

How to... broker a successful academic research partnership

by
Culture Forum North



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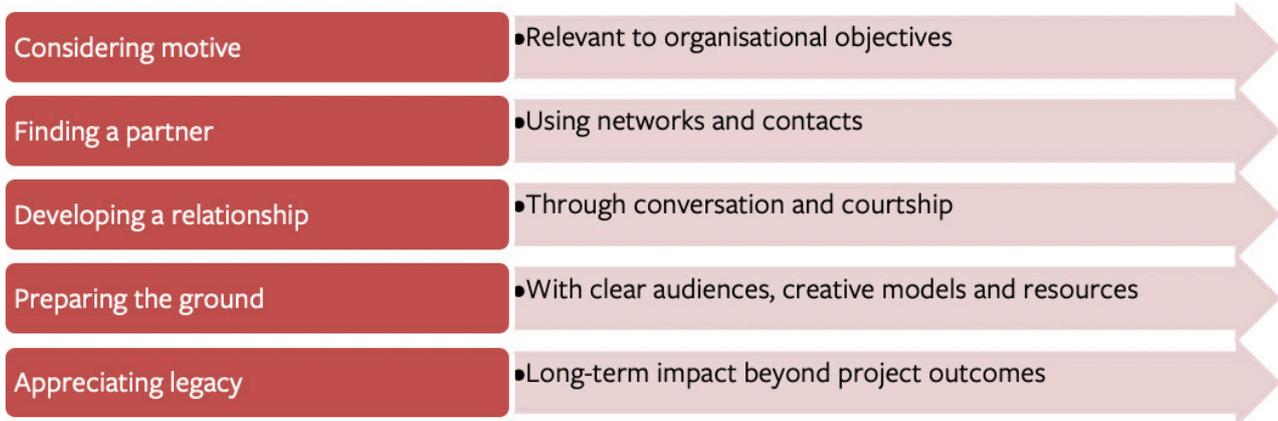
From motive to legacy

A research partnership goes beyond a transaction or project evaluation. It is a relationship between academia and practice built on equality and a shared ambition to create new knowledge.

This Guide has been created by [Culture Forum North](#) to help arts practitioners and cultural organisations consider and derive benefit from such partnerships.

Initiation, development and delivery

There are five steps that make up the initiation, development and delivery of a research partnership.



First off think about motive

For a cultural practitioner, reflecting on broader motives helps consider a potential partnership in the context of organisational need and ambition.

Although seeking a specific project output can help catalyse a partnership, longer-term benefits can emerge through the process itself. These may include:

- organisational sustainability
- civic impact
- sector leadership
- resources
- networks and opportunities
- staff development
- funding

Acknowledging the value of such benefits to your organisation helps identify and justify the potential return on investing time and resources.

“We seek to inspire thinking and learning with young people through theatre, an ambition that motivated our partnership with Alistair Ford, lecturer in geospatial data at University of Newcastle. His knowledge informed a new piece – [Climate Change Catastrophe!](#) – and the workshops provided valuable research insights into the perspectives of young people.” Katy Vanden, producer, Cap-a-Pie

Finding your potential partner

Be open-minded. Rather than commissioning a piece of work, you are seeking a meaningful, mutually beneficial collaboration.

Finding an academic connection without an existing relationship can be a challenge. Universities tend to be comparatively huge institutions, complex and difficult to navigate. Increasingly, universities are developing the equivalent of [The Cultural Institute at the University of Leeds](#) – a campus-wide portal to link academia and cultural practice.

Taking an open, exploratory approach can help find the right path. Ask the advice of your peers with academic connections.

Seek the support of networks such as Culture Forum North, that can broker an initial conversation. It's also worth talking to your funding body all of which have relationships with higher education: Arts Council England, [Arts Council Northern Ireland](#), [Arts Council Wales](#) and [Creative Scotland](#).

Get the word out that you are interested in a research partnership – use social media, speak with peers, and approach networks such as Culture Forum North. The result may not be quick, but then that wouldn't necessarily be a good thing. The advice is patience, conversation, open-mindedness and respect.

Don't rush the courtship

Understanding the values and drivers of the individuals involved is hugely important.

It is important to spend time getting to know each other through conversation before any project discussions. It could involve things like attending each other's events; informal coffee off-site; sharing recommended reading and listening; and tours of facilities.

“The breakthrough came when we visited each other's studios – we found common ground in how we approach our work.” Dominic Smith, artist and writer, on a Leeds Creative Lab with Dr Mike Ries, Senior Lecturer in the School of Physics and Astronomy, University of Leeds.

This phase enables potential partners to demystify and navigate what can be very different cultures and language, and to appreciate the value and expertise each could bring.

“Take time to listen to and learn each other's vocabulary. In cultural organisations, ‘research’ can be output driven; in academia it's more about the process of interrogating a question. Developing a common language helps avoid confusion and tension later in the relationship.” Dominic Gray, Projects Director, Opera North.

At this stage, it helps to involve others you think may be involved in the partnership. In addition to developing mutual respect, it helps to cultivate a sense of shared ownership.

“If I left the University now, our cultural partnerships, including our relationship with Castlefield Gallery, would continue. We made a strategic decision to engage others across our organisations, which secured buy-in at an early stage.” Lindsay Taylor, curator, Art Collection, University of Salford.

Not investing the time in conversation can cause challenges later.

It's all in the preparation

The start of this journey is the collective development of a Research Question (see the separate [‘How to...co-commission research’](#)).

The preparation phase includes four principal stages leading up to an agreed plan:



1. Knowing who you're doing it for helps ensure a usable output

Cultural organisations communicate with the public in ways that capture attention – valuable expertise when seeking to inform and motivate change.

Consider the internal and external audiences you want your research to influence – your own team, funders, the public...? This can kick-start thinking about methods of disseminating outputs, and influence data capture so as to create impactful material.

A cultural partner brings extensive experience and expertise in translating stories for diverse publics. Be confident in sharing your ideas.

“We appreciate the value of the skills and experience of our partner, The Reader. In addition to networks, they have a person-centred approach that motivates academics to think differently about how they undertake and communicate their work” Professor Josie Billington, Department of English, University of Liverpool.

2. Building research models with creative energy

This is where the research expertise of the academic and creative experience of the cultural partner come to the fore – an exciting opportunity generated by partnership.

It is important to acknowledge at the start that the research findings may not be what you want to hear. Research isn't a tool to prove a case, it is a process of investigation that creates new knowledge with the potential to inform thinking and practice.

Through your academic partner you will learn about methods and ethics for gathering data. You will gain insights into academic approaches to experimentation and risk. To this you can bring your experience of motivating public participation, and the implications of legislation. You may be well placed to engage participants and you have the potential to animate the research process to capture more valuable insights.

3. Developing a realistic schedule and project plan, with identified roles

Because navigating the calendars, priorities and decision-making processes of academic and cultural institutions is challenging, things can take longer than expected.

It is important to build in regular opportunities to meet – to revisit the purpose of the project, discuss progress, share ideas, and to highlight and resolve issues.

Clarifying roles and responsibilities within the schedule maximises resources and builds cohesion and a sense of ownership. Building in crossover, e.g. enabling academics to engage in creative activity, makes for valuable individual and institutional learning, and strengthens the partnership for the future.

A detailed plan and schedule are essential, though they are guides rather than rigid. The keys to success are open-mindedness, open-endedness, flexibility and inclusion– approaches that are easier to apply after a decent period of courtship.

Enable all partners to contribute to discussion and make changes in response; acknowledge different reporting timescales and negotiate a process for sharing results.

4. Recognising resource implications

An imbalance in scale and access to resources can be challenging, particularly for smaller cultural partners. It is important to identify the implications at the outset, and for the cultural partner to be honest about funding requirements.

The draft research plan should be checked against each partner's available resources – those in kind and those requiring funding. Be transparent about what you can contribute in kind, and what requires additional funding.

This conversation is easier when a respectful relationship has been developed beforehand. Bear in mind, for example, access to space; training; materials; time for meetings; additional freelance expertise; hospitality; travel; intellectual property.

Navigating challenges

There will inevitably be tensions in addition to those mentioned above. That they arise should not be considered a failure - the important thing is to address them quickly and collaboratively. This is easier when a mutually supportive relationship is in place from the start.

- Shifting agendas, which may happen when new opportunities emerge during the research journey. Discuss and log them for future consideration in order to retain the original focus.
- Losing sight of the original objective, more likely in complex, larger-scale projects. The creation of an Advisory Group of independent sector professionals can help motivate and maintain focus - and broker partner discussion when needed.
- Scale of partner organisations, should not be perceived as a power dynamic. Partners should feel able to discuss challenges equitably.
- 'Too many cooks' can cause confusion and inhibit progress. Open and honest communication is key. Create a leadership hub at the start, with others as 'associates'.

In summary:

**Log new agendas for later:
to maintain focus**

**An Advisory Group:
to help discussion**

**Create a leadership hub:
to ease decision-making**

Legacy

Just because one project is complete, it doesn't mean 'job done'. As suggested in Motives, above, there are positive impacts of developing a research partnership that might not be anticipated at the outset. When reflecting on the value derived, cultural partners highlight how the experience has strengthened the organisation and its team in ways that are unlikely to have happened otherwise. Read the longer '[How to..](#)' to find out more.

**Institutional
and individual
learning**

**Elevating
reputation,
legitimacy and
funding**

**Developing
sector-relevant
resources**

**Underpinning
creativity with
academic rigour**

**Inspiring
artistic
practice**

This guide is a summary of a more detailed document - [read now](#).

About the contributor

[Culture Forum North](#) is a network of partnerships between the cultural, higher and further education sectors across the north of England. It ignites and supports partnerships that have impact, build resilience, promote inclusion, and create new knowledge and skills.

This guide has been written on behalf of Culture Forum North by Lesley Patrick, in consultation with arts practitioners and academics across the North. As Head of Higher Education Partnerships at Opera North, Lesley co-led the creation of Culture Forum North and has thirteen years' experience of developing multi-faceted partnerships with universities including the long-standing DARE partnership with the University of Leeds.



With particular thanks to:

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Helen Wilson	Head of Shared Reading Programmes, The Reader

**Have you undertaken a similar project?
What did you learn?**

**Share your reflections and learning with us at ccv@leeds.ac.uk
and we'll feed this into future versions of this 'How to...' guide.**

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