

Mutually beneficial community university partnerships

Ways to contact potential community-based groups

Community university partnerships cover a range of contexts that include a very diverse mix of community-based groups. For example, groups may be large, complex organisations or small volunteer run groups who may never have considered partnering with an academic before. Some will have research experience while others will not. Many will be familiar with partnership agreements and eager to work with you. Others may be sceptical, have negative pre-conceived ideas or experiences of non-collaborative research in the past – but become perfect partners. Be prepared to adapt your approach. If you have an idea for a project and want to pitch it to explore possible interest with a community group, it can help to be direct and clear or it might be more fruitful to show a general interest in a community group's work first. We know community groups can be hard to locate sometimes, but if you are keen to partner on issues that you feel genuinely concerned about (rather than just having a remote academic interest in), and want to find a group who wants to collaborate with you, here are some tips from the UK Community Partner Network (UKCPN).

1. Find out if your university has a service or channel to help find partners – a helpdesk, a public engagement or knowledge exchange team, science shop, or even a student volunteering team.
2. Identify and approach the university public or community engagement staff because they may have a resource list of community partners, run brokering events where you can pitch your ideas with community groups, or link you with others involved in community-university partnerships.
3. If your university is without an official channel you will need to think more broadly to find a group with a similar interest or concern who might be interested in working with you. One way to identify community-based groups that cover your area of interest is by word-of-mouth. Ask around, use existing networks, approach professional groups or colleagues who already work on collaborative partnerships, to introduce you to groups or individuals that might be interested in your field. People often respond better to an introduction from a known person.
4. Consider approaching groups that already have the connections you're looking for, because they might collect relevant data, have links to broader networks, or care about the issues you're looking at. *Local authorities* (borough, district, town, parish councils etc.) frequently have useful information about their area accessible via their website or in person. *Third sector hubs* like the Council for Voluntary Service (CVS) typically have a database of membership organisations, produce newsletters and may be able to connect you with a group or advertise your research interest to their members. *Social Enterprise hubs* usually operate regionally and hold databases of membership enterprises too. *Public sector hubs* may have working groups hosted by the local authority, that bring together business, third sector and council staff to tackle community issues. *Private sector hubs* can include the local Federation of Small Business, or networking groups with a 'charitable' arm and can be well informed on local issues, or Chambers of Commerce can be willing to include information in their newsletters that reach a mix of businesses in the area.

5. Search online, use social media, email cascades and mail shots. Set up a profile with *Linked In*, to connect to others. *Twitter* can help you to connect with businesses and (some) third sector organisations, whilst *Facebook* is better at engaging with individuals and self-help groups. Twitter has a number of 'hashtag hours': set times of the week when you can promote what you do/ask for help to a huge audience.
6. Consider advertising in local libraries or using newspapers and radio, which are still a key source of information especially for those without access to the internet. Local papers, community and hospital radio stations often welcome well-crafted press releases or offer airtime for projects.
7. If you are seeking to work with patient groups, Involve produce extremely helpful guidance about patient and public involvement in research <https://www.invo.org.uk/resource-centre/>.
8. First impressions can be extremely important. Making contact is a critical first step and frequently takes more time than you might expect.
9. Showing genuine interest in the community groups' work, rather than immediately bringing up the topic of joint work, can be a way of signalling that you take seriously the expertise they can offer. Attend local events or network meetings to hear more about what the group are doing, explain you are working on similar topics albeit in an academic setting and are interested in exploring collaborations. Remember, academic language can be off-putting - keep it simple.
10. There may be many groups worth considering, all of which match your interests. You don't want to waste their time or yours, so it can help to assess their suitability by checking out their websites, asking around about their approach and track record, or their priority areas of work and experience of partnership working or participatory research.
11. Think in advance about why you want to partner, what you might want and what you can offer the group. Be able to describe your interest or project area in a paragraph or a five-minute conversation even if it is just an early idea.
12. Remember, once you find a potential partner, getting advice about how to set up a good mutually beneficial partnership is your next step. Guidance available from the National Coordinating Centre for Public Engagement (NCCPE) is a good place to start <http://www.publicengagement.ac.uk/do-it/working-partnership>

Written by UKCPN members, with parts drawn from "Building the Team" www.latentpromise.org