

# COMMUNITY TOOLKIT



## A guide to working with universities on research projects

*'I cannot give you the formula for success, but I can give you the formula for failure which is: Try to please everybody.'*

Herbert Bayarde Swope

This guide was written by members of Thrive, a community organisation based in Stockton-on-Tees. It is based on their experience of engaging and working with staff and students of Durham University. We hope that it will offer some guidance to other voluntary sector organisations or community groups about the ways to engage with universities, from first contact through to collaborative partnerships.



Photo: by Gavin Duthie, courtesy of Beacon NE

# Why work with universities?

Universities exist to share knowledge and they house expertise in a huge range of subject areas. They can also have useful resources such as funding and facilities and can act as a broker to other organisations and businesses.

*'Thrive had funding for a Sustainable Livelihoods Project which needed researching. We could not afford a consultant so we asked the University of Durham to help. One phone call was all that was needed and we were up and running. Usually the university asks the communities for their involvement in studies and research, we just switched it round – never be frightened to ask is our motto.'*

# What are they after?

Universities are experienced in seeking and securing community involvement, however, they are coming round to understanding what this should actually mean – an equal partnership.

Universities now recognise – and increasingly value – 'experts by experience'. Communities are well placed to offer expertise on a range of issues and can help shape and influence research so that it solves real problems and makes a difference to people's lives. Communities have a wealth of knowledge, resources and material which universities can draw on.

*'Local residents know the area, the people, the problems, the good things, the highs and lows of living in the area.'*

Photo: courtesy of Thrive



# How do we get started?

Like any collaboration, you must know (or at least have an idea of) what YOU want to get out of a partnership. This might change over time, but there should be clear mutual benefits at the outset.

Universities can appear to be daunting places but hold tight – if you are clear about **what you are doing** and **what you want** then you are halfway there already!

## The Practical:

### ● Timescales and costs

The costs of the study should be agreed before any work starts. Finalise who is responsible for what and have it in writing. The length of time for the study, research, evaluations and final write-ups should be agreed by all.

### ● Expenses

Volunteers should receive all out-of-pocket expenses; this should be factored in at the agreement stage. A breakdown of volunteer time should give an idea of the expense claims to be expected for the whole study or research.

### ● Time management

Volunteers are passionate, and usually do more than expected. This can be very helpful but can drain a person when they have other things to do in life. This can discourage them and they give up because the burden of work can be overwhelming. Volunteers' workload should be monitored and managed.

*Photo: courtesy of Thrive*



*'Thrive had the help of Durham University medical students to help us undertake a Sustainable Livelihoods research programme. The students helped us in interviewing households in poverty and this counted as part of their studies. Thrive activists were later invited by the University to become part of a co-inquiry action research group that was studying community–university collaborations. This worked extremely well for both parties as we learnt a lot from each other.'*

## The Principles:

### ● Do not do for people what they can do for themselves

You do not help anyone if you're struggling to do the work of five people – everyone taking responsibility for their own actions creates a culture where all are considered equal and those taking part gain confidence and most importantly, they have ownership of the solutions!

### ● Do not promise what you knowingly cannot deliver

Engaging in a partnership where you knowingly fall short of the requirements or capacity needed is totally unacceptable. More respect is earned when you are totally honest. Remember, this relationship is built on trust, working together knowing the capability of each other should be a given.

### ● Have confidence – your opinion is valuable

You bring a fresh pair of eyes, ears and thinking to the traditional academic world and that is greatly needed and valued. Humour, enthusiasm and a passion for the cause or issue are the most important qualities to take to any collaboration. Redefine your understanding of expertise – it isn't always granted in certificates or letters, it's experience of an issue, a passion for a cause, a commitment to change!

*'We discussed our project with the University and figured out what our funders wanted. Knowing what you want can be quite different to what the funding partners want. With the help of the University, we drew up our questionnaire so we understood it and could easily communicate it.'*



Photo: by Gavin Duthie, courtesy of Beacon NE

*'In our first meeting of a co-inquiry group with academics we couldn't wait to get out for a break because we didn't know what was being said. We stood there laughing at each other because we were totally bemused by what we had just sat through. We made a pact to say something when we rejoined the meeting. We did just that and asked the academics to speak in plain English, and they did. Now we all understand each other and if anybody slips into academia speak (that's what we call it!) they are asked to revert to plain English!'*

## Other things to consider

- **If you don't understand what is being said – ASK!**

Never be afraid to ask if you don't understand something. Ask for clarification or a definition if it's a term you have never heard before. Likewise, be patient if you have to explain terminology from your experience or sector to someone, we adopt our own language and collaboration is about finding a common language. Set ground rules for terminology and be sure everyone understands what is being discussed.

- **Keep focused – goalposts can be moved...**

Keep to the issue you are discussing. Tangents can waste time and you should never underestimate the value of your time and that of others contributing.

- **...but have patience – some answers don't come easy!**

Everyone else may be discussing theory or last year's research findings but it could still hold valuable information for you to hold and take forward. Take time to consider all ideas and concepts and give everyone enough space to reach their own conclusions before sharing.

- **Persistence – it may be over your head at the beginning**

Do not give in at the first hurdle. Research can be slow and you may have to be willing to both learn new things and teach new things! Everybody has to learn, and willingness for knowledge is what the University is about. Build on that relationship and feed your passion.

### Contacts

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For more details of the Thrive collaboration with Durham University and other toolkits and case studies in this series, see:

**[www.beaconnortheast.co.uk](http://www.beaconnortheast.co.uk)**

**[www.durham.ac.uk/beacon/socialjustice](http://www.durham.ac.uk/beacon/socialjustice)**

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