's about breaking barriers and crossing borders. Reaching out beyond established friends and partners to make new connections. Opening doors, building bridges and challenging ourselves to empathise and understand.

### Engage in conversations

And it's about engaging in conversations. Not just sharing what we know, not just listening, but real dialogue that affects and energises both sides.

And when we plug in, the energy we generate and release together has an impact.

### Make the world better, faster

We want to make the world better, faster. Being plugged in helps speed up positive change by getting the transformative power of knowledge and ideas out into the open.

### Free up knowledge and opportunity

Being plugged in is also about who has access to that transformative power. We want to free up knowledge and opportunity for more people, so that positive change can flow to and from all parts of society.

### Share the love

And finally, being plugged in is about leaving a legacy of understanding between people and communities. We use the power of knowledge, ideas, stories and culture to spark positive change, bring energy and share the love.

*Credit: Light painting workshop led by Jo Gane. Photography by Paul Stringer.*





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## **A new framework for Public & Cultural Engagement**





# Plugging engagement into the heart of our work

**Our call to arms and bold narrative will be brought to life by a challenging new framework for public and cultural engagement. A framework designed to reimagine standard sector practice by plugging engagement directly into the heart of the university’s core work and purpose.**

Our strategy will be built around a unique cross-disciplinary platform that puts engagement front of mind and into the hands of everyone in the organisation.

The idea behind the framework is to change people’s perspective about public and cultural engagement from being an add-on to a core behaviour and driver of innovation, impact and differentiation for the university. A way of working and thinking that we can all embrace, and one that will help us deliver novel and disruptive research and education, a stand-out student experience and a vibrant and welcoming campus community.

By empowering and enabling more of our people to engage and ‘plug in’ their work, and by facilitating the targeted provision of expertise and support, our new framework will harness university resources and energy more efficiently, creating momentum, and the means to measure progress more accurately.

At the same time, by making the act of engaging simpler and more rewarding, and by creating a network of collaboration and knowledge sharing, our framework will also stimulate new and newsworthy engagement ideas from across the organisation.





## Better by design

The new framework will help to connect the engagement work we already do across the different parts of the university – student experience, research engagement, community engagement and our campus – to create more coordinated impact, better use of resources and shared learning.

## Unlocking the new

By making engagement insight, data and materials more accessible and easier to use across the framework, we'll stimulate, encourage and support new kinds of engagement ideas and help ensure they come to life and create impact.





# Impact across the University

**We believe this focused and targeted investment in a smarter engagement framework, coupled with our bold engagement narrative, can deliver significant impact and return for the university over the next 5 years.**

Making Birmingham the most plugged-in university in the world is an ambitious idea that can capture the imagination and set us apart as leaders in the sector, drawing attention, creating interest and stimulating new partnerships. At the same time, our new engagement framework will ensure that our ambition translates into tangible action.

Public and Cultural Engagement at the University of Birmingham has the potential to differentiate and elevate our student experience; driving demand and supporting our broader student recruitment activity.

Engagement thinking and ideas will be central to our campus transformation plans; helping to make the most of our excellent transport links and the extraordinary space we have, to bring more people to us, create more vibrant and stimulating experiences and open up more opportunities to generate social and commercial value.

Our new strategy and our engagement framework will focus our energy and ingenuity more acutely on Birmingham's future; helping to mobilise the university to identify and plug into the communities that would benefit most, and making sure we invest our time and resources into supporting the city's growing technology, innovation and creative industries.

And perhaps most significantly, our strategy and framework will plug the power of engagement directly into our core research and education work; helping to improve our REF and TEF performance, further enhancing our reputation in the sector and the community and encouraging a sense of pride and belonging amongst our staff and students.

## Strategic themes:

Student experience  
Research engagement  
Community engagement  
Campus as destination  
Shaping the 'New Civic'



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## Activating the framework







# Student experience

Public and Cultural Engagement at the University of Birmingham has the potential to differentiate and elevate our student experience above others in the sector; driving demand and supporting our broader student recruitment activity.

Our framework will create new public and community engagement learning opportunities for our students, enriching their educational experience, contributing to their wellbeing through our cultural assets and connecting them with cultural institutions and local communities.



# Activations

## PACE in the curriculum

### Years 1-2

Identify early adopters for PACE UG/PG modules and develop.

Engage internal and external stakeholders (Melbourne) develop pedagogy, identify early adopters.

### Years 3-4

Deliver PACE UG/PG modules and evaluate.

Introduce Object Based Learning modules, test and evaluate.

Inform development of dedicated OBL space in Aston Webb.

### Years 5-6

Embed PACE UG/PG modules.

Embed Object Based Learning modules into curricula.

Creation of dedicated Object Based Learning Space in Aston Webb development.

## Student voice

### Years 1-2

Create Student Advisory for Public Programmes.

Bring 'Student Voice' into Aston Webb 125 Exhibition.

### Years 3-4

Identify further opportunities for student led exhibitions and performance.

Identify and enable student engagement with local communities.

### Years 5-6

Embedded 'student' programme of PACE related activities.







# Research engagement

Our strategy and framework will plug the power of engagement directly into our core research work; helping to improve our REF performance, further enhancing our reputation in the sector and the community and encouraging a sense of pride and belonging amongst our people.

Our framework will enable and support new and novel research and increase our impact through promoting, developing and enabling excellent public and cultural engagement practice.



# Activations

## Developing our talent

### Years 1-6

Building on our QR funded Leading to Engage programme for emerging academic leaders, supporting schools and individuals in delivering the Enterprise, Engagement and Impact pathway.

## Resources to deliver

### Years 1-6

Continue to develop PACE resources for academics through collaboration with the UEIC and Impact Hub, including evaluation, direct and indirect training, online resources and data to enable and evidence impact.

## Enhancing research engagement and impact

### Years 1-6

Through the delivery of public exhibitions and programmes to enable and enhance research engagement on campus, at The Exchange, in communities, city spaces and online.

## Engaging industry

### Years 1-6

Increase our engagement and partnerships with the creative and cultural sector as part of our educational programmes and through strategic partnerships and networks (e.g. Culture Forward).







# Community engagement

Our new public and cultural engagement strategy and framework will help us build and manage deeper, more meaningful long-term relationships with community partners and stakeholders, creating continuity, building trust, and delivering public good.

We will connect academics and students with local communities – in Birmingham and Dubai – to share knowledge, tackle challenges and help make the world a better, fairer, healthier place.



# Activations

## Making engagement easier

### Years 1-3

Deliver community partnership management and support for academics and communities.

### Years 3-6

Review management and support offering and needs.

## Making engagement happen

### Years 1-6

Deliver a community engagement advice and support including a small grant programme to enable academics and communities to test ideas and to inform larger scale grant applications.

### Years 2-6

Develop a reward and recognition 'awards' or similar, that involve community partners.

## Enabling and managing relationships

### Years 1-6

Deliver community partnership management and support academics and communities to connect.

Deliver audience appropriate communications and develop engagement pathways for communities that want to connect with us and our research.

## Community voices

### Year 1

Consult / develop a Community Charter.

### Years 2-5

Publish, launch and implement Community Charter.

### Year 6

Review Community Charter.



*Credit: Birmingham Festival 2022 medal making workshop at The Exchange. Photograph by Hayley Salter.*





# Campus as destination

Engagement thinking and ideas will be central to our campus transformation plans; helping to make the most of our excellent and improving transport links and the extraordinary space we have, to bring more people to us, create more vibrant and stimulating experiences and open up more opportunities to generate social and commercial value.

We will bring the campus to life by curating and animating our spaces, developing our cultural engagement offer for students and staff, and attracting and welcoming the public and local communities through a coordinated approach and promotion of our programmes.



# Activations

## A coherent offer

### Years 1-2

Explore benefits of an ACE NPO bid to include all eligible assets.

### Year 3

Dependent on outcome of benefits work, apply for NPO status and inform the implementation of the Masterplan.

### Years 3-6

Dependent on outcome, deliver NPO programme.

## Masterplan

### Years 1-6

Inform the implementation of the Master Plan – phase 1: Aston Webb – to include a public and cultural engagement offer.

## Sculpture Park for Birmingham

### Years 1-2

Public Art Commission for UoB 125 adding a 22nd piece to our existing trail.

### Years 3-6

Develop the campus as a destination through commissioning and loans of high-quality public art/sculpture installations.

## Activate the campus

### Years 1-2

Deliver coordinated programmes of cultural activity – performance, food, exhibitions, events for the 125 programme.

### Years 1-3

Explore potential for joint bi-annual STEAM Festival in Edgbaston.

## Audience development

### Years 3-6

Build and sustain our audiences through the acquisition and analysis of data and refine our offer in response to evaluation and Dubai campuses.







Credit:  
The Exchange,  
Centenary Square.  
Photography by  
Greg Milner

# Shaping the New Civic

Our strategy and framework will help stimulate and enable a new discourse on what it means to be 'Civic' in the 21st Century.

As part of our 'Fairer World' research theme, we will embrace our civic roots, connecting strategically and practically with local and regional stakeholders and becoming a leading Russell Group voice in the civic space.



# Activations

## Plug into Birmingham

### Years 1-3

Refresh our relationship with the City and engage regional stakeholders in discussion and debate. Review and renew our Civic Agreement.

Appoint DPVC Regional Engagement.

## Engage the City

### Years 1-2

Create an interactive and engaged programme at The Exchange using the 125 programme as a catalyst.

### Years 3-6

Develop a series of events with local, regional and national stakeholders.

### Years 5-6

Host national conference on the 'New Civic'.

## Plug in Research

### Years 1-6

Set a research challenge around the theme 'what does it mean to be civic in the 21st century?'.

Support and enable research engagement and outputs through community and public engagements, exhibitions, performance and other forms of dissemination.



*Credit: Members of Stories of Hope and Home at World Refugee Day 2024. Photography by Katja Ogrin*





# Acknowledgements



We'd like to thank all who generously gave their time, energy and ideas to help create this vision and strategy for public and cultural engagement at the University of Birmingham. The process has been very much in-keeping with the spirit of the strategy – we've plugged into communities inside and outside the University and prioritised listening, exploration, engagement and co-creation. In all, over 350 students, partners and members of staff have played their part.

Our intention has always been that this community created vision should plug back into the University and out into the wider world, bringing stimulation and direction and helping to coordinate activity across all our public and cultural engagement activity. We encourage people to embrace this strategy as a starting point and as a template for new ideas and to use it to build multiple bridges between the University and the outside world.



*Credit: 'In Search of Water' workshop on campus as part of Arts & Science Festival. Photography by Greg Milner.*





*Embracing the past, shaping the future - Africanize celebration event at The Exchange. Photography by Greg Milner.*

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UNIVERSITY OF  
BIRMINGHAM

Creative  
Media

Edgbaston, Birmingham,  
B15 2TT, United Kingdom  
[birmingham.ac.uk](http://birmingham.ac.uk)