

Getting Started

How to find your way around a university and get your project going?

A university is a highly complex and large enterprise, often the size of a small town in terms of numbers of staff and students. Universities are also varied in type, some concentrate on research and some on teaching. Others are highly specialised in terms of subjects that they cover. The common link is likely to be that they are all rather difficult to navigate. What you need may well be in there somewhere, the challenge is finding it!

If you have an idea for a partnership project and want to pitch it to explore possible interest with a university (as opposed to managing a university request to get involved in an idea they have) then here are some tips that the UK Community Partner Network have pulled together – we would be interested to know what you think of them.

1. Be able to describe your project in a paragraph or a 5 min conversation, even if it is an early idea rather than a worked through plan.
2. Have a think in advance what you might want from the university. The main possibilities are likely to be:
 - a. Help with research from staff or students
 - b. Student time to contribute to a piece of work
 - c. Use of university facilities
 - d. Funding (a possibility but unlikely in most situations)
 - e. Advice or training relevant to your project/work (e.g. do they do research that could inform your work?)
3. Think through what you can offer a university too, doing this may help you clarify what you want and can help 'equalise' the relationship. The main possibilities are likely to be:
 - a. Help improve research - by making it relevant to communities
 - b. Help improve teaching - by adding community expertise/perspectives
 - c. Help the university develop partnerships that can raise funds
 - d. Improve the university's connection and standing in its communities
 - e. Improve the university's understanding of issues that concern its communities.
4. Find out if the university has a service to help you find your way around. This might be called a helpdesk, the community engagement team, the public engagement team a science shop, knowledge exchange or something else entirely. If an official channel exists find out how it works and use it. It is worth remembering that if you are looking for students to work with you this could also be organised through the student volunteering team at the university. Ring or drop them an email that is brief, to the point and has a clear request.

5. However, perhaps your local university does not have an official entry point and you will have to find a sympathetic academic who might be interested in your project idea. Try looking at the staff websites for the area of work that your project idea falls into (e.g. Health or Social Work). Start networking by:
 - a. Attending events that are about your topic, but are of an academic nature
 - b. By signing up to any email lists or newsletters that are being published by the university
 - c. By following key academics on twitter or connecting on LinkedIn
 - d. Attend university student fairs, Fresher's Week - again to link/network with student societies who can often put you in touch with relevant lecturers or heads of departments
 - e. Attending relevant public lectures. If any of the lectures are related to the work you do, ask if you can be part of the discussion panel, showcase your organisation or even conduct a lecture.

6. You might want to check with your local voluntary sector support organisation (for example a CVS) whether they have had any contact with anybody at the university or any tips that are specific to the local area with regard to this.

7. Before initiating contact spend 30 minutes looking at the university website trying to understand what its teaching and research strengths are. Linking with these gives a much better chance of making a partnership work. It may be that another university or a different organisation could offer better support for your specific project. Think about what you specifically seek from approaching a university as opposed to a different type of organisation (such as, independent researchers, credibility or validity for your data, building your research capacity, impacting training for the next generation of practitioners etc). Be aware of the academic year timings and the implications for the availability of staff and students. For instance most universities are very quiet in August. Student availability for projects will vary but is often October-April.

8. Find out if the university has a written policy of working with community partners. This might be called a "social/community engagement" policy. Things to find out, and to assess for suitability with your way of working are:
 - a. What is their ethos or approach to co-working with community organisations? Do they, for instance, seek equal partners for a two way exchange or do they expect community organisations to provide a specific service?
 - b. Do they prioritise working with a particular target group e.g. disadvantaged and marginalised communities?
 - c. Will the university pay for community partner time on a partnership project?
 - d. What agreements, formal or informal, do they use?
 - e. What is their track record in this area?

9. You may have a number of local universities. Bearing in mind the above questions you might want to assess which one is likely to suits you best. Talk to other community organisations that are similar to you to understand their experiences of working with a particular university.

10. Some of this information will be easy to find, but some will not. Try not to be put off. Even if your first contact with the university isn't promising, there are often other parts of the university that might be able to help. And remember, once you find a potential partner, getting advice about how to set up a good mutually beneficial partnership is your next step.