# School-University Partnerships: *Fulfilling the Potential*

# Report on Survey and Interviews

Matt Varley
Qing Gu
Toby Greany
Graham Handscomb

# Background

This paper is one of the outputs from the SUPI Learning Project (Phase 1). The outputs from this project include a Literature Review[1]; an Event report[2]; and a Summary Report[3].

The paper summarises the findings of the semi-structured interviews and the survey. Interviews were carried out with twelve individuals: five representing key stakeholders, four working in schools, and three from Higher Education Institutes (HEIs). The survey was administered to 42 individuals who were invited to participate in the workshop event in June 2014. A response was received from 37 of them. Eighteen were from HEIs, six from the third sector, four from schools, four from research councils or other funding body, three from professional bodies or learned societies, and two from policy officials.

The narrative presented below is based on an analysis of the interviews and the survey responses. Quotes are presented in italics, and referenced to either a school, university or stakeholder representative.

# Summary

Analysis of the interviews and the survey responses suggest the following key conclusions:

1. School-university partnerships have changed significantly in the last five years and continue to evolve, although the legacy from historical approaches and cultures remains strong.

2. There remain many barriers to schools (teachers) and universities (academics and others) working together, including cultural, logistical, and structural barriers, the speed and nature of the changes in the school sector, and issues to do with knowledge definition and creation.

3. National policy is disjointed and funding is reducing and uncertain, and while efforts should be made to address this fact, coherence may be best realised through local, sub-regional or regional effort.

4. For these reasons, purpose, commitment, leadership and a strategic approach are crucial to the success of partnership effort.

5. Successful partnership is all about relationships, mutuality, and win-win propositions – but this requires the right kind of approach if it is to be successful and sustain.

Each of these points is explored in turn below.

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1 www.publicengagement.ac.uk/sites/default/files/publication/supi_literature_review.pdf

2 www.publicengagement.ac.uk/sites/default/files/publication/supi_workshop_event_report.pdf

3 www.publicengagement.ac.uk/sites/default/files/publication/supi_project_report_final.pdf

# Five Key Themes

1. **School-university partnerships have changed significantly in the last five years and continue to evolve, although the legacy from historical approaches and cultures remains strong.**

The relationships that have existed for some time between schools and universities are characterised by a number of colleagues working in schools as being fairly distant, and consisting of universities repeating the same annual cycle of inviting schools to engage in activities to widen participation in HE, encourage interest in scientific study and research, and to train new teachers. This *'one way street'* saw universities making their *'traditional offer … about which schools were not thinking much … (as they were) restricted in their thinking'* (Head Teacher, School).

While this traditional cycle remains, there has been a *'significant change in the nature of school-university partnership over the last three to five years'* (Head Teacher, School). Policy initiatives and funding mechanisms were perceived to have played a key role in steering the directions of school-university partnerships.

From the government and policy perspective, it was recognised that '*our guidance to institutions has grown to emphasise the importance and effectiveness of long term, sustained and targeted activities*' (Policy Adviser). Associated with this is a growing recognition amongst universities and schools that they are expected to provide evidence of impact on their partnership work: '*Increasingly, institutions are being asked to provide evidence to measure impact and value of their outreach work. At my University, we have subscribed to the Higher Education Access Tracking system (HEAT), which is proving to be very effective in terms of monitoring and evaluation of activities against Access Agreement targets*' (Project manager, HEI).

There is now a much greater opportunity to explore what each can offer the other. *'Universities are becoming more interested in engaging with schools … The most enlightened universities are working genuinely in partnership, rather than doing stuff to schools'* (Programme Manager, Research Council / Funding Body). The changing policy landscapes of initial teacher education (ITT), shifting funding mechanisms for outreach activities and the greater policy push for evidence-based teaching and education in schools have worked to demand more joined up thinking and greater strategic engagement between the two sectors – so that partnership activities are better served to align individual and institutional commitments and purposes into a common goal.

The School Direct initiative in England has *'nudged'* at some of the tensions within teacher education and while leading to some difficult conversations has resulted in *'an increase in schools' confidence … (and) a growing recognition that schools have something to offer as well'* (Head Teacher, School). *'The DfE strategy to empower schools, through School Direct and Teaching Schools, has tested established partnerships and in the main strengthened them. In strong partnerships we have been able to jointly develop ITE programmes which provide outstanding opportunities for trainees.'* (Secondary Partnership Coordinator, University).

Beyond teacher education, whereas in the past *'universities were only interested at the point that pupils were reaching the end of their time in school, now there is much more engagement from them further down the school'* (Head Teacher, School). Examples include projects aimed at informing pre-GCSE choices in Northern Ireland through improved understanding of study and career pathways, which is of particular importance given that the age at which such choices will be made is being brought forward.

Furthermore, there is an increasingly recognised opportunity for universities to engage in working with schools to identify and address the CPD needs of teachers. Schools are also being strongly encouraged to engage in research. One university has shifted to deeper partnership over the last five years through a focus on a model of *'teaching as clinical practice'* that has involved work with school clusters and resulted in a *'qualitatively different experience for teachers and university staff that is encouraging much harder thinking about CPD for teachers throughout their careers'* (Senior Lecturer, University). Another has used the funding provided by the Roberts Agenda to establish a post-graduate certificate in research development and to establish a 'Becoming an Engaging Researcher' programme that promotes the involvement of teachers in research.

There has been a '*wide spectrum of responses from universities, from the defensive to the progressive'*, and some schools are consequently taking steps to find the right partner: '*we shopped around for a more creative HEI when it came to School Direct'* (Head Teacher, School). Changes to school curricula require that the knowledge and skills of teachers be updated, and in England teaching school alliances are being asked to respond to this by setting up maths hubs for example.

One of the key changes in recent years cited by a number of university colleagues is the '*development of a more strategic approach. This is both through a raising of the importance of working with schools to a more strategic level within the University and also through the University working with a set of educational partners that are themselves working at a more strategic level, e.g. qualification bodies, school improvement services and local authorities'* (Community Engagement Manager, University).

2. **There remain many barriers to schools (teachers) and universities (academics and others) working together, including cultural, logistical, and structural barriers, the speed and nature of the changes in the school sector, and issues to do with knowledge definition and creation.**

There are fundamental cultural and logistical barriers to effective partnership working between schools and universities, compounded by a lack of understanding of how each other works: '*We are just starting to understand and tap into the way in which HEIs work – for example, that they require their staff to engage in research projects – why didn't we know? … We operate differently. We need more joined up thinking'* (Head Teacher, School).

A number of references were made to a mis-match between HEIs and schools in terms of the rhythm of their years and the speed at which they need to move. As a university colleague put it, '*our partners expect better of us'* in terms of understanding how schools work and the practicalities of working with teachers who have full-time jobs: '*When are university services open and accessible? Do you hold sessions at the weekends or during the evenings?'* The interface between these two worlds is '*clunky and unhelpful'* (Principal Lecturer, University).

Furthermore, schools need to act much more quickly, largely because they are so driven by their accountability framework and need to move fast and see results; slower and longer term HEI projects can work across different school years and take a long time. The speed and nature of the changes taking place in the school sector, in particular the increase in autonomy and the drive towards a school-led approach to initial teacher training, present particular challenges. The rapid growth in the number of academies and free schools is '*beginning to slightly upset the existing partnership model because you suddenly have these different types of schools coming through … (that have) to be dealt with in a different way … (because) they (do) not have the immediate LA link and have a much greater degree of autonomy'* (HEFCE).

While universities can '*show something new'* to teachers and pupils, the fact that '*different schools want different things'* – from mentoring for their pupils to enhancing chemistry lessons with explosions – makes it hard for one university to respond flexibly to multiple school partners (Senior Leader, University). As a more prosaic example, one university initiative was not allocated funding for the necessary barring and vetting checks, and therefore found that it could not have as many people working in schools as it had hoped. Trying to respond to these kinds of practicalities can create conflict with the broader approach of the HEI institution, and it takes leadership to ensure that the right approach is taken.

'*The landscape of university-school interaction is hugely complex, even within one institution',* and this presents significant challenges (HEFCE). It isn't unusual for there to be a fragmentation in the communication within the university – for example, for the widening participation team to not know what the recruitment team are doing – and the '*lack of a single, obvious entry point'* (Director, HEI) has obvious consequences for external partners. It could make sense for HEIs to work closely with their school partners to develop new ways of managing the different levels of engagement that are needed for different purposes, from the strategic to the operational, with individual schools and with groups of schools. The outcome could be '*a strategy around that school engagement … (so that each school gets) a full breadth of provision, rather than narrowly focussed interventions'*.

The availability of time is of course a key challenge. '*The challenge is always balancing time for the researchers to be away from their research against the need for this public engagement prepared to be delivered. So I think there are always management issues between the researchers and their research*

*group leaders … On the school side, again it is a time issue'*, and it can be tricky running activities to suit school timetables and avoid clashes – for example, twilight sessions. *'It is very difficult for teachers to be released and the teachers that we are working with are in the shortage subjects. So we have to be very careful that the processes of building this exciting experience for the students and teachers do not actually have a negative impact in terms of the core teaching'* (Programme Director, HEI). The *'length of the lead time for inserting additional activities into the school time table'* (Programme Director, HEI) is also a challenge, requiring perhaps 9 to 12 months between planning and implementation. It can also prove to be difficult to get students released as well.

The challenges faced in the School-University Partnership Initiative (SUPI) include how to match the interests of researchers with the interests of schools, quite apart from the different levels of interest that researchers have in getting engaged at all. One University has approached this by asking Early Career Researchers (ECRs) to provide biographies and then to form working groups as a result of discussions and negotiations with teachers; this more collaborative approach has worked well because ECRs and teachers understand each other's expectations better, and teachers had more input into the activities and therefore felt *'more comfortable'* about their involvement. As another colleague put it: *'There are key differences between ECRs approaches to public engagement compared to established academics - including confidence, time management challenges and one-to-one interaction in talking about their research. However, we have learned that ECRs have a wide variety of previous life experience that needs to be recognised when thinking about the best form of public engagement for an individual to engage in. We feel that it's about encouraging ECRs to start with an acceptable and appropriate form of engagement and then encouraging them to build on this to develop their skill set'* (Programme Director, HEI).

Whether explicit or not, questions about the how knowledge is generated and by whom are fundamental to the experience of different professions working together. While only identified by one survey respondent, this issue was referred to by a number of interviewees and is particularly evident in relation to the schools-led ITE policy in England. Universities may see themselves in this role, but some hold the view that the knowledge that they produce is often too impenetrable and not disseminated effectively: *'journals have not impacted on teachers'* (Policy Adviser, HEI). A better approach may be if *'teachers and academics could publish together, citing projects that involve teachers'* (Head Teacher, School). The potential that some see is for the development of deep partnerships between universities and schools that become the place from which individuals draw their professional identity and the basis for shared accountability (Policy Adviser, HEI). Views differ on whether the range and depth of university knowledge and research activity can be readily mapped into school curricula.

The general view is that, despite examples of significant developments, there is further to go in order to take full advantage of the opportunities for school–university partnerships. Each has *'far more value to the other than has yet been realised – in particular on the research agenda, and on subjects and curricula; HEI input on the curriculum reform programme is weak and too reactive, in part because HEIs don't have the curriculum leaders you would need to make a difference'* (Policy Adviser, Government). The sense of mis-matched views and understandings is exemplified by contrasting these two quotes: *'Engaging teachers in research is hard to do'* (Senior Leader, University) and yet *'I would love to see an HEI leading the research arm of a teaching school alliance'* (Head Teacher, School) – although only four of the thirty-seven survey respondents identified engaging schools with research and development as a core purpose of school-university partnerships.

### 3. National policy is disjointed and funding is reducing and uncertain, and while efforts should be made to address this fact, coherence may be best realised through local, sub-regional or regional effort.

It is self-evidently the case that policy and funding influence institutional priorities and commitment, and therefore shape the partnership landscape. The widely-held view is that national policy in areas that have a consequence for partnership effort between schools and universities is not joined up. The experience that most have had in HEIs and schools is of a repeating cycle in which a particular initiative arrives on the scene backed up by funding, resulting in local action undertaken by identified staff – who may or may not have been recruited specifically for this purpose; and once the initiative and its funding run out, the local activity stops. Some suggest that policy perspectives are almost inevitably partial, reflecting the priorities of different ministries and policy teams (Policy Adviser, Government). For example, the Aim Higher initiative was affected by the removal of Connexions Services at a time when the work of careers services in schools had been criticised. Certainly, the extent to which different national government agencies work together varies between policy areas: DfE and BIS have many links

with each other on STEM activities, some links on Widening Participation, and very few on ITT (Policy Adviser, Government).

Whether and for how long funding is in place to support a policy often determines the success and longevity of an initiative, leading one interviewee to state that *'the funding is more necessary than the policy'* (Senior Lecturer, University). It is suggested that the partnership efforts in Scotland for example, where local authorities have a key role to play in the partnership efforts to deliver the national Teaching Scotland's Future initiative, have been damaged by the deficit reduction focus resulting in insufficient numbers of dedicated posts and a high turnover of key staff within local authorities. Given that *'the era of goodwill has come to an end'* and that engagement in partnership effort can *'no longer be done on a wing and a prayer'*, an argument is made that HEIs should receive grant funding to support active partnership engagement with schools (Policy Adviser, Government). Another view is that truly deep partnership requires that funding is held by partnerships themselves, rather than by one or other of the partners (Policy Adviser, HEI). Stability over a sufficient period of time is also identified as important: *'the main factor for building these relationships is time. Funding for a few years is not sufficient. Universities need to build up an internal structure to support these relationships and schools need time to pick up on this and for word of mouth to spread. If the structures and initiatives keep changing so that academic staff don't know what's going on we cannot expect schools to buy into them'* (Project Manager, HEI).

However, there are examples of attempts being made to break out of a funding limitation. Some universities have managed to draw in other funding sources to support their efforts. For example, one university obtained funding from the London Schools Excellence Fund – a one year programme aimed at supporting teacher CPD – in order to support their outreach and SUPI effort. This HEI uses the funding to support the provision of lab spaces for outreach activities and CPD for teachers in hub and satellite schools – felt to be crucial given that schools' ability to pay for activities and use of lab spaces has decreased, especially for hard to reach schools which are in most need of support and engagement. Charges are made for some programmes, while others are provided for free. An interview from a school stated that they felt that their partnership could easily continue even if funding stops as good relationships have been established and *'we are working together, developing the modules and curriculum'* (Senior Teacher, School).

One policy insider suggested that the DfE had deliberately taken a low key approach to fostering evidence-based teaching, pointing out that there is not a huge amount of funding behind the policy but nevertheless schools are felt to be *'quietly interested'* in a subject that is clearly prime territory for HEIs since schools don't usually have the capacity for quantitative research (Policy Adviser, Government). However, the view from some head teachers is that *'a lot of universities have focused on ITE and should be further on with research and professional development'* focused on teaching and teachers (Head Teacher, School): this feels like a gap yet to be closed, and perhaps the lack of funding has contributed to this.

The way in which policies are framed and introduced has consequence. For example, although a lot of the rhetoric on both sides of the debate has suggested that there is a struggle between school-led and university-led ITT in England, in fact the quieter policy at the heart of these changes may be more pragmatic than that. It is characterised by one policy insider as *'better quality, with more schools involved if possible'*, developing sustainably over time (Policy Adviser, Government). The DfE does want more schools to show more leadership of the recruitment and development of teachers, but not without HEI involvement. So, strengthening the role of schools changes the nature of this partnership, but the intention is that there should still be a partnership. This is recognised by schools: *'a self-improving school system couldn't be realised by schools alone … schools don't have the capacity or skill by themselves … We need to challenge the dismissal of the HEI role in ITE … the policy is a bit of a distraction … The message isn't quite right'*, as it has perhaps encouraged some school leaders to interpret it to mean that HEI's should no longer have a role (Head Teacher, School). Only three of the thirty-seven survey respondents saw the purpose of school-university partnerships to be to expand the capacity of schools, which does suggest that this key policy message has yet to get through.

Finally, while some argue and hope for more policy coherence at a national level, others feel that it is unrealistic to ever expect coherent policies to emerge from the *'spaghetti'* of national government. Instead, the effort that needs to be made is to drive local coherence across the multiple overlapping projects that emerge on the ground in response to national policies. More self-sustaining cooperative partnerships, supported by increased flexibilities around funding, are felt by some to offer one way forward to achieving sustainable effort with impact over time (Policy Adviser, University). One view is that universities should serve their local communities to a greater extent than is the case at the moment.

They tend to focus on national and international perspectives for reasons of position, reputation, funding and competition: '*It can be easy to lose sight of our values and purpose, and of the local context'* (Senior Lecturer, University).

There are significant differences between the home countries in terms of the fit within, and commitment to, objectives for localities. In Scotland, the implementation of the national Teaching Scotland's Future initiative is founded on local partnerships involving schools, Local Authorities and universities. One of its key recommendations is to strengthen and formalise existing partnerships, without getting in the way of existing good practice. Local Authorities are seen as crucial to this effort in mediating and securing support to establish and secure partnerships, and in mitigating the failures that can occur when key individuals move on. In comparison, the role of local authorities in England has reduced.

**4. For these reasons, purpose, commitment, leadership and a strategic approach are crucial to the success of partnership effort.**

In the face of the challenges involved in developing and sustaining partnership effort between schools and universities, a clear purpose and strong commitment are essential if they are to succeed.

Two-thirds of the survey respondents suggested that these partnerships are driven by HEIs rather than schools. As one put it: '*ITE partnerships have been driven by the university, largely out of necessity. Similarly, research partnerships usually develop out of a need on the part of the university. Subject or other interest related partnerships are often driven by the school. Here, the need is on the part of the school to access expertise'* (Head Teacher, School). Another goes on to say that while '*there are exceptions, usually (involving) charismatic and energetic teachers, … usually it is the university that tries to reach the school. Schools often are unaware of what is available or are just too busy … (or) feel it is above their station'* (Education Adviser, Professional Body / Learned Society).

The extent to which universities are invested in partnership effort, and to which leaders within universities are focused on this, is therefore crucial. Success requires '*a clear sense from senior academics that this sort of work is supported and rewarded among more junior researchers'* (Director, HEI). As '*… there is not a uniform approach within the HE to outreach. … a lot is dependent on the Head of Department and their commitment to school and university partnerships … School-university partnerships need to be fully recognised by the head of department as important public engagement activities that should be carried out alongside research'* (Programme Head, Funding Body). Initial teacher education is not always seen as an important priority by the '*older universities'* as it does not deliver '*big bucks'*, and sometimes LAs and schools don't value it either (Policy Adviser, Government); those who take this view presumably see neither an imperative to survive in this marketplace nor a need to fall in line with policy.

An overarching, organising strategic approach is also seen to be important and beneficial. In particular, Knowledge Exchange and Public Engagement initiatives can provide a very effective strategic umbrella for the development of various aspects of school–university partnership. For example, one university has established a corporate Public Engagement Group that includes representatives from schools as well as many other partners. This pre-existing group has led the response to the SUPI initiative, alongside coordinating other activities such as engaging teachers and pupils in research projects subsequently presented at an Annual University Research day and running the Children's University. Given that this is not a '*centralist'* institution, coordination is challenging and it will always be '*lots of people's jobs to do (partnership)'* with the inevitability that some toes get stepped on (Senior Leader, University). An Advisory Committee at another university coordinates responses to raising aspiration, widening participation and responding to skills shortages in the economy, and includes head teachers from schools across the region alongside representatives from local employers and other stakeholders. In a third example, a Reach Out Lab has '*a sharp widening participation focus … Its primary function is to provide outreach opportunities to under-presented school students and their teachers'*. It has also forged relationships with the research community at the College and been able to '*translate some of their aspirations in terms of public engagement into tangible outreach activity'* (Director, University). The lab has linked researchers with teachers, and has become more widely used since some activities have been located in schools and used to provide inspirational and aspirational STEM experiences for students and clusters of schools.

**5. Successful partnership is all about relationships, mutuality, and win-win propositions – but this requires the right kind of approach if it is to be successful and sustain.**

The factor most commonly identified by survey respondents as important to the success of school-university partnerships was relationships. One colleague noted that there is generally a desire to avoid conflict and work collaboratively because *'people know each other'*. (Senior Lecturer, University). However, this foundation can be flimsy; another colleague described partnerships as *'people with passion who have managed through a range of rather coincidental circumstances to find partners. I wish I could see it being more systematic than that!'* (Director, HEI). Another stated that you need *'somebody in each school who wants to make it work. … that's where funding becomes an issue'* (Senior Teacher, School).

While it is necessary to establish and nurture strong relationships in order for effective partnership to operate, *'you have to start again each time the people change'* (Senior Lecturer, University) you also need to have the right institutional arrangements in place to secure the sustainability of the partnership: *'embedding relationships such that they are sustainable beyond individuals and there is institutional buy-in from schools with there being a culture of working with the local universities'* (Programme Manager, Funding Body). Partnership requires that you *'find people who can take this on ... Principals of schools do change, and with that the commitment to the joint effort with an HEI can change'* (Head Teacher, School).

More broadly, the key success factors for school-university partnerships were identified succinctly by one survey respondent as: *'trust, honesty, time investment from both parties, previous experience of working together, an understanding that we can't do it alone and a mutual aim to do it as well as possible'* (Secondary Partnership Coordinator, HEI). In part, this refers to the dispositions that are held by the individuals involved in the partnership – which was the second most commonly identified success factor in the survey. The partners *'being on the same page'* and whether people believe the partnership adds value are crucial (Policy Adviser, Government). While some individuals get involved straight away, others are less convinced of this value and are concerned about the additional work entailed: *'some school departments are far more enthusiastic than others, and that makes a difference … you have to convince them at the beginning… when they realised that they could actually have an input into what is being developed, that overcame that (reluctance) as well'* (Senior Teacher, School). Institutional values and culture are also of key importance. A senior leader at one university pointed to the founding of the institution during the Enlightenment with a commitment to being a 'place of useful learning' as being key to sustaining a core purpose of reaching far beyond the privileged minority into professions and trades, and the fact that there is a *'serious commitment to our role within and contribution to our city'* (Senior Leader, University). Another respondent stated: *'The success of any joint HEI – school initiative depends upon the reason for and purpose of the activity, whether there is real commitment, and how the partnership is mediated … In some cases, academics have been told by their faculty to engage in effort to widen participation, but having been dragged in they don't do it well … You need people who really believe … When it falls down, that is usually to do with the will, time and priority given to it within the University'* (Head Teacher, School).

The earlier quote listing the success factors of school-university partnerships also speaks to the importance of mutuality. However, the partnerships between institutions are being significantly affected by the increased competition between them – between schools, between HEIs, and between schools and HEIs. The removal of the student numbers cap is placing a premium on marketing and recruitment – *'it is imperative for them to get the students in otherwise they don't get the funding'* - and this will affect the collaborations between HEIs (HEFCE). One survey respondent goes as far as to suggest that the national policies and financial incentives *'are all lined up in some respect against school university partnerships because they are encouraging the development of a marketised educational service'* (Senior Lecturer, School). The ITE policy in England in recent years has particularly accelerated this, given the view that it should be left for schools to decide what they may need from HEIs, and many within the HEI sector feel that the encouragement of schools to see themselves as purchasers of services from HEIs will act against the development of partnership (Policy Adviser, University). *'We are in a market place now where other universities are paying schools more … (and) letting schools do more from recruitment all the way to lectures'*, and universities are needing to compete on financial packages, the amount of *'free citizenship work'* that they can and are willing to offer to maintain the partnership, and the quality of the services that they provide in the eyes of the customer; *'I am fearful that schools are beginning to think they can do the job. … There is a dedicated team at the University to do the ITE job well … (academics may be) less credible in the corridors and classrooms, but their expertise is well informed by the research … if the school values reflective practice and research-informed practice, they are going to value a university partnership'* (Senior Lecturer, University).

An importance is attached to schools (and hence teachers) needing to see universities (including academics) as equal partners, and vice versa, which would require that HEIs become more flexible and *'less precious'* about their provision and processes – something to which the nature of HEI quality assurance processes presents some challenge – and is perhaps less likely to be realised in a marketised approach (Policy Adviser, HEI). The headship programmes that ran in Scotland until about five years ago were cited as being successful due to the consortium model and co-constructive approach that was adopted (Senior Lecturer, University).

Finding and demonstrating win-win propositions is also fundamental. In addition to the specific objectives of widening participation in HE and engaging teachers and pupils in research activities, the survey respondents identified encouraging a mutually beneficial relationship in its own right and fulfilling an organisation aim or function as the key purpose of school–university partnerships. As one respondent put it: *'The main challenge always is to bring together the right people from both sides … Partnerships work when there is a strong personal connection and there is real, mutual benefit'* (Head Teacher, School). Another stated that *'effective partnership requires a win-win situation – this is the key. Unless both parties get something out of it, it won't work … Without government subsidy, the costs need to be worth the benefits … You need to examine the DNA of the institutions involved … Are they truly really committed to the partnership? Everyone is very busy, on both sides. It needs to work for everyone to be a success'* (Senior Leader, University). An example from one university underlines the mutual benefit of involvement with SUPI: the value of engaging in the programme for the researchers involved has been that it has developed their presentation and communication skills and provided them with the opportunity to engage with schools, link with professionals and carry out outreach activities; the benefit for teachers has been that it has helped to refresh their subject knowledge and to be in touch with research – *'it is a win-win situation'* (Senior Lecturer, University). Another example demonstrates that SUPI has succeeded where other partnership efforts have been less successful, because it has been tailored to a school's needs: *'Some departments were involved in different projects with different organisations in the past and this has meant a lot of work for us…. And it was not what we wanted or needed to be doing. But this project was very, very different because it was tailored to what they [the school] wanted'* (Senior Teacher, School). In general, the survey respondents identified a wider set of benefits for schools than for universities from engaging in partnership.

Evaluating partnership initiatives and being able to demonstrate the benefits that they provide to each partner is therefore crucial to gaining support and securing sustainability. Such evaluations are however very hard to do well, whether because there is too little investment in this, the study is initiated too late, the initiative doesn't run for long enough to allow sufficient time for benefits to accrue, or the methodological problems are hard to overcome. There are examples of good practice however: *'Increasingly, institutions are being asked to evidence, to measure impact and value of their outreach work. At my University, we have subscribed to the Higher Education Access Tracking system (HEAT), which is proving to be very effective in terms of monitoring and evaluation of activities against Access Agreement targets'* (Project manager, HEI).

Meaningful partnerships go far beyond separate institutions working together, let alone simply trading. Underpinning partnership with structural and legal arrangements to cement the investment of both partners can be important: *'University Technical Colleges and Sponsored Academies are two examples of effective partnerships, in that the University has a vested interest in the school institution. These relationships provide a significant level of commitment on behalf of both parties, which included the exchange of services and expertise e.g. access to academic staff, resources, facilities, students etc'* (Access Partnership Lead Officer, University). These kinds of arrangement can foster deeper strategic relationships that have the potential to make a difference to how young people see universities, perhaps encouraging more of them to see them as a natural progression from their school, and can bolster further developments such as strategic engagement in curriculum development, student support, and engagement with parents and carers (HEFCE). This greater formality can involve a board making collective decisions and directing funding.

Generally, ITT partnerships have involved more formal agreements than has been the case for other partnership effort, given the Ofsted requirement that these exist for this purpose. Beyond that, in many cases the establishment of such formalised arrangements are not yet mature. One colleague from a school described how commissioning provision usually takes place before consideration is given to whether underpinning formality is needed and if so of what nature. Memoranda of Understanding are common, but *'don't really have teeth'* and schools are not clear how they should go about *'accessing tangible service provision from universities'* and tapping into the wider resources and interests that universities have; moving to School Centred ITT provision (SCITT) does force more formality as the

school's *'head is on the block, and we need to commission what is necessary'*, but in other respects this kind of approach may not be helpful as schools do not want to be exclusive to one university and the very act of having a strict, formalised contractual agreement could damage the intention of developing deeper partnership (Head Teacher, School).

Finally, investing in the necessary capacity to develop and maintain partnership effort is crucial to sustainability, as has been demonstrated by the discussion about moving beyond the limitation of the funding available for a particular initiative and the number of references to the need to identify individuals to fulfil the link roles between institutions. One university colleague makes a plea for a public engagement requirement being included within a larger number of research grants, which would support the building and sustaining of capacity to support and develop relationships between researchers and teachers. A policy adviser points out that secondments and joint appointments are increasingly being used to help the two professions to work together, although this is hampered by salary differentials and the perhaps unrealistic demands of universities for people with PhDs. A colleague from a school suggests that there should be a more defined and clarified commitment to partnership endeavour that would include stakeholders such as the DfE and Governors Associations, and funding should be provided to support posts that exist to drive partnerships – *'otherwise, this will always be an add-on'*. It is generally recognised however that there is *'no Rolls Royce solution to the challenges of sustainability'*. Efforts in one university are being made to sustain SUPI at a smaller scale, having used the funding to employ one person, but the work is very labour intensive and involves only a few schools. The intention is to move beyond this, which will require a schools liaison function.

The national Aim Higher initiative as described by two individuals who worked at the heart of this programme provides an informative example of the challenges faced in attempting sustained delivery of a policy through school–university partnership. The purpose of the initiative was to 'widen participation in higher education (HE) by raising awareness, aspirations and attainment among learners from under-represented groups' (HEFCE website). It involved FE and HEI institutions, LAs and other agencies, schools and employers, and developed through three phases between its inception in 2003 and its termination in 2011. There were various elements to the initiative, including forming regional networks of universities and colleges with a view to developing progression pathways between FE and HE courses. In its final three-year phase, Aim Higher received funding of over £250 million and consisted of forty-two partnerships across England involving a 'comprehensive range of key stakeholders' delivering activities to meet local needs that targeted a significant number of disadvantaged children.

The longevity of the initiative and the significant level of funding that it received are identified as important factors that created *'a fair amount of stability'* and enabled *'deep collaboration'* to grow. The personal trust that developed between people who had come to know each other well meant that it was possible to develop an *'even-handed stakeholder model'* in which partners and stakeholders saw each other as equals. It is suggested that in the last three years of the eight year initiative, the partnerships and the benefits that they delivered *'really began to embed'* – although despite *'striving really hard to put in place an effective evaluative model … I don't think we have managed it'*. Individual programmes produced their own impact data, but overall there was *'no tracking mechanism which took the learner from whatever age they were in school to Sixth Form or university'*.

Some twenty of these outreach partnerships have survived. In these cases, their survival has been largely down to the energy and determination of a few committed people who *'managed to find some way of maintaining themselves, either through prescription or through individual funding, but they all tell me that they are relatively fragile … they have to go out and fight their corner and explain to institutions what benefit they can give'*. Different models have been pursued; for example, in Birmingham a number of institutions have pooled funding to set up an office towards the cost of which schools pay a small fee.

Sustainability of initiatives is a real challenge. For example for the SUPI initiative *'how is this initiative working with the broad work of the institutions in terms of their widening participation activity, for example, or their broad school liaison work? How is it … becoming integrated into some of that, so that it actually becomes part of a larger delivery structure, so that it could then be sustainable beyond the survey and project funding that the RCUK is able to provide?'*

What is clear it that there is much to be learned from previous and ongoing efforts to establish and sustain effective deep partnerships between schools and universities, and concerted effort should be made to learn these lessons and support more effective practice in the future.

## National Co-ordinating Centre for Public Engagement

The National Co-ordinating Centre for Public Engagement's vision is of a higher education sector making a vital, strategic and valued contribution to 21st-century society through its public engagement activity. We are working to help support universities to improve, value and increase the quantity and quality of their public engagement and embed it into their core practice.

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