National
Co-ordinating
Centre for
Public Engagement

Working with Local Communities

Introduction

Community-university partnerships can be of mutual benefit to the partners that engage in them. This comes about through exciting two way exchanges of knowledge, experience and skills between university staff and community partners. Whilst there are challenges to overcome, getting involved in work that is of benefit to local communities is often stimulating and rewarding. For many university staff it is a welcome complement to their day to day university focused life. This guide has been written by staff at the **Community University Partnership Programme (Cupp)** in Brighton and takes an approach that starts from an analysis of local needs and assets within and outside of the university. It is designed to be applicable to any university. However, it is likely that many activities with communities are already underway and are at different stages of development in the institution. This approach may serve as a starting point for a growth of these activities.

Whilst there is no single path to successful working with communities, there are a number of principles that we have found particularly useful. Seeking mutual benefit between a university and the communities it seeks to work with has been central for Cupp at Brighton as it gives a clear incentive for partnerships to last. Alongside this we have found aiming for as equitable power relationships as possible is very important. This is challenging to achieve and is best seen as a lens by which to view and assess the work. In process terms 'co-production' is key, right though project development to project delivery and evaluation, and in governance and dissemination. Above all we would contend that this work in the early stages (perhaps the first 10 years!) is often highly developmental. Early on in the Cupp story our Pro Vice Chancellor, Stuart Laing, freed us up to 'define it in the doing'. This has liberated us to have a go when we weren't sure, to take risks, and to keep momentum when otherwise we might have got stuck.

Getting started

Whilst working with local communities is hugely rewarding, it is important to manage expectations about what you can do together. The following suggestions will help you to think through how you might approach developing work in this area:

Principles and values

- **Aspire to equitable partnerships with local communities**. This will mean developing joint arrangements with community partners and service users in project governance, development, evaluation and dissemination
- **Establish a shared language** – a process, as opposed to an event, requiring considerable ongoing attention

- **Consider the needs of marginalised and excluded communities as well as the mainstream**
- **Develop an effective long term strategic approach**, even if only short term resource can be identified. Communities will not welcome short lived attempts at partnerships
- **Communities, like the university should not be treated as if they are homogenous**

Process

- **Assess and utilise the specific university asset of knowledge and expertise**. What are the research, teaching and other strengths of the university? (see Brighton and Cambridge community engagement reports as examples)
- **Analyse local community needs, requirements and expertise**. This can be done via a formal study (see Taking Account as an example) or through systematic interviews with key stakeholders. The latter can be a very useful relationship building exercise in its own right
- **If responding to a specific request from a community organisation, consider whether the university has the skills to respond to the request.** It may be that another organisation is better suited to respond
- **Develop appropriate internal infrastructures to support community partnerships**. This should include brokerage, project development, support and communications designed to ensure equitable access to partnerships with the university. These infrastructures should both facilitate developing a one off partnership for a specific project, and developing a long term strategy for managing and supporting engagement with local communities
- **Develop mutual goals for social and economic impact of the work for both university and external audiences**, and for developing links to university research and teaching
- **Develop project work, networks or communities of practice** that can sustain partnerships, if appropriate, beyond an initial phase
- **Develop an evaluation framework** as early as you can. Decide what you are going to measure and how. Consider leaning on any benchmarks and approaches developed by others rather than inventing your own; consider how the process and outcomes of measurement are useful to community and university

Things to bear in mind

- **Don't assume that the community is waiting to be 'rescued' or that there is a lack of information, skills and resources within communities as a whole that are waiting for academic input**. In fact there will already by sophisticated community development work underway and active and informed individuals ready to collaborate. You will need to sensitively negotiate the university's role with community partners
- **Both parties may need to be persuaded of the value and potential of partnership working**. Consider how community partnerships might fit with the university mission. If this can't be demonstrated the activity is unlikely to be sustained. Consider also the

strategic benefits to communities and the organisations and networks that support them. High quality ongoing communications will be needed to keep the value of the work to the fore, and to share how much progress is being made

- **Take spatial issues seriously**. Think carefully about the symbolic meaning of space for community-university partnerships. Are academics generally expecting community practitioners to come to them? Might some meetings or seminars be best delivered on university soil and others in the community? It is helpful to provide opportunities for community members to physically come in to the university, particularly if they might be reticent for some reason or another. However, it can be equally useful to get academics to visit community organisations, taking them out of their normal arena and helping them understand better the context of the community work

- **Don't let definitional problems stop you in your tracks**. There are inherent weaknesses in the language around the work. The most established international term of 'community university' engagement is problematic. What is contained within 'community' and where does the university fit within it? The university is part of the community and many staff who work on Cupp projects have a significant stake in community practice or activity

- **Commitees and working groups don't always help**. In working within the university, don't overly concern yourself with committees and working groups. Find the spaces between the bureaucratic structures and work through them first. The committees will still be there to take your processes through later. In working with community organisations, don't overly concern yourself with organisational form, look at what useful relationships can be made, and what benefit is being produced. At Cupp, we have found that the appropriate partners for any piece of work might come from a variety of sectors, including public and statutory sectors. In fact the strongest pieces of work have often been where all relevant sectors and service users have been involved together, from the start

- **Use community-university brokers who can work across different cultures and in different languages**. So called 'boundary spanners' can be very useful. Many academics are community activists in their own right. Many community practitioners are experienced researchers and academics

Top tips

- **Set up links that fit with the strengths of the university**. Those partnerships that work best link closest to core business of research and teaching
- **Think local.** If you are new to community-university partnerships, it is likely that the more local the partnerships are, the more likely they are to work
- **Begin work with people who want to work with you**. Concentrate on beneficiaries of the work and develop communities of practice to link those involved. Prioritise your attentions on those who want to work with you and address the barriers to their participation. Although positioned as a central university resource Cupp has not adopted a 'managerial'

approach. There is so much that can be done using the university as a resource, no one has to be forced to work with us

- **Emphasise getting on and doing things,** rather than organisational form or structure
- **Find creative ways around university processes** – working with communities probably won't fit standard procedures. This can be stressful and difficult – culture change requires a bold heart! When we've found ourselves needing to be brave and do things outside certain bureaucratic structures the adage 'Don't ask for permission, ask for forgiveness', has been useful
- **Academic language can put people off so use it carefully**. Aim to write articles and books that everyone involved can understand and be interested in. "Co-production" throughout is the aim, including in relation to academic outputs. We know that this can be hard to do but the process can be invaluable, as we discovered through our jointly written collection Community University Partnerships in Practice.
- **Develop the ability of staff to communicate and build relationships with diverse communities** – explore integration into staff development programmes. Champion the work of leading academics involved in the work as we have done with our Academic Experiences publication.
- **Secure funds to buy academics and community practitioners out**. This helps to bust through the 'interested but too busy' syndrome. We use most of the funds at our disposal to buy out both academic and community practitioner time. We seek to influence university strategies (corporate, research, teaching, staff development) to ensure that community oriented activity is suitably valued by the institution
- **Providing library cards and access to desk space can help community practitioners feel more at home**and included as mutual partners on research and teaching-related projects as we have done through our Community Fellows scheme

External resources

- [Taking Account](#): A Social and Economic Audit of the Third Sector in Brighton and Hove, Brighton: Brighton & Hove Community and Voluntary Sector Forum
- **[University of Brighton community engagement report](#)**
- **[University of Cambridge Connecting with Communities reports](#)**
- Hart, A., Northmore, S., Gerhardt, C. and Rodriguez, P. (2009) 'Developing access between universities and local community groups: A university helpdesk in action', *Journal of Higher Education, Outreach and Engagement* 13(3) 45-59
- Hart, A., and D.Wolff. 2006 'Developing communities of practice through community-university partnerships' Planning, Practice and Research 21(1) 121-138