

# **Greater than the sum of its parts: What works in sustaining community-university partnerships**

**Susanne Martikke, Andrew Church and Angie Hart  
Executive Summary September 2015**

## **1. Introduction: Aims and definitions**

Susanne Martikke is the lead author of the report and is a researcher at Greater Manchester Centre for Voluntary Organization (GMCVO) who is a founding member of the UK-wide Community Partner Network and runs its own Greater Manchester Third Sector Research Network.

GMCVO was approached by Professors Angie Hart and Andrew Church from the University of Brighton to undertake jointly the research that informs this report. The study is part of a larger ESRC-funded research project into collaborative research between universities and communities, *Imagine* ([www.imaginecommunity.org.uk](http://www.imaginecommunity.org.uk)).

The aims for the research were to:

- Examine the key features of Community University Partnerships (CUPs) Identify the degree to which they have developed into Communities of Practice (COPs).
- Identify how the partners learn from each other in CUPs.
- Critically explore the extent to which universities are hostile or enabling working environments for CUP working.
- Examine partner views on the future of CUPs and understand the processes that make CUPs resilient in the longer term.

A CUP is defined as a relationship in which anyone from the community who is not at the university collaborates in some shape or form with someone from the university who is acting as a member of the university, and not as a citizen in some other capacity. In this report, we are taking this fairly wide definition and looking at what characterises such partnerships, how they benefit partners, the challenges they face and to what the future might hold for this type of partnership work.

A COP is defined as a group of people who interact regularly because they have a passion for a shared interest. The aim of their interaction is developing knowledge around this common concern.

## **2. Data sources and analysis**

The study gathered data in the following ways:

- Qualitative interviews with university staff and community partners from 23 CUPs across England and Scotland
- Three focus groups with community partners
- Memory stories provided by community partners and academic staff involved in CUPs
- Access to data from ongoing research about Brighton University's Community University Partnership Project and the Future of CUPs

The sample for the interviews was recruited partly based on pre-existing knowledge within GMCVO, but the overwhelming majority of interviewees got in touch in response to a call posted on the GMCVO website. From this initial list a selection was made that reflected different types of partnerships in different areas of the country. All data was coded using the computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software Nvivo.

## **3. Key findings**

CUP working between universities and local statutory or voluntary agencies is a recent and growing expression of an overall trend towards partnership working. Whereas universities already have tried and tested systems of collaborating with for-profit businesses and industry, the situation with regard to collaborations with not-for-profit organizations and communities is still less developed.

Since 2006, when the Higher Education Funding Council for England included the desirability of partnerships with statutory and voluntary players in its strategic plan, there has been a notable drive towards public engagement and CUP working. Universities are somewhat caught between responding to this agenda of becoming more responsive to communities and increasing pressure to perform as businesses and deliver other agendas linked to teaching and research.

Not least as a result of the economic downturn, the financial bottom-line has also become more important to community partner organizations, which in turn affects their ability to engage in partnership working. Community partners' capacity is increasingly stretched, as they are trying to address more community needs with fewer resources. This means they have less capacity to work in CUPs unless this collaboration generates resources.

CUP working usually happens on top of academics' and community partners' day-to-day duties. Therefore, time and capacity constraints present a major obstacle to CUPs that are not funded in their own right. Funding regimes are not conducive to promoting fair and inclusive practices of CUP working due to short lead-in times and short-term funding horizons.

Despite the above, there is a plethora of CUP work going on, both funded and unfunded. Moreover, CUPs themselves were often cast as a resilient move for a community or a voluntary

organization, for example by boosting community partner organizations' ability to access resources for service delivery and by securing the support of academics to advocate on behalf of the community. Among statutory participants in our study, CUP working was seen as one way of navigating through difficult economic times by pooling resources.

However, a perceived need for change was also articulated by both academics and community partners, in order to enable CUP working and unlock its full potential. Inflexible bureaucratic structures in universities and lack of research-mindedness in community partner organizations are common obstacles to CUP working.

Those interviewed for the study mainly saw changes as needed in future in universities, where an ideal future scenario would be that CUP working was seen as normal and was embedded across the institution, leading to universities involving communities in shaping research agendas and design.

At this point in time CUP working is rarely fully embedded in university settings in the UK. In a university context, individual academic leadership in CUP working often compensates for lack of organizational support and buy-in. Although there are examples of institutional leadership among the universities in this study, it is often challenging to translate high-level commitment into practical realities at an operational level.

In this context, personal relations that have a chance to develop over time are key for successful CUPs, because they enable trust to be built, power dynamics to be acknowledged and honest communication about respective organizational constraints, thus minimising the disruptive potential of obstacles that might occur. Overcoming difficulties together forges trust and builds partnership.

In our sample there seemed to be an association between trust and the ability to appreciate one's partner in CUP working on a more personal level. There was also a disregard for adopting an instrumental approach to CUPs. Instead of mutual instrumental gain, shared passion and motivation were emphasized. Successful CUPs appear to be always underpinned by mutual interests and benefits, but where there is a more personal relationship there appears to be more trust.

The findings of this study suggest that successful CUPs have a set of characteristics that include the following:

- Partners accept that partnership working is an ongoing learning experience.
- Partners manage to reframe differences into an opportunity, rather than an obstacle.
- Partners make an effort to become aware of power dynamics underlying their CUP and take practical steps to address these.
- Partners pay attention to the social aspect of the CUP, for example incorporate opportunities to interact socially into the activities of the CUP. This recognizes the

importance of those involved in CUPs getting on at a personal level in order to perform their roles successfully.

- Partners play to each other's strengths and acknowledge that equity and fairness in CUPs are compatible with different levels of involvement by different partners and, if applicable, varying levels of involvement over the course of a CUP.
- Partners choose a level of formality appropriate to their mission.

Adhering to principles of co-production was often seen as the gold standard of CUP working and one of the criteria that CUP partners referred to in order to set their own CUP apart from those of competitors. Although challenges remained in implementing co-production in practice, there was a recognition that co-production has benefits, such as:

- Ensuring that CUPs have mutual benefit
- Enhancing the impact and quality of research
- Generating appropriate and ethically sensitive research approaches
- Enabling practice-relevant outputs
- Securing buy-in and ownership by both partners and their respective stakeholders (i.e. organization, service users, wider community)

The extent to which CUPs are formalized varies widely. Although formalization and/or institutionalization can enhance legitimacy and act as a mechanism to draw resources into the CUP, study participants pointed out that due to the unpredictable nature of CUP working it is often best to gradually build the relationship by generating some quick wins and testing approaches on the way rather than becoming a specified formal cross-organizational partnership, or institutional structure at the start of a CUP.

CUPs certainly produce benefits at the individual and institutional level. Individual partners benefit professionally and personally from CUP working by getting access to their respective skills sets. Community partner organizations and universities have improved their ability to acquire resources through CUPs, saw reputational benefits and had access to wider networks with the associated new opportunities. CUP work also enabled both partners to offer more opportunities and better-quality services to students and service users.

The only area where there was no strong evidence for the benefit of CUP working in our sample was their impact on the community-at-large, although there was some indication that, as long as CUPs adhere to an ethos of co-production and mutual benefit, there is a chance that the community at large may benefit to varying degrees. This mirrors the difficulties with trying to evidence impact at this level in the Impact case studies that University's had to provide for the 2014 Research Excellence Framework (REF) that assessed the quality of research in all universities. Community partner organisations themselves also have plenty of experience with the limitations of evidencing impact in their own practice. Nevertheless, expectations have to be kept realistic and take into account the size and remit of the CUP.

An area for which there was some evidence in the study of impacts on the wider community was the ability of CUP working to generate outputs that help communities to re-discover their history and combat stigmatization and stereotyping.

In light of these benefits it would be desirable to inspire more people to champion the cause of CUP working. Although there were academics who are trying to pass on their expertise to future champions, in many cases, the expertise in CUP working resides in the individuals who are directly involved.

Partners in CUPs are not often given the time to reflect on their experiences. Therefore, a crucial precondition to enable embedding and sharing learning about how to make these partnerships work is not in place. In addition, both sides currently lack incentives to share their learning more widely: engaged academics often do not feel empowered enough by their organization to share learning and community partners are not adequately resourced to do so.

There is also a question to what extent CUP working can ever become a habitual way of working across sectors, unless it is adequately resourced across the board. Student placements are a readily recognized and common form of CUP. Our study showed that by hosting student placements community partner organizations become quite an important element of students' education, but are not always rewarded or recognized for this service. If public engagement principles were embedded in curricula across universities, leading to a high demand for student placements, it is not difficult to imagine that mechanisms would have to be found that resource this community contribution adequately, whilst preventing community partner organizations from being over-run by demand.

The blurring of boundaries between universities and communities are desirable especially in terms of sharing spaces and resources, but boundaries are also important to maintain complementary strengths in the future.

In light of the findings we suggest a series of recommendations for different sectors and groups of people.

#### **4. Recommendations for Community University Partnerships**

Establish expectations at the outset as much as possible whilst staying open for readjustments and continuous learning.

Be aware of how some funding sources restrict your ability to adjust over time. In some cases it might be better to stay as independent as possible from funding.

Check that funding allows for full cost recovery of each partners' involvement.

Make your assumptions explicit to build awareness of mutual constraints that might disrupt joint working.

Different cultures, skills sets and ways of working are what makes CUPs tick, so try to see them as assets rather than obstacles.

Consider the potential for small pieces of joint work to build trust and test approaches prior to more formal arrangements that establish the CUP within institutions.

Allow for the involvement of partners at different levels of intensity and regularity and be aware of the historical context of CUP working and issues such as research fatigue and the economic context (i.e. capacity constraints).

Reconceptualise CUPs on an ongoing basis, rather than as a one-off, as this enables CUPs to build on the investment partners have made into the relationship.

The impact of CUPs is a relatively under-researched subject, particularly with community partners leading the research.

Consider co-producing joint articles and reports about the impact of the CUP to give it a separate profile, and ensure that community partners lead this, or are appropriately included.

Make reflective time to embed learning with and from each other for the purpose of the partnership itself and to be able to share this with others in the field.

Ensure that the knowledge of CUP working does not only reside in individual partners themselves; otherwise your CUP's success will be dependent on this one individual.

## **5. Recommendations for Universities**

Consider the benefits universities stand to accrue as a result of their CUP working.

Be aware of the assets community partners bring to the table, rather than assuming that they are the only ones who benefit from CUP working.

Re-evaluate the value of student placements for the students, the university and voluntary organizations respectively in order to recognize their contributions appropriately.

Consider investment in CUP working as a business case and an opportunity to stay competitive.

University leaders need to implement the high-level rhetoric about public engagement across the entire university by supporting all staff accordingly.

Encourage the sharing of learning in CUP work across the institution, across disciplines and across the hierarchy.

Consider how CUP actions provide evidence of research impact and how impact is documented for the purposes of the REF in order to incentivize co-production through CUPs.

## **6. Recommendations for Research Funders**

Incorporate an evaluation/reflection component into the funding for CUP work.

Acknowledge the unpredictability and evolutionary nature of CUP working in funding regimes, rather than making funding regimes overly prescriptive.

Recognise the resource implications for developing CUPs in the first place and allow funded time for this, particularly for community partners as bid development is often not included as part of their core role.

## **7. Recommendations for Community Partners**

Networking is usually the best approach to find university partners for CUP working.

Be clear about how the CUP fits into the rest of your work and what it contributes to your mission.

With academics, the link to their work is often clearer and therefore the risk is not that high, but for community partners, whose resources are much more limited and mainly dedicated to service delivery, the risk of not linking the CUP to the core mission can be considerable.

Ensure that you have the support and buy-in of your organization to ensure that the CUP work can actually be of benefit to the organization in a broader sense.

Allocate capacity towards using the findings of any CUP research.

Manage expectations of stakeholders as to the potential impact of the CUP on the wider community.

Be conscious of the value of assets that you bring to the table. These may be in the form of contacts, reputation and expertise, among other things.

When hosting student placements organizations often become collaborators in students' educational journey. Do not host student placements simply in the expectation of gaining access to expertise. Expect to support the student.

In CUPs partners are from organizations with radically different deliverables. It is therefore highly important to think about how CUPs can benefit from these differences rather than viewing them as a hindrance.

Join the UK Community Partner Network (UKCPN) and make yourself aware of their resources so that you can get advice and support with your partnership from other community partners

## **8. Recommendations for Academic Partners**

Networking is usually the best approach to find community partners for CUP working. Voluntary sector development agencies are a good first point of contact, but be aware that these agencies are also struggling for funding and their ability to do work for free is limited.

Be clear about how the CUP fits into the rest of your work. Be aware that as an academic, the link to your work may be clearer than for the community partner. Therefore for community partners, whose resources are much more limited and mainly dedicated to service delivery, the risk of CUP work can be considerable.

A common strategy to deal with adversity from one's institutional setting is to "fly under the radar." This might not be the most beneficial way of addressing the situation. Instead, try to pitch your CUP work in a language that is understood by managers to increase legitimacy and recognition for CUP working. There was experience amongst people in the study that an effort of making people understand CUP work is worthwhile

Be aware of the historical context of CUP working and issues such as research fatigue and the economic context (i.e. capacity constraints)

Manage expectations of partners and stakeholders as to the limited potential impact of the CUP on the wider community.

In order for CUP research to be feasible, there needs to be a practical use for it. This often requires some flexibility on the part of academics, which in turn would presuppose a slight change in a university culture, where typically academics are encouraged to be highly specialized, with an inherent lack of flexibility on research topics that might be of interest.

Ensure that you familiarize yourself with the UKCPN and the advice and support it gives to community partners.

Engage with other academics who have a history of working in community university partnership and find a mentor who you trust.

Draw on the expertise of bodies such as National Co-ordinating Centre for Public Engagement (NCCPE) in the UK and the Community-Campus Partnerships for Health (CCPH) in the USA as they have established websites replete with advice and run regular conferences where you will pick up tips on how best to work with community partners