The DEMOCRACY NETWORK

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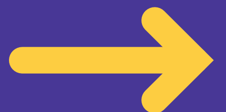
Collaboration for democratic change

A GUIDE FOR PRACTITIONERS AND ACADEMICS



DEMOCRACY UNDER PRESSURE

Democracy in the UK is increasingly under pressure. A diverse and growing movement is building to help renew and protect democracy, made up of people who want to mobilise, campaign and gain more influence over the direction of our future. One hopeful sign is the interest amongst democracy practitioners and academics to collaborate, to realise democratic and broader social change. Collaboration promises creativity and innovation in meeting the democratic challenges we face.

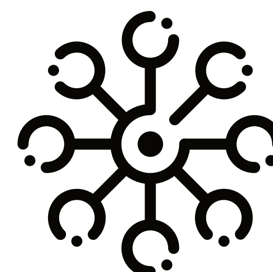
Both groups bring their own skills and experience to the collaboration. Academics have specialist research training, enabling them, for example, to deepen understanding of challenges we face and evaluate the effectiveness of interventions. Practitioners from civil society and the third sector have unrivalled experience of working closely with communities, giving them valuable expertise in how policy works on the ground.

Many practitioners and academics are motivated to collaborate. But often, they don't know how to get started, what successful collaboration looks like, or how best to sustain relationships. This Guide aims to help overcome this challenge. Here, we summarise the findings of a participatory research project that explored how collaboration works, when and how it goes wrong, and goes right. We offer suggestions for how future collaboration could work best.

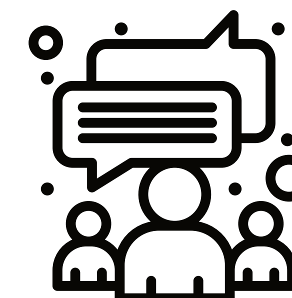
This is not the last word on this issue. It is the first step in developing a set of coherent resources that academics and practitioners can all contribute to and use. Hopefully it will inspire more practitioners and academics to try collaboration for democratic and social change; so that we can all work towards a thriving democracy.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

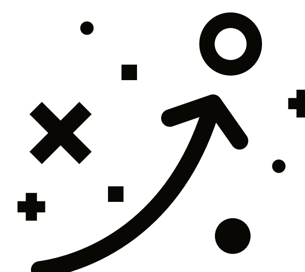
TOP TIPS FOR SUCCESSFUL COLLABORATION



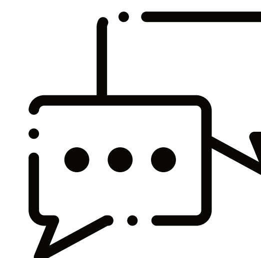
1 RELATIONSHIPS FIRST



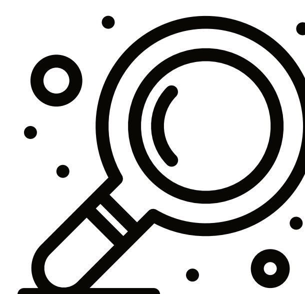
2 FIND SHARED VALUES AND GOALS



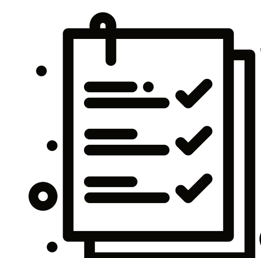
3 BUILD ON EACH OTHER'S STRENGTHS



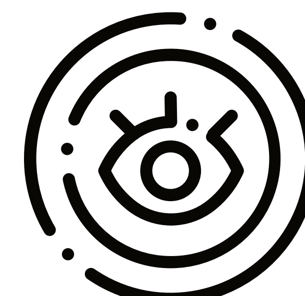
4 EMBRACE THE AWKWARD CONVERSATIONS



5 CRITIQUE POWER IMBALANCES



6 BE TRANSPARENT AND REALISTIC



7 BE YOUR OWN ADVOCATE

1

RELATIONSHIPS FIRST

Collaborative work between academics and practitioners is more complicated than everyday work within an organisation, or between organisations within the same sector. It takes time to feel comfortable with each other so that you can be honest and open about challenges as they arise. So, spend time getting to know each other. It's worth it - and it's a form of collaboration in its own right.

2

FIND SHARED VALUES AND GOALS

Identifying shared values with collaborators can help build mutual respect and understanding. Once that bond is made, it becomes easier to work towards shared goals for mutual benefit. Clarifying shared values and goals will help to sustain your collaborative work through inevitable ups and downs.

3

BUILD ON EACH OTHER'S STRENGTHS

Collaboration across sectors involves recognising one another's superpowers, even when this isn't within your own comfort zone. Practitioners tend to spend more time on problem-solving, are often closer to lived experience and have more insight into how democracy works in the 'real world'. Academics have in-depth knowledge of research in their field of interest and have received specialist training that enables critical and rigorous analysis of often complex democratic issues. Recognising and complementing each other's strengths, and being honest about our own knowledge and skill gaps, helps collaboration to be effective and impactful.

4

EMBRACE THE AWKWARD CONVERSATIONS

What each party seeks to achieve in any collaboration should be clear from the start. Everyone should feel the project will meet their needs. Don't be afraid to discuss specific outputs and outcomes from the project. Raise these questions early on, surfacing any tensions or issues and revisit them as projects can change over time. The collaborators should make sure that one partner's needs from the project are not outweighing the others'.

5

CRITIQUE POWER IMBALANCES

Analyse power dynamics together. Who has the most power and influence in shaping this collaboration? Whose wider interests are being served through this work? Who is having less say over the project's direction? Openness between each party over these big questions is crucial. Done well, a collaboration which is open and conscious of these questions can have an impact beyond itself - even contributing to the wider rebalancing of uneven professional and social power dynamics. It's worth doing, but can be hard, as honest self-reflection can be uncomfortable. Real change comes when we look beyond our personal or organisational self-interest.

6

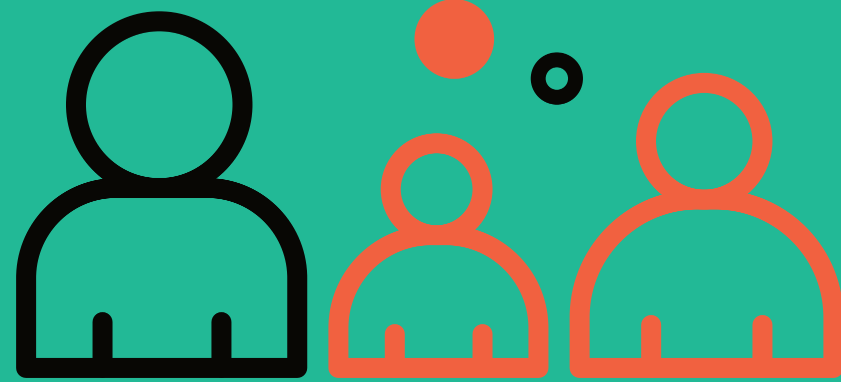
BE TRANSPARENT AND REALISTIC

We all have big ideas about how to strengthen democracy and make our society more just and fairer. But over-committing is a big risk. Both parties should be realistic and transparent about the resources and capacity they can commit to a project. It's better to succeed with a modest project than to over-commit to unrealistic targets and end up disheartened and disillusioned. Building up collaborations slowly through smaller projects can also help everyone gain the confidence and experience needed to succeed in bigger initiatives.

7

BE YOUR OWN ADVOCATE

Be a champion of collaborative work. Academics should share the connections they've made with colleagues, highlighting where collaborative work can feed into their institution's broader aims. More senior individuals with more power and influence within their institutions should take responsibility for promoting collaboration and making the case for resources to support such activities. For academics, make the case for impact, knowledge exchange and public engagement to be integrated into workload models and recognised as part of promotion processes. For practitioners, build in time for advocating and communicating the benefits of working with academics to your wider sector, make sure that your costs are adequately covered in grant applications and plan for practical outcomes to emerge from collaborations.



INTRODUCTION

ABOUT THIS GUIDE

A set of core values motivated the creation of this Guide. They are shared by the team that led the project and those practitioners and academics who co-created the Guide in workshops and interviews.

- We want to work with others to achieve change for the benefit of our democracy and society.
- We insist on mutual respect, dialogue and trust.
- We are willing to listen and learn from each other.
- We appreciate the value of different forms of knowledge and experience.
- We need collaborations to benefit (or at minimum not harm or exploit) all parties involved and wider society.
- We believe that the democratic crisis can be addressed from multiple perspectives and across different sectors of society.
- We welcome the challenge of addressing entrenched power dynamics, both social and professional.

WHERE DID THE GUIDE COME FROM?

This Guide has been commissioned by the Democracy Network, which aims to develop a trusted, strong, diverse and well-functioning network to share information, build capacity and expand the collective influence of the UK democracy sector. One ambition of the Network is to foster effective collaboration between practitioners and academics. We want to make sure those collaborations have the best chance of success. This Guide is a first step by the Network to make that a reality.

The Guide itself is an example of collaboration. It's a collaborative effort between a small core team of practitioners and academics from Involve, the Democracy Network, the University of Southampton and the Centre for the Study of Democracy at the University of Westminster. It has been supported by a small grant from the University of Westminster.

The Guide is based on key insights from 15 interviews, 2 co-design workshops and 2 rounds of crowd-sourced feedback from a range of academics and practitioners (more details on methodology at the end of the Guide). It explores and offers practical advice on how best to build, sustain and navigate cross-sectoral collaboration.

This Guide is not comprehensive, or the final say on collaboration. Our aim is to encourage productive conversations and action on how best to collaborate to meet the challenges facing our democracy today.

WHO IS THIS GUIDE FOR?

The Guide is principally for practitioners and academics who have a desire to work together to rejuvenate and strengthen democracy in the UK. For the purpose of the guide, we have divided them as two different audiences, though in reality it is more like a spectrum.

We understand practitioners to be those working within civil society and the third sector.

We understand academics to generally be employed in universities.

However, there are many ways to work on democracy. Think tanks or private sector consultancies may employ researchers whose work straddles academic and practitioner activities. Some researchers who collate evidence around democracy push forward democratic innovation, or sit within local, regional or national government

institutions. Some work as freelancers in a number of different contexts. Some individuals may be combining academic research with other practitioner work or consulting, so may identify as both practitioners and academics. Practitioners and academics may inhabit different roles at different times in their careers.

Both practitioners and academics may be working on issues such as citizenship education, community development, voter mobilisation, representation of politically marginalised groups, democratic innovations, deliberative and participatory democracy, etc.

The Guide is primarily aimed at supporting practitioners and academics in civil society, academia and the private sector, but it may well be of interest to public officials working in local and national government and funding bodies. The values and ways of working we discuss may help foster collaborations with public authorities and may help funding bodies design and support collaborative funding calls.

In short, the Guide is for anyone interested in collaboration to improve democracy, but will hopefully be particularly useful for those with less experience of collaboration and to help academics and practitioners understand one another better. To sustain and enhance our democracy, we need to foster different types of cross-sectoral collaborations aimed at social and political change.

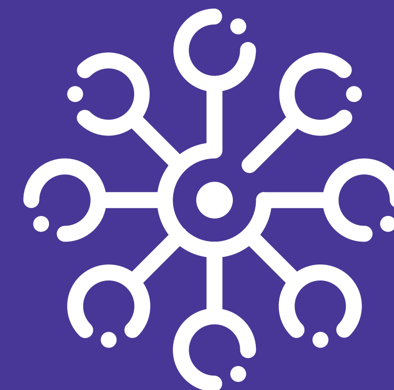
WHY DO WE NEED THIS GUIDE NOW?

If you are reading this, you will probably recognise that democracy in the UK and elsewhere is under serious stress. While crises such as the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, climate breakdown and endemic racism put pressure on democracy they also present opportunities for transformative change. Shaping the future of our country cannot be left to a small number of powerful interests. If those who have a deep commitment to democratic values do not play an active and coordinated role, democratic institutions and processes will fail to represent public interests and respond to the complex needs of our communities.

One potential driver of change is collaborations across sectors. Numerous practitioners work on the frontline of democratic change from community to national and international levels. Similarly, many academics wish to use their skills and expertise to improve democratic practice. However, we don't always know how to work together in mutually beneficial ways. Practitioners and academics are often suspicious of each other and unsure how to develop effective collaborations.

Some great collaborations are already happening - but significant opportunities and appetite exist for further and deeper collaborations, as we heard at the workshops and interviews that informed this Guide.

But as one workshop participant argues, what is needed is a culture shift, with academics and practitioners stepping out of their silos and comfort zones to relate to each other as individuals with shared values. The academics who engaged with us strongly agreed that those wishing to pursue collaborative projects with practitioners often face disincentives, and further reform is necessary within academia to encourage this kind of work.



TYPES OF COLLABORATION

Collaborations between academics and practitioners can come in all shapes and sizes. The best collaborative partnerships are built up over time. Smaller collaborations can help to build the trust and mutual understanding needed for larger, more ambitious projects, but are also valuable in their own right. Below we introduce some of the different forms that collaboration can take, starting with the simplest.

1 CONVERSATIONS ABOUT SHARED VALUES AND INTERESTS

Sharing ideas over a coffee or a Zoom call can be a way of building mutual trust and an opportunity for learning. Identifying shared values, motivations and interests can help build lasting bonds and break down common misconceptions about each other's professions. One of the researchers on this project, who is currently doing his PhD, identified a practitioner organisation that was aligned with his goals of promoting collective action amongst democracy organisations. He reached out and through an initial informal Zoom call about shared interests began working with the organisation. Eventually this led to participation in the project team that has produced this Guide. It was the initial conversation about shared values and interests that was the first step.

2 SHARING RESOURCES AND INFORMATION

Academics and practitioners have access to different resources and information that can be valuable to the other party. Collaborations can be based on sharing these valuable assets. For example, one practitioner we interviewed told us about how their organisation was planning to compile a dataset of MPs' voting records in Parliament. While on Twitter, he saw that an academic had used a similar dataset in a journal article. The practitioner reached out and the academic was happy to share the dataset, saving a lot of time and forming a new connection. A similar example saw a practitioner organisation reach out to an academic to help them write a briefing that was in the academic's area of expertise.

In both cases, the practitioner organisations saved significant time and resources and the academics are able to show that their work has social impact. Sharing of resources and information is a form of collaboration in its own right, but is also a way of building mutual understanding and trust for other types of collaboration.

3 SPENDING TIME IN EACH OTHER'S ORGANISATION

We all can have preconceptions about organisations that we have not experienced directly. Through taking the time to learn about and spend time in each other's organisations, we can build a deeper understanding of the contexts within which we work and broaden our perspectives on what is possible.

A practitioner gave an example of collaboration with a PhD researcher over the course of 2 years. The researcher spent much of the first year in the practitioner's office, learning how the organisation worked and adapted to new challenges. In exchange for the access, the researcher introduced the organisation to existing academic research relevant to its work, which is often hidden to practitioners. This process of mutual understanding built trust which made it much easier to organise the researcher's data collection in the second year.

4 ORGANISING WORKSHOPS AND OTHER EVENTS

Workshops and other events can provide vital opportunities to connect across sectors and strengthen our professional and personal relationships. These are opportunities for shared learning and can seed more extensive collaborations. A number of academics we spoke to have used their university's commitment to knowledge exchange to access space free-of-charge to hold collaborative events with practitioners - or in some cases to access specific funds to support co-created training workshops. One inexperienced direct action group worked with a sympathetic academic to organise workshops at the university, bringing together academics and more experienced campaigners to inform the development of their strategy.

5 SMALL PROJECTS BASED ON NO OR SMALL FUNDING POTS

We all know that things get done faster when there's funding. But collaboration does not necessarily need specific finance as long as all parties can bear the costs. This requires open conversations about what is possible. If a project begins without funding, part of being a good collaborator involves developing and sustaining a close understanding of the relevant funding landscape. No matter how small, it's always worth applying for funding to support collaborative work.

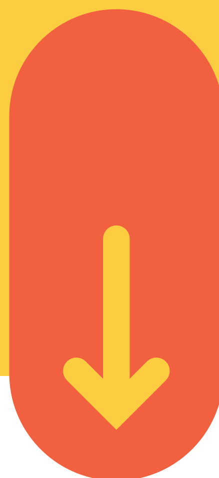
This Guide is one example! Our team had begun talking about this project, when one of us spotted a small funding call at his university to support participatory research projects with potential for social impact. It was enough to kick start the collaboration.

6 LARGE FUNDED PROJECTS

Large projects can have big impact (but then again, so can well-designed small ones!). It is the high profile collaborations that often get the headlines. One example is a pilot citizens' assembly in the UK that was a collaboration between academics and practitioners, funded by an academic research council. Since then the practitioner organisation has organised numerous assemblies at local and national level, often involving academics as expert leads. The initial pilot helped establish citizens' assemblies as an accepted model of public participation.

But sometimes we jump into big collaborative projects straight off because of the promise of impact. A number of our interviewees and participants had examples of large projects where their expectations were not met, and which had significant personal and professional costs. The danger is that we have not got to know our collaborators and that can cause problems if we misunderstand each others' motivations and interests. But when they work well, large projects can make a big difference.

UNDERSTANDING EACH OTHER



One of our interview questions was: **"What do you wish you knew when you began collaborations with academics/practitioners?"** A common response was that people wished they knew how the other sector worked. Different work styles, priorities and vocabulary can make collaborations difficult to get off the ground. Here, we offer some background information for academics and practitioners to better understand potential collaboration partners.

ARE ALL ACADEMICS THE SAME?

No. Academics come in all shapes and sizes. Each discipline, each university and each job role can have its specific expectations and work patterns that affect the time available for an academic to spend on research. Only a few academics have research-only contracts. Most have to balance teaching and administration along with research.

Available time for research will vary at different points in the year - especially when under pressure to mark exams! Different departments and universities have different views on collaboration, although the knowledge exchange and impact agendas (see Box 1) are raising the profile of these activities and opening up opportunities.

BOX 1
Impact agendas in Universities

Many academics are paying more attention to the social impact of their work and so should be more open to collaboration with practitioners. This is not just a personal agenda of those academics who have a strong sense of responsibility given the social and ecological challenges we face, but the result of a number of drivers.

- **Research impact.** Universities receive a block grant for research from their funding council based on regular assessment of a department's outputs (e.g., publications), impact and environment. In the latest Research Evaluation Framework (REF) 2021, 15% of the final result (and hence funding) was based on impact case studies that provide evidence of the social and economic impact of research.
- **Knowledge exchange.** A relatively new development requires universities to complete the Knowledge Exchange Framework (KEF) which attempts to capture the way that academics work with different partners (including voluntary and third sector organisations) to ensure knowledge can be used for the benefit of the economy and society, ranging from public events to the development of new products.
- **Research funding.** Many academic research funders are increasingly interested in supporting collaboration and impact. For example, the Economic and Social Research Council allows up to 30% of collaborators' costs to be allocated to non-academics.
- **Corporate social responsibility.** Many universities trumpet their social responsibilities, from their commitment to UN Sustainable Development Goals through to the communities within which they are located.

Universities are beginning to recognise the economic and reputational value of impact and invest resources, support and time. The extent to which institutions, departments and individual academics embrace these emerging agendas varies. They can be undermined by senior colleagues and managers who do not buy into the agenda. But most universities now have impact and/or KE officers, academic managers have to account for activities in these areas and (limited) internal funds are often available to support this sort of work. Academics and practitioners can exploit these agendas to facilitate collaboration!

Just like with any job, the seniority of an academic matters a lot too. Whether an academic is at the beginning of their career (either as a PhD researcher or an Early Career Researcher) or is a permanent member of a university department can have an impact on their capacity to engage. More senior colleagues should be able to make the case for collaboration, but may also be tied up with management responsibilities. PhD researchers in principle have more time as they are concentrating primarily on research. Much depends on whether they are funded or whether they have to work to support their studies - and they have to complete their theses!

Academic jobs can vary in contract lengths. While some more senior academics are on permanent contracts and have years to dedicate to a topic of their choosing, many junior academics are on fixed-term contracts as short as one year. Time-constraints relating to contracts and funding consistently appeared in our interviews as reasons for collaborations ending. Building relationships on long-term goals and values can help relationships outlast these short-term cycles.

WHAT ABOUT PRACTITIONERS?

Practitioners are an equally diverse group - perhaps more so. They work in different types of organisations. In charities, all work done and time spent will need to lead to tangible demonstration of impact on their mission. Their progress at achieving their mission, or overall aim, is then reported to the Charity Commission, their funders and the world at large. This means practitioners in charities need to prioritise the most focused, impactful activities. Other organisations in the 'third sector' (as opposed to the private or public sectors) include community interest companies (CICs), co-operatives, 'think-tanks' and 'do-tanks'. These organisations are not geared towards profit but instead pursue social and political change through practical projects or both. Some organisations can include a profit making arm, or a requirement to create profit to support social aims, and this needs to be understood and respected within the collaboration.

The purpose, or mission, of practitioner organisations can differ greatly. Organisations may exist to serve the interests of their community, like a religious institution, or to further a particular political cause, or to produce research on particular issues. The purpose of the organisation will shape the type of collaborations that practitioners can engage in; and will affect the type of outputs the organisation is constrained to produce.

A large grant can change a small organisation suddenly as it rapidly regears to new priorities. And, if funding stops, this can put pressure on cashflow and dramatically reduce expectations of impact. Sudden changes, like a snap election, government reshuffle or unexpected policy shift, can affect the day to day operation of the organisation.

Practitioner organisations can vary significantly in size which shapes their capacity (the number and size of projects they can pursue at the same time) and the resources it has available (the time, money and other assets that it can expend). Job roles can vary widely, with small organisations having fewer people performing multiple roles, while larger organisations may have whole departments and teams responsible for some areas of work. As with academics, the seniority and experience of the contact can matter a lot when it comes to getting work off the ground.

The variations across academic and practitioner contexts means it is important to take time to understand a potential partner's situation in order to break down preconceptions, build mutual understanding and set realistic goals and objectives.

BOX 2
Impact for practitioners

Depending on whether the organisation is a charity, a consultancy, a commercial service provider, or some combination, practitioners will need to demonstrate different kinds of impact, though they are often less restricted than academics in the ways they monitor and evaluate these.

- **Toward strategic objectives.** Many organisations will have a theory of change which they use to identify the outputs they need to create through their work and the outcomes they want those to achieve. They will need to prioritise work which delivers those as closely as possible, and justify this to stakeholders. This may mean that a collaboration which has a broad purpose and can benefit society in the long term might also need to have immediate and tangible benefits built in for the constituencies the practitioners work to support (e.g. particular social groups, local areas).
- **Toward commercial targets.** Every piece of work will have an opportunity cost, and some practitioners will need to make commercial decisions about what to go for.
- **According to how funders have specified impacts should be reported.** In a grant-funded collaboration, practitioners and academics may both need to identify ways to report impact which work with the strict requirements of feedback to grant funders.

BARRIERS TO COLLABORATION

The interviews and workshops uncovered key, interconnected themes which arose time and again as barriers to successful collaborations. Academics and practitioners often want to collaborate, yet collaborations can be difficult, and at worst they generate an unproductive cycle that can lead to frayed relationships and inequitable outcomes.

AN UNPRODUCTIVE CYCLE OF COLLABORATION

Incentive structures differ

Despite often sharing values and interests, academics and practitioners pursue differing objectives in their work - which can pull plans in different directions.

Priorities in tension

Individuals may enter collaborations with only their objectives in mind, not reflecting on how the overall project helps both parties. Wanting to be involved, partners may commit, but the project is not designed to meet both parties's needs.

Timescales

Practitioners tend to want project outcomes on a tighter scale than academics. If one collaborator's needs are prioritised, the other may not get their desired outcome on time, if at all.

Capacity

Differences in the institutional and project-specific capacity between collaborators can produce power imbalances, hinder honest discussions about priorities and timescales, preventing a collaboration from reaching its full potential

Poor results

The project then not meet the needs of both parties, therefore being more extractive than collaborative. One side, or even both, are discouraged from future collaborations and power imbalances are reinforced.

INCENTIVE STRUCTURES SHAPE DIFFERENT PRIORITIES

"It's all about the 'case for promotion'. Our incentive structure does not leave much time to spend on building relationships with practitioners" Academic

"We make our living from telling a passionate story about what we do. We need a compelling narrative not complexity" Practitioner

Academics and practitioners have different incentive structures. The pressures they are under in their roles shape their priorities and what they wish to get out of a collaboration. If each other's motivations aren't understood and made transparent, it can lead to one party investing time, energy and other resources into a project that does not deliver their expected outcome. We heard too many stories where a collaboration ended up working towards one party's objectives without sufficiently pursuing a shared agenda. Understanding your collaborating partner's incentive structure can make identifying shared goals easier.

Academics are often judged by their universities (and their peers) on the quality and number of their publications (normally in the form of journal articles and books) and the research funding they attract. More experienced academics stress that Early Career Researchers need to be aware of how to carry out collaborative projects without harming their chances of future employment and progression. The impact, public engagement and knowledge exchange agendas that have emerged in universities in recent years are key here (see Box 1 on page 13) and can be exploited to the advantage of academics wishing to engage in collaborative activities.

Practitioners are much more driven by ensuring impact, for example on the communities or stakeholders that they serve, and can find it hard to understand the system of academic publishing and why academics must jump through so many hoops while doing their work. Practitioners with less experience are often unsure what they can bring to collaborations.

PRIORITIES COME INTO TENSION: EXPLOITATION CAN BE THE RESULT

"Collaboration is not a one-way street. We need to know what we can get out of it too. We need a frank discussion early on" Practitioner

"I did many collaborative projects that I enjoyed, but harmed my career because I couldn't use anything from them" Academic

Unintentionally, those seeking to collaborate can do so without reflecting on what they are bringing to the table and the demands they are placing on partners. This can lead to people overextending, offering free time, expertise or resources for other people's projects without receiving anything in return.

Practitioners are often concerned that they will be used for academics' own interests and co-opted into academic projects. They also worry that academic outputs are often hidden behind expensive paywalls. Everyone with experience of collaborations has a story to tell about when they invested time and energy into a collaborative project without getting anything out of it. These experiences taught them to be upfront early on with their aims and objectives - and available resources and capacity. These honest conversations are key to ensuring mutual benefit and building trust.

It is essential to undertake a power analysis, making sure that one party is not taking advantage of another. If not, the work can become extractive - exploiting one or other side. The principle of mutual benefit - ensuring that both parties are benefitting - is a good way of addressing this issue. Benefits needn't mean a tangible output, one party might be benefiting in terms of valuable experience or training.

Extractive collaborations can happen the other way round too. Particularly early in their careers, academics recounted stories of helping out with practitioners' projects that had no relevance to their area of work or a tangible output for them. Although favours are a great way of building trust, all partners should be weary of committing considerable amounts of time for no tangible gain.

TIMESCALES CAN CLASH

"We need to just get it on the internet. That can be difficult when the academic needs months of processing time for the output" Practitioner

"I remember being told to evaluate a project in 2 weeks but it seemed more like 2-months of work, which I just didn't have time for" Academic

Both academics and practitioners are often short on time and under a lot of work stress. Collaborations can fizzle out or become tense if there's a lack of honest discussions about expectations and deadlines for the output or outcome of a project.

Practitioners often need to prioritise efficiency, wanting to see the results of their project without delay so as to have the best chance of impact on practice. Speed is often a requirement of funding.

Academic articles can take months or years to produce, be accepted by a journal and then end up behind paywalls. While journal articles and books are necessary for academic progression, experienced academics consistently recommend that it is possible to create multiple types of outputs from collaborative research that are available at different times and targeted at different audiences. Non-academic outputs and outcomes that have social and political impact are becoming valuable within academia.

CAPACITY BECOMES TIGHT

"It's often difficult to find money to pay practitioners within collaborations, which means you have to offer favours that add to your workload" Academic

We get so many requests for collaboration from well-meaning Masters and PhD students, but we simply can't offer time to each of them to help them with their projects." Practitioner

Both academics and practitioners are often time-poor and need to work as efficiently as they can. Until they're fully funded, collaborative projects are often difficult to prioritise, meaning they must be juggled alongside other responsibilities. If honest discussions aren't had about the time available for a certain project, it may fail.

One academic recalled how, early in their career, they undermined relationships with practitioners because they over-committed. With the best intentions of being helpful, we can commit to deadlines and targets that we will struggle to meet and which aren't good for individual well-being. One example is a PhD student who agreed to write a report for a practitioner organisation, which ended up taking way longer than they had expected. They then had to rush through a PhD assignment so that they could finish the report. This left them feeling burnt out and made them think twice about collaborating again.

Practitioners can be overwhelmed with requests for collaboration, or simply 'help' from academics - often Masters or PhD students asking for practitioners to complete surveys or undertake interviews. One practitioner summarised the situation well, when she said that she'd love to be able to help with all of the interesting projects, but each hour of their time at their organisation had to be accounted for. If proposals for collaboration don't align with a practitioner's core objectives, they may not get a response if the capacity to help out doesn't exist. Academics and research students should not take this personally! That said, the approach academics make is critical. Rather than sending a cold email with a request to complete a survey, better to reach out to practitioners with a request to explore

potential collaborative outputs from shared research interests. It is also worth assessing whether the kind of survey you propose to send out has been sent a hundred times before; especially in the case of Masters students, the evidence they seek to gain from practitioners may actually have been already collated recently somewhere else, and it shows good understanding of the sector to not reinvent the wheel.

POOR RESULTS - AND DISCOURAGEMENT FOR THE FUTURE

"We put a lot of time into one project, but the main output was a journal article. The academic did write a report for us, but we ended up having to re-write it" Practitioner

"I signed up to a project that I was really interested in, but I ended up having to rush it because I struggled to find the time alongside my main commitments" Academic

One of the main risks in collaborations is poor results. At their best, collaborative projects utilise the best skills and knowledge of both parties involved, resulting in an outcome better than either could achieve on their own. If the challenges laid out above aren't sufficiently planned for, however, the results can be worse than if the project was just done by one of the parties alone.

This risk of poor results demonstrates the importance of openness and trust in the early stages of the collaborative process. When that initial connection is made, it is key to let your collaborators know of your key commitments and deadlines. Although we all have plenty of interest and are dedicated to our cause, we are also very often time-poor! Planning projects that fit around current commitments can help preserve the relationship and ensure better results when the deadlines arrive.

PRACTICAL ADVICE

Collaborations are worth doing! Barriers can be overcome or at least mitigated if we are aware of them - and respond accordingly. Innovation and creativity can emerge when we take the risk of working across boundaries and sectors. Below we offer some practical steps that can be taken to navigate the challenges that will often emerge.

ADVICE FOR PRACTITIONERS AND ACADEMICS

- Having awkward conversations early on and throughout the collaboration will help relationships become open and honest. Transformative change will be more likely when collaborators confront power dynamics within the collaboration and how they are affecting the project.
- Begin with shorter, less stressful projects to get used to each other and to build mutual trust.
- Evaluate as you go - working with one another should be a learning process. Even if this is very informal, have 'wash up' meetings about the working relationship as well as the content of the collaboration.
- Make an effort to build support for the collaboration within your organisation. This can mobilise further resources that can help projects gain momentum.

ADVICE FOR ACADEMICS

- If you are senior and have some power and influence in your institution, push impact and knowledge exchange agendas at every opportunity, including ensuring that these activities are adequately resourced, integrated into workload models and recognised as part of promotion processes.
- If you are an early career researcher or a junior academic, seek out champions within or outside your institution who have undertaken the type of collaborative work that interests you and who can offer advice. Seek out the staff (academic or professional) responsible for impact and knowledge exchange in your institution to better understand the internal resources and support available for collaborative work.
- Build the argument for collaborative work by highlighting the importance of impact and public engagement to the Research Excellence Framework (REF) and Knowledge Exchange Framework (KEF). Get facts and figures about your university and department's performance (relative to others) to drum up support for collaborative work.
- Bring relevant practitioners into discussions about research projects at the earliest possible stage so that they can be designed with their needs and interests in mind. Don't just think of practitioners as objects of research or as delivery partners. Collaboration in research design can mean that research projects are more likely to achieve social change as well as academic outputs. It is not a zero-sum game.
- Make the case for paying practitioners from smaller organisations to attend meetings, recognising their more limited resources. Even if you do not get it the first time, keep badgering as things change.
- Prioritise practitioners' needs, experiences and knowledge (and those of the communities they serve), rather than simply framing a project according to academic conventions and incentives. This will ensure collaborations further democratic practice as defined by practitioners, rather than only furthering academic debates.
- Academics should foreground humility. Practitioners – in particular those from more marginalised communities – are best placed to understand their own needs. Create contexts within which they are empowered to shape collaborations, not just act as recipients of information or help.

ADVICE FOR PRACTITIONERS

- Be careful. Just because universities talk the talk does not mean that academics will always be able and know how to bend incentive structures to ensure productive collaborations.
- Find the right academic. Ask your contacts to recommend. Search the internet, look at conference proceedings, papers, webinars, and see what different academics, departments and institutes are focusing on and putting out in the public domain. Think about how your overall mission fits with their area of interest.
- Take advantage of key phrases like social responsibility, impact, public engagement and knowledge exchange (see Box 1 on page 13) in your dealings with individual academics and their institutions. Not all academics are fully aware of these agendas or the resources that may be available within their institutions to support collaboration. Suggest they look into it!
- Think creatively - there may be academics who do not think of themselves as working on democracy whose expertise could be very valuable. For example those working in data science where there are linkages with civic tech.
- Don't sell yourself short. You have knowledge, experience and contacts that are invaluable to academics. Integrating practitioners' perspectives can only improve the quality of academic research.
- Read the academic work in your area if you have the time - or at least the abstracts! Don't be afraid to ask an academic for a copy of a paper that is hidden behind a paywall. Challenge an academic to explain their ideas in everyday English.
- Take advantage of facilities. Universities have great spaces for events that a friendly academic should be able to access for free if it is a collaborative initiative.
- Make sure costs are covered. It is not always possible for academics to find funds to support your engagement in the development of projects, but don't be afraid to ask. The more we ask, the more likely it is that resources will be available. It is a sign of recognition. Make sure your costs are fully covered in grant applications.

WHAT NEXT

JOIN THE DEMOCRACY NETWORK

The Democracy Network has recently been launched by Involve, with funding from the Joseph Rowntree Reform Trust. The Network seeks to bring together people passionate about democracy from across the UK to support collaboration and build collective power and influence. Everyone can join, just email DemocracyNetwork@involve.org.uk to find out more.

FIND POTENTIAL COLLABORATORS

The Democracy Network has regular meet ups and events where you can network with like minded individuals from across different sectors who are committed to democratic change. Alternatively, start looking on your own. To find academics, search for recent research on the topic that your organisation focuses on. Most academics will be delighted to hear from someone doing practical work in their area of interest. To find practitioners, just search for third sector organisations that are dedicated to the topic that you research. There will likely be a contact email or a social media profile that you can use to make contact.

REACH OUT AND BEGIN COLLABORATIONS

Reach out and begin conversations. Collaborations always start with an initial conversation. Remember the content of this Guide: read-up on their work or organisation and reflect on how your values and objectives align with theirs. As one interviewee said, relate to collaborative partners as fellow citizens, not as potential business partners. It's likely you share a common passion if you are working in the same area. That passion can help collaborations get off the ground.

METHODOLOGY

Step 1: Callout and survey

An original survey was circulated around the Centre for Democracy and Involve's extensive network of practitioners (and some academics) working on democracy-related topics across the UK. An academic version of the survey was circulated amongst Political Studies Association specialist groups and various PhD study groups. The surveys not only collected data on experiences with collaboration but also invited individuals to take part in the various stages of the project.

Step 2: Exploratory interviews

16 interviews were carried out with a diverse mixture of academics, practitioners and individuals with experience in both sectors to explore in more detail experiences with collaborations across the academic-practitioner boundary.

Step 3: Scoping document

A scoping document was written by the core team. The document organised the interview data into 5 key 'barriers to collaboration' and was circulated to participants in Workshop 1.

Step 4: Workshop 1

A 2.5 hour long workshop was held with around 20 academics and practitioners who had responded to the surveys and/or been interviewed for Stage 1 and 2. The workshop discussed the key themes from the interviews and proposed content to go in the Guide.

Step 5: Draft of the Guide

The core team produced the first draft of the Guide based on insights from Workshop 1.

Stage 6: Workshop 2

15 academics and practitioners, some of whom had been involved in previous stages of the process, took part in a second 2.5 hour online workshop to discuss the first draft of the Guide and suggest improvements.

Step 7: Second draft

The core team collated feedback and revised the draft Guide

Step 8. Final consultation

The second version of the Guide was shared with collaborators for final comment

Step 9. Final revisions and publication

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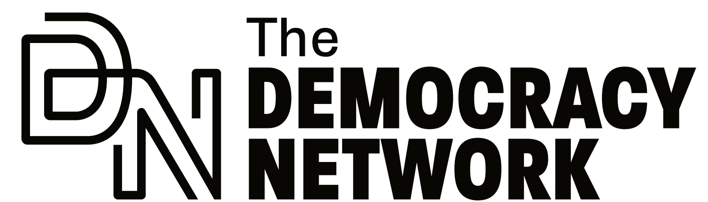

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The
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