Setting the Scene

UK Community Partner Summit – 25th and 26th June, 2012
Building Community University Partnership Resilience

We are a small group of community partners who have come together to plan this summit, because we believe that community-university partnerships (CUPs) are an important means of tackling social inequalities. It’s why we bother to invest time and effort in making links, motivating ourselves to talk with folk we don’t quite understand and reading materials we understand even less. They increase the capacity to problem solve, expand networks, engage allies in helping to solve community issues and add to the quality and relevance of research and teaching. As a group of community partners committed to this way of working, we want to learn from each other. We want to identify and share best practices for building university partnerships that are strong, sustainable and effective. To date, opportunities to meet up to reflect on our collective experience have been thin on the ground. So, the first day of the Summit provides a safe space for community partners to say what they really think.

We are pretty sure that working together with universities can achieve more than we can do alone. They harness different expertise, generate new understandings, provide valuable access to information and resources. So, on the second day of the Summit we have invited a group of academics committed to partnership working to join us to ponder some of the hurdles to making community-university partnerships work well. As in any ‘partnership’, CUPs seek win-win situations however we are not yet convinced that we’ve reached this ideal. It is our view that community partners need infrastructure support and real decision making powers if we are to create enduring partnerships for the future. Our hope is that by mobilising a network of experienced community partners we will identify ways forward to achieve this aim.

Background

Organising a Summit with the hope of kick starting a UK wide Community Partner Network was originally Professor Angie Hart’s idea and she led on the bid to the Arts and Humanities Research Council that is providing funding for this initiative. Angie has been the Academic Director of the Community University Partnership Programme at the University of Brighton since 2006 and has worked with community partner, Kim Aumann, for the past five years. Their own collaboration has highlighted a number of interesting themes and tensions. They also noticed the lack of opportunity for community partners to meet, connect and learn from each other to build expertise together and find solutions to the complex issues CUPs face. They invited the National Co-ordinating Centre for Public Engagement (NCCPE) to get involved and the hunch was tested and confirmed at a workshop held at the NCCPE ‘Engage’ conference in December 2011. Two parallel groups of community partners and academics were formed to help take the initiative forward (members of the two groups are identified in the List of Delegates) and links with colleagues in the United States who are ahead of us on this front, were activated.

We realise that social inequalities is not an explicit issue for all CUPs, however the Summit is fixed on this agenda. Apart from it being the driver for those on the planning group, we wanted to draw a boundary around the range of topics likely to be important to delegates in order to encourage depth of discussion, debate and action. This is also why we have limited the Summit to people working specifically in CUPs and not broadened it to more general public engagement collaborations. While not wishing to exclude issues and themes, we console ourselves with the hope of arranging a larger community partner event able to accommodate a wider audience in the future. We want to start somewhere and we thought that taking small steps and tightening the agenda would best facilitate achievable outputs and outcomes.

We recognise that Research Councils and the Higher Education Funding Council of England (HEFCE) have provided financial support for programmes in which academics and community partners work together on mutually beneficial projects (such as the Beacons for Public Engagement, South East Coastal Communities
Programme, Connected Communities Programme and Follow On Funding). However, there has been little, if any, investment in community partner infrastructure support. We commend the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) Connected Communities Programme for taking a first step in this direction. Funding this initiative will enable community partners to explore the potential for a UK network and provide a rare opportunity for us to link with academic partners (with us leading the debate) to consider ways to translate our vision for strong CUPs fit to tackle social inequalities into practice.

Our summit and the project behind it is funded through the Connected Communities Programme (www.ahrc.ac.uk/FundingOpportunities/.../connectedcommunities.aspx). This is a cross-Research Council research programme, led by the AHRC, to support research that seeks to understand the changing nature of communities and community values, in their historical and cultural contexts and the role (positive and negative) of communities in sustaining and enhancing our quality of life. Even though we might sound ambitious, we hope to challenge what we perceive as the status quo so that we move closer to a shared recognition that community participation is fundamental to improving the lives of those experiencing social exclusion and disadvantage. Communities ought to be at the heart of identifying problems and involved in every step along the way to finding solutions that make a difference to their lives. We could do to support communities to carry out their own research if they wish to, and the activities and research of CUPs ought to be relevant and convincing in the eyes of the communities they serve - after all its public money we’re spending. These aspirations are in our view, the way to advance the Connected Communities Programme and investing in community partner infrastructure support and capacity can help to make this happen.

Definitions
We are nervous about pinning ourselves down to definitions of terms likely to occur throughout the Summit, when vast reams of research papers attempt to unpick the nuances and clarify their meanings. We want to avoid long discussions about language in order to prioritise our limited time together on themes, actions and ways forward. At the risk of over simplifying and irritating some, we thought it could be useful to at least try to set out what we mean by the following:

Community engagement: The process of working collaboratively with groups of people who are affiliated by geographical proximity, special interests, or similar situations with respect to issues affecting their well-being. (Principles of Community Engagement, CDC, 1997, p9)
Participation: A continuum that moves from low level involvement, to consultation, to collaboration, to shared leadership - it’s about involving those affected by a decision in the decision-making process.
Partnership: Win-win situations between different parties including community based participatory research, collaborations focused on solving a particular problem or achieving a particular goal or student-community learning initiatives.
Resilience: The capacity to survive and bounce back from hardships and adversity, strengthened or more resourceful.
Social inequalities: When individual groups in society don’t have equal access to its riches such as social status, property rights, education, health care, housing, travelling and so on – in other words, the inequality has its roots in socioeconomic conditions.

Context
The Summit aims to provide a space to vision positive futures for community-university partnership working however we are keenly conscious of context and are fond of setting achievable goals. In our experience, despite being set up with the best of intentions, effective CUPs aren’t always easy to achieve. This seems to be for many reasons, however for community partners, the current economic climate is likely to be of major significance. UK public, community and voluntary sector funding cuts look set to make our strategic inclusion in CUPs ever harder. There is a downturn in economic activity, reduced public spending, reduced philanthropic giving in both numbers and amounts and reduced contracts in the social care, health, employment training and criminal justice arenas. At the same time, community and voluntary organisations are reporting a dramatic increase in demand for services.
For academics, while reduced funding is already having an effect and will impact further, the pressures on them come from slightly different angles. Although there are now ways of unlocking funding to support community engagement with research (linked to the so-called ‘impact agenda’), the professional culture of universities still tends to recognise academic, peer-reviewed research as the gold standard and it is very difficult to secure long term funding to secure that wider impact. CUPs take extra time, resource and effort and the more demands that are placed on academics the less that time is available. Increased support at all university management levels would help but this varies considerably between institutions.

You’d be forgiven for thinking things look rather bleak, but perhaps the words of Budd Hall from the Office of Community Based Research, University of Victoria, Canada will keep our spirits lifted “Higher Education Institutions may be one of the largest, relatively untapped resources that our communities have” www.coastalcommunities.org.uk/films.html. It seems to us that this might be just the time to mobilise community partners to ensure capacity is supported and developed and it’s why we called this project ‘Building Community University Partnership Resilience’ because we anticipate hard times ahead that will require us to scaffold what we have gained to date, to ensure long lasting collaborations.

So what do community partners tell us about the UK experience of community-university partnership working? We are aware of the growing body of information and commentary about this area of work however we are sorry to report that we have not been able to find much that is clearly written from a community partner point of view. As part of Connected Communities a number of scoping studies have been commissioned to try to clarify some of the issues, but these have been directed at academic audiences. In addition there is a body of work from the Community University Partnership programme at Brighton www.brighton.ac.uk/cupp that explores the dynamics and issues and offers constructive advice on how to address these.

We know from our own experience that community partners are less likely to prioritise writing and there are few incentives to record their experience, so it is possible that little exists. We would be really interested to hear about examples from summit delegates. We also know from writing project evaluation reports, that it is likely that much of what gets written about are success stories or written for audiences such as funders, where authors want to portray partnership working in a positive light. Where support has been available, there are several examples of resources (toolkits; case studies; reflective learning) that highlight effective partnership work between community groups and universities. For example:
Manchester Beacon: http://www.manchesterbeacon.org/ourlearning/creative-learning-partnerships;
Beacon North East: Co-inquiry toolkits: http://www.beaconnortheast.org.uk/resources/tools;
CUE East case studies: http://www.uea.ac.uk/ssf/cue-east/CaseStudy%3aPublicEngagement+-+Evaluate,+Reflect+and+Learn; and the NCCPE website www.publicengagement.ac.uk.

Given this, we turned to a different source to set the scene for the Summit. All Summit delegates were asked to complete the following question on their application form: “Reflecting on your community–university partnership work, what have been your major challenges and lessons learned”? Summarised into 6 general themes, those of us lucky (or sad) enough to have read about community-university partnership working, will note the resonance. These are the 6 themes that have informed our planning for the Summit.

1. Negotiating different cultures
2. Expectations
3. Power and Equity
4. Funding & Capacity
5. Communication
6. Terms of student-community engagement
7. Talking too much
Who’s attending?
A List of Delegates is attached. The range and scope of community partners and academics attending is diverse and includes 23 enthusiastic community partners attending on day one, and 10 academics joining us on day two. Unfortunately, we didn’t have enough spaces for all applicants and so have tried to ensure a broad geographical spread, existing experience of partnership working and a willingness to get involved and help to produce useful outputs.

To do what – what to do
We have four objectives that we hope will catch your attention.
Firstly, we plan to provide space to share and consider the successes and blunders of partnership working. While it can be easier to identify failures, please arrive ready to share a good story as we are looking for a positive edge to apply to the challenges we want to problem solve together.

Secondly, we want to explore ways to influence community-university policy, decision making processes and practice. We might take inspiration from our community partners in the States. They set up their first community partner forum back in 2006 and met again in 2011 to deliver a conference for 100 community partners focused on community based participatory research. Supported by Community-Campus Partnerships for Health www.ccph.info/, they’ve built community partner capacity by designing and offering peer support and pursuing policy change. For example, they have written resources such as best practice guides, training in research methods, peer support mentoring programmes, established an active community partner listserv plus developed and advocated for policies that support community-university working, including submitting responses to research agency’s strategic plans and peer review processes and securing community partner places on research agency committees.

Thirdly, we hope to deliberate on the pros and cons of setting up a UK Community Partner Network. While not wishing to pre-empt the decision, should we agree that this would help, the National Co-ordinating Centre for Public Engagement is keen to support it (e.g. to provide practical help and a hub for a self-sustaining community partner network including for example, a website presence, producing resources that others might find helpful, exploring funding sources and so on).

And lastly, we look forward to gathering a bit of inspiration and direction to produce some specific outputs. This might involve providing text or illustrations for dedicated web pages, drawing case studies together from Summit stories, producing slides, posters, film clips illustrating lessons learnt, best practice methods, creative arts approaches to community engagement, briefing papers for universities and research councils and so on. You do have skills in some of the above - yes? We will definitely need your help (although appreciate the limitations on people’s time and budget.)

We hope the Summit is fun and fruitful. You should get to share your experiences and challenges and leave with a few solid tips. We suspect it will be quite interesting to hear a range of views and gather new perspectives and if all goes well, our issues might just get channelled to those who need to hear. You will definitely get to meet others doing similar sorts of work, partake of free food and refreshments and snooze away in a comfy bed free of the usual chores at home.

We’re really looking forward to meeting with you
From all of us on Planning Group
Kim Aumann, Erinma Bell, Kathleen Carter, Sophie Duncan, Dave Wolff, Angie Hart (PI).