WORKING TOGETHER:

A Toolkit for Fostering Academic-Community Partnerships

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The Value of Academic-Community Partnerships

Community stakeholders can provide invaluable, timeous and context-specific, insights to inform research into issues directly affecting them. Rather than being merely observers or informants, community members and organisations can share the responsibility for designing, implementing, evaluating and disseminating research activities. Community partners and their networks also provide essential pathways for achieving impact.

Engaging individuals and communities who have previously been marginalised or excluded is an ethical imperative. Voices of lived experience and voices from the frontline of services, for instance, can shape the research agenda, challenge biases inherent to institutional expertise, and fundamentally influence how a problem is viewed and addressed.

Academic-Community Partnerships describe equitable research collaborations between representatives from academic institutions and community members, agencies or other non-academic organisations[1]. The collaboration is centred around a cause or issue that is of direct relevance to the respective community.

Despite their demonstrable value, there remains uncertainty about how to implement these partnerships, as well as a reluctance to engage with potential partners outside one's sector or area of activity. This brief toolkit seeks to demystify and encourage the initiation of academic-community partnerships to tackle research problems and carry out knowledge exchange activities. The authors draw on lessons learned from their experience with academic-community partnerships, including a collaborative research and knowledge exchange project between a Scottish research-intensive university, a leading social care provider, and people with lived experience of social exclusion.

How to Use the Toolkit

This toolkit is designed to guide and inspire academics and community organisations to forge equitable, productive and mutually rewarding partnerships. It distils key messages and good practice that are grounded in our own experience in various social work and public health research and knowledge exchange projects. In a series of principles and prompts, we aim to guide the planning, implementation and sustainability of joint working to understand societal problems and effect positive change. This is not an exhaustive guide, and we recognise that a host of factors and issues specific to certain types of collaborations, academic disciplines and partners have likely not been addressed. Instead, the toolkit is intended to serve as a scaffolding of such endeavours by centering the principles of trust, equality and mutuality.

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[1] Drahota et al. (2016); https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-0009.12184

Identify Common Goals and Priorities

It is important to first attempt to establish common goals and purpose. A good starting point is to consider together the following questions:

- How does this research problem resonate with your organisation's priorities and pain-points?
- What is most important to you and your stakeholders in this project?
- How can we ensure the research objectives are consistent with community needs?[2]
- Establish shared vision and framework
- Co-create a shared mission statement that reflects community ideas and organisational priorities and ethos.

Understand Each Other's Core and Shared Values

Identify ground rules or ways of working and ensure that all stakeholders are signed up to these. Our experience suggests that it works best when the rules are established and agreed upon together. However, some common examples include:

- Always be non-judgmental
- Listen to what everyone has to say
- What's said in the room stays in the room
- No talking over one another

Highlight the Personal and Professional Development Value for Both the Academic and the Community Partners

For academics: Public engagement, knowledge translation , stakeholder collaboration and influencing policy.

For community organisations: Research skills, scientific writing, stakeholder collaboration, policy influence etc.

For peers or People with Lived Experience: Leadership skills, research skills, stakeholder collaboration, public speaking, event planning, policy influence, project management, transferrable skills, personal development:

"I learned a lot", "its a great opportunity and platform to have your voice heard and share your opinion and experiences that will hopefully help someone further down the line"

Peer Leader

Recognise the Valuable Contribution Each Party Brings to the Partnership:

- What academics can bring: Funding; theoretical knowledge; a structured approach/methodology; credibility/ reputation/reach; infrastructure.
- What community organisations and members can bring: Community relationships; know-how; practice and policy expertise; lived experience; reputation.

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[2] Ross et al. (2010); https://doi.org/10.1525/jer.2010.5.1.19

Source Small Funding to Help Build Relationships and Complete 'Seed' Projects

- Many funders offer schemes to support knowledge exchange, workshops and 'seed' or proof-of-concept projects. Many also allow for, and encourage, non-academic co-applicants.

- This could be external or internal (university) research or knowledge exchange funding.

Obtain Ethical Clearance

- Obtain any institutional ethics approvals whenever individuals', including community partners', personal data (e.g. email addresses, views, survey responses, workshop contributions) are recorded, stored and used for research and/or knowledge exchange purposes. These approvals should accurately reflect and encompass all relevant project activities.

- Due to their situational and dynamic nature, it is very easy for community-based projects to pivot and evolve. In such cases, it is vital that additional ethics approvals be sought for any additional uses of personal data.

- Assess and mitigate any potential risk to community partners that is posed by any substantive or practical aspects of the project such as the topic (sensitive, politically charged etc.), venue and group dynamics.

- Determine whether written informed consent should be obtained and how this can be practically done in individual and group settings.

Build in Sufficient Time

- As a rule of thumb, we tend to grossly underestimate how long collaborative projects will take. And yet, for grant applications, projects should be time-bound and produce measurable outcomes.

- It is helpful to distinguish between short-, medium- and long-term intended impacts.

- In our experience, the stages that require considerable time and are often underestimated are the initial, trust-building phase and the latter, reflection, evaluation and output generation phase. Allocate ample time in anticipation of this.

Define Roles, Responsibilities and Expectations

- These need not be fixed; they can be continuously revisited and negotiated.

- Identify preferred communication channels and frequency.

- If working as part of a larger academic team, designate a Knowledge Exchange Champion to liaise with the community partners. This is an especially suitable role for building early-career researchers' skills and confidence.

- Ensure a common understanding of the required time commitment. Medium- and longer-term impacts necessitate a significant time commitment.

- A Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) may be useful if a more formal approach is preferred.

Form a Diverse Team

- Representation of partners with diverse backgrounds, experience and skillsets is essential. Think about groups who are often excluded and consider how to make the process as accessible as possible.

- However, complete representation is hardly achievable. Always be mindful of 'who is not at the table', and endeavor to reach out to them and represent their views[3]. Peer researchers/ leaders have a particularly valuable role to play here in seeking out testimony from those who cannot participate themselves.

Co-design Key Project Aspects

- Respectfully and inclusively negotiate key project design features and outcomes. Wherever possible, these should be agreed upon collaboratively and flexibly.

- Encourage all partners to ask questions and openly share concerns and ideas.

- Crucially, the agreed-upon research aims, objectives and methodology should be both scientifically rigorous and ethical and acceptable to the community.

- Co-produce meaningful project outputs in suitable formats. Consider what formats will be most suitable to community partners' own priorities and work – for example, policy briefs will be appropriate for advocacy or lobbying and may be useful to guide partners' ongoing work.

Create a Stakeholder Map and Foster Engagement

- Engage and involve various community members, outside of the partnership.

- Map out community organisations, leaders and structures. Also think about the less obvious stakeholders. The community partner is likely to have a range of additional contacts and networks that will be useful to engage with.

- Consider how to best 'market' the project to the target community so that the community understands what is involved and is willing to engage. Clearly communicate the benefits to community members.

- Seek early feedback from the target community about the appropriateness of project aims, recruitment methods and communication strategy[4].

- Work with community leaders and other gatekeepers and link persons to raise awareness and credibility, and foster engagement.

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[3] Alang et al. (2020); https://doi.org/10.1177/135581962096350

[4] Ross et al. (2010); https://doi.org/10.1525/jer.2010.5.1.19

Acknowledge the Expertise of People with Lived Experience

- Prioritise the involvement of people with lived experience (or experts by experience, or peers).

- Be aware that people with lived experience may hold self-limiting beliefs (such as self-stigma), which may prevent them from fully and authentically participating. To counter this, actively encourage their participation by recognising their unique expertise and creating suitable conditions for sharing by building trust and enhancing accessibility.

- Put in place support and mentorship structures for collaborators with less experience and those who may need additional support to participate.

- Treat personal and sensitive information shared by people with lived experience with respect, empathy and confidentiality.

Provide any Necessary Training

For academics: Field visits, policy discussions, appraisal of current community needs and organisational 'pain points'. Consideration of alternative forms of engagement and dissemination is important and may require additional training. A training needs analysis should be carried out.

For community organisations and peers: Research methods training, public engagement training, IT skills, project management, training in group faciliation, ethics training (with a particular focus on informed consent and confidentiality) may be useful. A training needs analysis should consider particular areas of interest, skills and expertise and there should be a particular focus on the development of transferable skills.

- Consider carrying out a training needs audit to identify what training will be of most benefit to your partners.

- Such training can be formal (classroom-based) or informal (experiential).

- Think about where to source this training. Are there existing resources that you can draw on?

- Reciprocal learning builds capacity.

- Think about how this training and any related skills developed will be recognised (for example, by issuing certificates).

Be Flexible

- Due to the nature of their work, community organisations can face emergencies, which could temporarily disrupt the flow and timeline of the project.

- Keep in mind that community stakeholders have busy and complex lives and plans may need to change at the last minute. Build in additional time to account for any unforeseen setbacks.

- Build in contingency plans.

Show Humility and a Willingness to Listen and Learn

- Listen attentively.

- Provide psychological space for stakeholders to express their views, feelings and emotions in a supportive environment. Do not allow project targets to get in the way of attentive, active listening and respect.

- Be open to learning and to challenging your pre-conceived notions.

- Value all knowledge and expertise (professional, lived or academic) equally. Complex societal problems can best be solved by integrating diverse perspectives.

- Build in time for informal and relaxed conversation to enable all stakeholders to build trust and get to know one another.

Stay Accountable

- Set explicit, measurable goals for the partnership – rooted in societal and/or systems change and betterment.

- Negotiate the feasibility of project goals with the partner. As a rule of thumb, goals should be ambitious, meaningful and – most importantly – achievable.

- Be consistent and methodical, and follow through what you have promised you will deliver through the partnership. Provide regular updates to all partners so they can see what progress is being made and appreciate any delays.

- Periodically review risks and discuss potential obstacles to meeting goals with the partner. Be transparent about any setbacks and uncertainty during the project.

Encourage Creativity and Risk-taking

- The most impactful academic-community partnerships skillfully leverage diverse perspectives – resulting in ingenious, culturally acceptable and effective solutions.

- Be comfortable with uncertainty. It can reveal opportunities for innovation.

- Empower others to use their strengths, try out new roles and develop new skills.

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[3] Alang et al. (2020); https://doi.org/10.1177/135581962096350

[4] Ross et al. (2010); https://doi.org/10.1525/jer.2010.5.1.19

Prioritise Accessibility and Engagement

- Academics should avoid scientific jargon and should adapt research findings and terminology to non-academic partners and audiences.

- Do not expect community partners to have the required time and level of engagement to read through long academic texts or analyses. Whenever appropriate, prepare accessible, lay summaries in the form of bullet-pointed lists and visual aids (tables, graphics etc.).

- Identify and use appropriate tools and frameworks for project management, research and knowledge exchange (Some examples we have used are Conversation Cafés; Ketso Kits[5]; Participatory Action Research (PAR) toolkits; photovoice; Sharepoint; Dropbox; Miro boards[6] ; and KanbanFlow[7]).

- Consider each partner's preferences, skills and comfort level. For example:

  » Images are often preferred to text.

  » Summaries or bulleted lists are often preferred to long-form.

  » Interactive activities are often preferred to passive listening.

Strengthen the Credibility and Identity of the Partnership

- Devise a joint publicity strategy, including on social media. Publicise the collaboration via social media, providing updates on progress and impact. If useful, a project website can be launched[8].

- Use the partnering organisations' logos in formal project correspondence to promote shared ownership of the project.

- Create new, project-specific branding if appropriate to foster a sense of co-ownership.

- Ensure contributions are acknowledged via joint authorship and acknowledgements.

Have a System for Capturing in-the-Moment Insights

- Take meticulous notes during fields visits and stakeholder meetings.

- Aim to capture key stakeholders' ideas, insights and vernacular. Transformational ideas often come up unexpectedly during prolific fieldwork and partner discussions. Ensure you have permission to capture these insights.

- This information may be overwhelming. Having a reliable system for taking, storing, organising and acting on notes is immensely practical.

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[5]https://ketso.com/

[6]https://miro.com/

[7]https://kanbanflow.com/

[8]https://www.ukri.org/councils/esrc/impact-toolkit-for-economic-and-social-sciences/how-to-develop-and-maintain-a-website/

> "This collaboration between the Simon Community and Strathclyde University for me has the beauty of bringing hearts and minds together. The 'heart' of compassion and understanding of individual experience from the Simon Community with the skills of creating an environment where people feel safe to share their experiences and the academic 'mind' of the University with the skills in bringing everything together to form a true reflection of people's views"
>
> **Steven Ross, Healthcare Support Worker, Simon Community Scotland**

Sustain Momentum

- Sustaining energy and momentum is critical, especially in challenging, transformational multi-stakeholder projects. Plan regular check-ins and progress meetings to strengthen relationships and maintain progress.

Formally Recognise Contributions

- Allocate funds to compensate community partners for their involvement in an appropriate and acceptable way.

- Consider issuing certificates recognising community partners' leadership, public engagement, and/or research skills, and other contributions to the project. Think about other ways that partners' contributions can be recognised. Seek partners' views on what would be valuable.

Evaluate the Collaboration

- Gather each partner's views on their participation in the project. In addition to formal, end-of-project feedback, check in with partners about their experiences and any concerns they may have routinely during the work.

- Develop metrics for evaluating the impact and effectiveness of the partnership[9]. Use both qualitative and quantitative methods to assess outcomes.

- Take stock of the success of the partnership, including what worked and what could have gone better.

- Celebrate successes!

> "I'm just hoping that the work the peers have undertook with researchers has been helpful and hopefully the report reflects the real voice of homeless people."
>
> **Peer Leader**

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[9]https://www.ukri.org/councils/esrc/impact-toolkit-for-economic-and-social-sciences/defining-impact/

Apply Lessons Learned and Adjust

• Use the evaluation data already gathered and make adjustment to make the partnership more mutually beneficial and fruitful.

Seek Larger Funding to Sustain the Partnership and Implement Larger-scale Projects

• The initial, 'seed' work can be used as a 'proof of concept' and to demonstrate established trust and relationships.

Nurture the Partnership: Organise Follow-on Activities

• Ongoing, community-based research, capacity-building, public engagement and other networking activities are important to nurture and sustain the partnership.

• Other examples of collaborative follow-on activities are joint conference presentations, guest lectures, student internships, field visits, grant applications, and others.

• Do not engage in 'helicopter science'[10] - forms of superficial engagement with partners that can lead to a lack of reciprocity and, in severe instances, to exploitation. Ensure engagement is ethical, equitable, mutually beneficial and sustained. If you say that you will keep in touch to engage in follow on activities, make sure that you do.

Share the Learning

• Disseminate successful practices and findings through co-authored good practice guides, workshops, presentations and academic journals.

Build a Culture of Academic-community Liaison and Collaboration

• Avoid solely relying on individual members of staff to maintain the collaboration and instead build a culture of academic-community collaboration and partnership within your organisation.

• Ensure an infrastructure is in place to maintain the collaboration longer-term. This may include academic members of staff or a department who will be responsible for maintaining relationships with the community.

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[10]Steinert et al. (2021); DOI: 10.1136/bmjgh-2021-005380

"Academic and community partnerships offer significant value to both parties. These partnerships foster a two-way exchange of knowledge, resources and expertise that benefits all involved. From our recent experience our peers developed skills such as event planning, problem-solving, communication and teamwork.

Academics can apply their research skills to address current issues within the community, leading to innovative solutions and community organisations can provide local knowledge and insights that can inform academic research, making it more relevant and impactful."

Ashley Young, Head of Complex Needs Services, Simon Community Scotland

Final Words

The value of academic-community partnerships cannot be overstated. They present invaluable opportunities for learning, capacity-building and social change. For both academics and community members, engaging in such partnerships means going out of your comfort zone. Our experience and that of our colleagues shows that the benefits of such collaborations outweigh any initial discomfort or risk. Above all, to produce real societal change, such partnerships need to be authentic and meaningful, not an afterthought or a 'tick-box' exercise. To achieve this, careful planning is essential. Even more important than good planning are the collaborators' values and aptitudes – humility, respect, beneficence, curiosity, boldness and a willingness to learn.

By sharing our authentic experiences - the successes, setbacks, vulnerabilities and learnings - we hope to inspire others to view academic-community partnerships as integral to socially and economically impactful science.