

CREATING LIVING KNOWLEDGE

Summary report of the connected
communities programme

Keri Facer & Bryony Enright



As a funder and as a partner in a Connected Communities co-design project, the learning in this report resonates strongly. I would recommend it to everyone - policy makers, funders, researchers and community organisations - interested in how universities and communities can work together successfully to create new knowledge, solve problems, and make a difference in society.

Karen Brookfield
Deputy Director (Strategy), The Heritage Lottery Fund

For funders and communities, universities and researchers, this report offers a stimulating reflection on the Connected Communities Programme. From its engagement with individual projects and clusters of awards to the divergent traditions, roles and structures at play, the report provides a frank perspective from participants on the challenges, both inherent and less expected, that have emerged as the Programme has evolved. But it does so by also exploring the vitality and energy, creativity and distinctiveness that is possible when we acknowledge that new knowledge requires new approaches to funding and collaboration.

Professor Mark Llewellyn
Director of Research, Arts and Humanities Research Council

This report offers a mix of the conceptual and the practical that is exemplary. I am confident that it will inspire universities to rethink their future missions for years to come. That the work is itself a result of deep collaboration between the AHRC, the University of Bristol and a wide range of community partners is both most appropriate and a source of pride.

Professor Guy Orpen
Provost, University of Bristol

INTRODUCTION

This report summarises the lessons that have been learned from the AHRC/RCUK Connected Communities Programme about university-community collaborative research in the arts, humanities and social sciences.

The Connected Communities programme comprises over 300 projects bringing together over 700 academics and over 500 partnering organisations researching together on topics ranging from festivals to community energy, from hyperlocal journalism to care homes and everyday creativity. The projects are all concerned with understanding how university and community expertise can best be combined to better understand how communities are changing, and the roles that communities might play in responding to the problems and possibilities of the contemporary world. The Connected Communities programme is distinctive in that it encourages exploratory and open ended projects that involve collaboration between university and community partners at all stages of the process.

This short report provides an executive summary of the findings from a two year study of the Connected Communities programme involving 100 interviews, a survey of 309 participants, 3 workshops, 2 x twelve month case studies, and collaboration with 7 'legacy' projects. The full report is available at: <https://connected-communities.org/index.php/creating-living-knowledge-report>.

Lessons Learned

How can community and university expertise best be combined to better understand how communities are changing, and the roles that communities might play in responding to the problems and possibilities of the contemporary world? This is the question posed by the Connected Communities Programme, a UK Research Council Programme led by the Arts and Humanities Research Council.

Since 2010, the programme has funded over 300 projects, bringing together over 700 academics and over 500 collaborating organisations on topics ranging from festivals to community food, from everyday creativity to care homes, from hyperlocal journalism to community energy. The programme is distinctive in its commitment to encouraging exploratory and open-ended projects that involve collaboration between university and community partners at all stages of the process, and in its commitment to drawing on the methods and theories of the arts and humanities to understand and research ‘community’.

This report focuses on the lessons that might be learned from the programme about how to bring together expert and public knowledges – a trend in both universities and the wider policy and public spheres that we might call the ‘participatory turn’. It is based on a two year study of the programme conducted by Professor Keri Facer (Leadership Fellow for Connected Communities) and Dr Bryony Enright (Connected Communities Research Fellow). The study involved 100 interviews with programme participants, a questionnaire completed by 309 participants, workshops with 59 community partners, collaboration with 7 projects in which university-community collaborations were used to analyse the legacy of specific elements in the programme, and 2 twelve month case studies of individual projects. Findings have been developed iteratively throughout the study with programme participants.

Who is attracted to collaborative research partnerships and why? The motivations for individuals to participate in these collaborative projects can be clustered into 6 broad characteristic groups: generalists and learners (who are interested in new ideas and connections), makers (who are interested in getting something tangible made or changed), scholars (who are interested

in finding opportunities to pursue specific interests), entrepreneurs (who are attracted by the funding opportunities), accidental wanderers (who end up in the programme by happenstance), advocates for a new knowledge landscape (who are explicitly looking to experiment with new ways to create knowledge). These motivations are characteristic of both university and community partners. 98% of survey respondents reported they would do this sort of collaborative work again.

What sorts of partners are involved? - The community partners participating in the programme are highly diverse, with groups ranging from large national organisations and charities with established research capabilities, to smaller precarious and voluntary organisations, to individual community activists and artists. An important reason for many community partners to participate was the perception that this funding would allow them to take a step back, address fundamental questions and develop new insights about their work. For many groups, this was a unique opportunity as they often find themselves on a constant treadmill of activity and evaluation, often working to different and sometimes conflicting evaluation frameworks.

What are the reasons for collaboration? - The university and community partners tended to work together for practical reasons (it was impossible to conduct the research any other way), for personal reasons (they had shared interests, values, commitments and ideas), and for symbolic reasons (university partners sought the ‘authenticity’ offered by collaboration with communities, and community partners sought the ‘legitimacy’ offered by collaboration with universities).

Negotiating the fantasies of ‘community’ and ‘the university’ - Project partnerships are often formed on the basis of inchoate ideas about what ‘the university’ and ‘the community’ might offer to projects. A central part of the work of collaborative research, therefore, requires treating these fantasies seriously. Such questions can require project teams to reflect upon their own claims to authority: to what extent do community partners really represent ‘the community’? To what extent do university partners represent the only or most appropriate way of producing meaningful knowledge? Such work is necessarily unsettling and can be disruptive of existing identities.

Negotiating accountabilities – There are competing accountabilities on projects. These are internal to the project teams: to community partners, to university partners, to community members; and external to the project teams: to disciplinary fields, to the wider public good, to personal social networks. These internal and external accountabilities require careful articulation and the tensions between them have to be carefully addressed.

Building on deep traditions of collaborative research – While the idea of ‘co-producing’ research may only recently have come into vogue in the research councils, the Connected Communities Programme demonstrates the longstanding and highly diverse traditions that project teams draw upon when invited to conduct ‘collaborative research’. The different traditions at play in the programme include but are not limited to: traditions of participatory, collaborative and community engaged research; people’s history; environmental activism; participatory ethnography; traditions of responsible innovation and public engagement; participatory/action research; communities of practice approaches; co-design and user-centred design approaches; civil rights, feminist and disability rights traditions; crowd/commons and open innovation approaches.

Negotiating competing logics – These traditions bring very different rationales and methods for the processes of collaborative research. There are key differences, for example, between those traditions that seek university-community collaboration for reasons of equity and democracy, and those that see it primarily as a means of improving the quality of research and practice. Indeed, the idea of ‘community’ is framed very differently in different traditions – with some partnerships particularly concerned with capacity building amongst grassroots communities and others with building policy-level knowledge with representative organisations.

What new roles are emerging? – Negotiating different traditions, different motivations for participation and different relations of accountability requires expertise. To make projects work requires a highly diverse set of roles within the team, these include: the catalyser (who prompts and disrupts), the integrator (who synthesises), the designer (who connects and creates a plan), the broker (who negotiates relationships), the facilitator (who enables conversations), the project manager (who addresses progress and risks), the diplomat (who handles inter-institutional relations), the scholar (who connects

the project with existing knowledge and ensures rigour), the conscience (who asks how the project is benefiting communities), the accountant (who manages the money), the data gatherer (who conducts the empirical/archival research), the nurturer (who keeps an eye on all participants), the loudhailer (who promotes the work). Notably, such roles are taken in these projects by both university and community partners.

What benefits does funding bring? - Funding for collaborative research that enables community partners to be remunerated for expenses and time is essential in introducing diverse life experiences into the research process. Civil society, community and cultural organisations simply are unable to access resources to participate in reflective projects without funding. Indeed, without resource, economically marginalised communities are effectively shut out of the landscape of research production. The money matters significantly. In the Connected Communities programme funding has significantly enhanced the capacity of projects to learn from the experiences and perspectives of economically marginalised communities. It has enabled investment in people, materials, equipment and institutions which has in turn supported further investment in collaborative research by some universities. The funding also plays an important symbolic role in signalling that this sort of research is valued and valuable.

What are the risks of funding? - The form that funding takes, however, matters significantly – short term projects are less beneficial than longer term support of partnership working. The relationship between individuals and groups committed to collaborative long term partnerships can be negatively impacted and rendered instrumental if the consequences, politics and implications of project-based funding are not discussed from the outset. At the same time, for small organisations, project based funding can cause difficulties in terms of longer term sustainability of activities with volunteers. The unintended consequences of ‘success’ in gaining research funding have to be carefully considered by all parties.

Dealing with time and money - There is also often a discrepancy between formal allocation of time and resources and the lived experience of individuals working on such projects. Participants report that such research requires significantly more time than is usually budgeted for. As a consequence, research assistants, who are junior members of the team but who tend to have the most time formally allocated to projects, tend to take

a disproportionate responsibility for the success of these collaborations. Managing project finances through university systems that are often highly bureaucratic can also have negative impacts on community-university relations.

Reframing impact - In the area of research ‘impact’ these projects are leading to a reassessment of how we might understand the idea of what counts as a positive legacy from research partnerships. Indeed, they are troubling the popular linear model of research impact as a simple process that runs from ‘paper’ through to real world ‘application’. Instead, they are demonstrating that more sustainable, embodied and transformative legacies are produced through ongoing interactions between publics and universities throughout the development of projects and partnerships.

Creating multiple legacies - Project teams are working with plural notions of legacy, which include: the creation of new products (websites, guidelines, toolkits, academic papers, software, exhibitions, booklets, artworks, reports, performances); the creation of new networks and relationships; the development of new theories, ideas and concepts (relating to communities, histories of community and means of researching community); the strengthening and evolution of institutions (community partners are developing new services and strengthening their research capacities, universities are adapting their systems and developing greater capacity for collaboration).

Producing embodied legacies - The most significant and sustainable legacies, however, are embodied. Participants in projects are developing new skills, knowledge and understanding as well as the confidence to put these into action in the networks, organisations and partnerships they are involved with beyond the project itself. At the same time, the programme has nurtured the development of a new generation of community and university researchers who have ‘grown up collaborative’ and who take for granted the value and potential benefits of interdisciplinary community-university partnerships.

Limitations to funding models - There are some limitations to Connected Communities/research council funding as a model of creating powerful collaborations between universities and communities. First, those groups who are

under-represented within university faculty demographics, in particular both visible and invisible minorities, may find it harder to create connections and collaborations with universities. Second, investment in partnerships through a project based approach does not easily facilitate the slower participatory forms of research that require commitment over time.

Work still to do - There remains a need for research and scholarship, that is explicitly accountable to a wider public good; for more explicit and targeted attempts to diversify both faculty and the range of groups who partner with universities; and for ongoing community-university relationships to be sustained and nurtured through core and partnership funding rather than project based research funding.

To conclude - The Connected Communities Programme demonstrates that 'public value' from research is not about creating short term, instrumental partnerships in which universities offer quick evaluations or specialist inputs in exchange for communities offering access to a 'real world'. Rather, it is about creating substantive conversations between the different sets of expertise and experience that university and community partners offer, and in so doing, enabling the core questions that both are asking to be reframed and challenged. Such a set of relationships is far from the naïve economic model that would see the value of research judged by its immediate utility. Instead, it is about the creation of a new public knowledge landscape where communities, and the universities that form part of those communities, can collaborate to question, research and experiment to create new ways of understanding, seeing and acting in the world.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendation 1: Invest in the infrastructure for high quality collaborative research partnerships

High quality collaborative research partnerships between university and community partners involve the development of trusting, challenging relationships and opportunities for real conversations, informed by a deep knowledge of what is already known in research and practice. There are simple steps that can be taken to remove barriers to the development of these partnerships and to enhance the likelihood of them occurring. Four priorities are:

- **Extending Connected Communities funding models across research councils and other funding bodies** – in particular the two stage model that supports community partners and academics to collaborate at the earliest stages of research design as well as the ability to name and pay community partners as co-investigators.
- **Investing in research assistants** who often carry the relationships, deep knowledge and potential legacy of collaborative research projects – by committing to longer term employment opportunities and offering follow-on funding for project legacy activities.
- **Capacity building.** An understanding of the different traditions of collaborative research should form part of basic training for early career researchers, doctoral students and peer reviewers for research councils. National investments in research methods capacity building (e.g. NCRM, Doctoral Training Centres, Collaborative Doctoral Awards etc) should be required to demonstrate their expertise in this area alongside other arts, humanities and social science traditions.
- **University professional services** require training and support, as well as more agile and adaptable systems, to enable processes in HR, finance and legal departments that are adequate for partnership working with multiple small scale partners. Here, research councils, universities and professional bodies, such as the Association of Research Managers and Administrators, need to work closely together to build capacity and require the commissioning of adequate systems within the sector.

Recommendation 2: Recognise that time is to collaborative research what a supercomputer is to big data

The critical factor in developing high quality research partnerships is the time for individuals from universities and communities to meet, to develop ideas, to become familiar with the concerns, issues and expertise of the other, and to reframe and develop common agendas. This suggests the following three priorities:

- **Funding should enable collaboration over much longer time periods.** This may mean that research councils and other funders should consider significantly extending the duration of potential research projects (this does not necessitate raising overall budgets).
- **The balance between partnership investment and projects needs to be rethought.** There is a need to rebalance investment in partnership activities as compared with ‘project’ based activities. If time is critical infrastructure for these collaborations, then researchers need access to funds such as infrastructure accounts and impact acceleration awards for activities such as project design, partnership development and networking.
- **Reconnect teaching and research.** A critical overlooked mechanism for building sustained collaborations between universities and communities as well as for enhancing student learning, is to embed collaborative research into the teaching programme of universities. Opportunities for university and community partners to co-develop curriculum and pedagogy should be encouraged.

Recommendation 3: Take explicit steps to mitigate the risk of collaborative research partnerships actively intensifying existing inequalities

Not all community partners are the same. Large international charities and government organisations, vulnerable voluntary projects, social enterprises developing services for communities, are all very differently positioned in being able to participate in knowledge production. Universities are also products of existing social, cultural and economic inequalities and do not reflect the full diversity and talents of the UK population. Explicit efforts therefore need to be taken to ensure that the encouragement of collaborative research does not lead to the intensification of existing inequalities. This suggests the following four priorities:

Funders should develop a more nuanced lexicon of types of community partners and the forms of funding and support that might be offered to or requested from different groups. This new lexicon would encourage greater reflexivity about the increasing requests for match-funding on RCUK projects, and about the forms of resource that might be needed to support particularly economically excluded groups to participate in research projects.

- **Explicit efforts need to be made to understand and address the barriers that prevent different minority groups from contributing to research projects.** This will require both the development of new and better lines of communication between the ‘research community’ and more diverse public communities through active and intentional efforts; explicit strategies of small scale investment and training to build the capacity of minority groups to take a confident and active role in research activities; and the cessation of mechanisms such as residential research development workshops/sandpits as a mechanism for project generation.
- **Research investment needs to be considered in the wider context of the university as a whole.** This means examining the impact of the significant reduction in part time and adult education courses on the diversity of those entering universities and becoming staff members; it means examining the impact of the lack of diversity in faculty members on the willingness of different communities to trust and collaborate with universities.

Recommendation 4: Invest in civil society's public learning infrastructure

The Connected Communities Programme has demonstrated that there is a significant demand for public learning that enables individuals, community groups, activists, social enterprises, charities and civil society as a whole to reflect on the fundamental challenges, histories and futures of communities today. This demand does not always fit easily with the constraints and timescales of a research funding programme. That our civil society would be immeasurably enhanced in its capacities for development and social innovation by a more widespread capability to support such public learning, however, is not in doubt. This suggests the following urgent priority:

- **A new funding programme open to civil society organisations should be established, resourced by a combination of RCUK and the larger charitable trusts and foundations.** The aim of the fund would be to support civil society, third sector and community organisations to develop exploratory, non-instrumental research partnerships that allow them to address foundational and long term challenges and issues. Early stage collaboration with universities on substantive issues rather than as evaluation partners should be encouraged as part of such a fund, but such collaborations may equally concern the theoretical and foundational research development of networks of civil society organisations alone.

FURTHER INFORMATION

For further information - www.connected-communities.org

A copy of the full report is available to download here:

<https://connected-communities.org/index.php/creating-living-knowledge-report>



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