

Report Summary

Reimagining research collaboration:

How universities can help their local
places thrive

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Engaging people outside of academia in research is an important opportunity for universities to deliver greater impact in their local communities. But without two fundamental shifts in how such research engagement is approached, we risk focusing on transactional collaborations rather than the bigger prize of achieving together the things that no organisation can alone. We need to create the conditions for deeper collaboration across the local system and reimagine research as an opportunity for actors across a place to work together to support people and places to thrive.

Universities and the world of research can seem disconnected from the 'real people' in a place and focused instead on a globalised, competitive world of grants and journal articles, whose impact on local people can be difficult to discern.

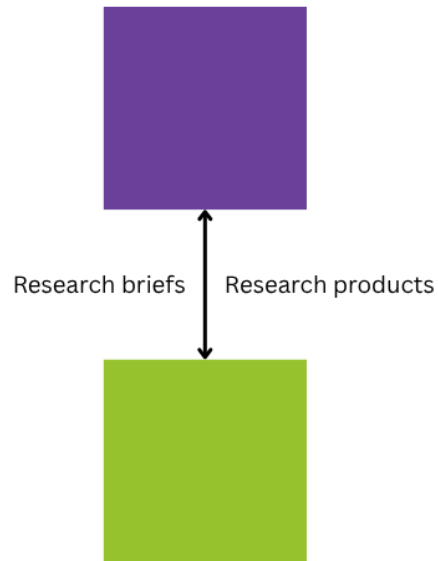
But we believe that **research, reimagined, can be a powerful collaborative force between universities and their local place to improve outcomes and help people and places thrive**. And in a challenging context for universities, local councils and the voluntary sector that continues to demand ever more is done with ever diminishing resources, **impactful and brave collaboration around research offers an important opportunity for real community impact**.

While research collaborations between universities and other local actors such as councils are not unusual, they often focus on helping people to do the thing they are responsible for (e.g. delivery of a service) more effectively. This makes them inherently transactional and such projects can only get us so far in tackling the most complex challenges in our local places.

We believe that great opportunity lies in going beyond short-term, bilateral and transactional relationships to develop **a shared learning culture across organisations that enables ongoing, open and inclusive knowledge creation and sharing across the local system**. This is what's needed to make the best use of our collective resources in challenging circumstances, and tackle the most entrenched and complex problems in local places which no organisation or service provider can address alone.

Achieving this requires changes in mindset, relationships and culture as well as policies and procedures. We believe there are two key shifts in perspective that are needed to deepen and strengthen research collaborations between universities and partners in place: **a system approach**, and **a new, expanded interpretation of research**. These are both essentially mindset shifts, which can be the most fundamental and powerful levers of change that in turn enable aligned structural and technical changes. Both shifts can be characterised as **broadening of our view** from a narrow starting point to something more expansive that creates space for more possibilities and action.

Starting point



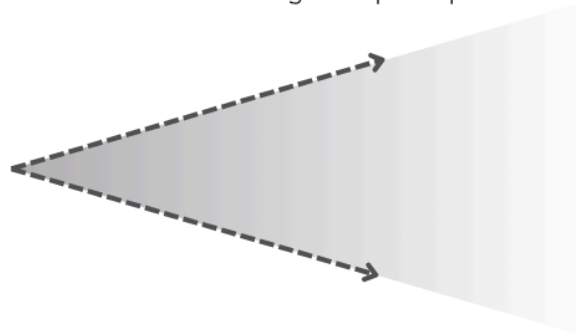
Expanding the possibilities

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Shifting from research as product, to research as process

From: research as a fixed output delivered by universities.

To: research as a collaborative, ongoing process of learning, involving many forms of knowledge and participation.



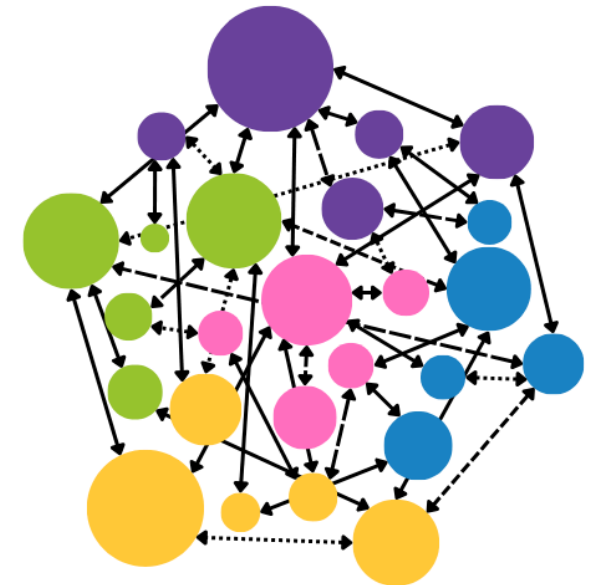
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Shifting to a system focus

From: bilateral, transactional relationships between individual organisations.

To: a connected system of diverse actors working together to tackle complex, shared challenges.

Aspiration



Key



A new interpretation of research

- Agreeing a shared understanding of 'research' and its purpose
- Expanding our understanding to see research as a **process** of exploration, learning and knowledge creation, of which research findings and products (such as journal articles or evidence reports) are just one element that people might engage with
- Expanding the role for other actors, including the VCSE, communities and business, to actively participate in research in different ways
- Using the convening power of research in different ways to build partnerships that give value to all who participate in them

A system approach

- Moving beyond bilateral research projects to build an integrated and networked approach which includes more actors, perspectives and methods for collaboration
- Working across different actors and organisations in a place to bring different perspectives, experiences and types of knowledge to bear on tackling complex problems
- Re-balancing power to communities to set the agenda for research, not just be research subjects or participants
- Focusing on efforts to build to conditions for effective collaboration through system stewardship, rather than on the outputs of the process

Making the shift

The table below sets out some suggestions for those who want to build more collaborative practice, offering ideas for how you might start if you are at the beginning of the journey, as well as an ambitious goal you might reach for as things are more developed. Making these shifts in practice is not down to universities alone, but requires a range of actors, including their partners in place, funders, regulators and central government, to play their part.

These suggestions have emerged from our discussions with partners in County Durham about their ambitions for the future of their research collaboration work, drawing on a workshop with a small number of partners from Durham University, Durham County Council and Durham Community Action. In addition, we have drawn on our understanding of what is needed to support effective, sustainable cross-sector collaborations as set out in our publication **A Guide to Collaboration**.

Foundation	Start by...	Reach for...
Collaborative mindset	Acknowledging 'together is better' and being open to doing things differently in order to accommodate working with others	<p>Focus energies and efforts on the things that we can only do together and cannot do alone to make best use of collective resources.</p> <p>Acknowledge where power needs to be re-balanced, especially towards communities, in order to enable true and equitable collaboration.</p>
Healthy, trusting relationships	<p>Create opportunities for match-making between staff from different organisations/sectors and build understanding about each other's perspectives.</p> <p>Bring together people working on similar themes to identify areas of shared interest and opportunities to work together.</p> <p>Build trusting relationships across different stakeholders - including rebuilding trust with those who have had poor experiences in the past</p>	<p>Move beyond relationships between individual people and create roles and structures that ensure connections that persist even as individuals move on.</p> <p>Acknowledge who is holding what power and work purposefully to rebalance power to communities to determine what is researched, who by and how, how what is learned is interpreted and how changes are made as a result.</p> <p>Integrate the voluntary and community sector and business into governance and decision-making alongside universities and local government.</p>
Shared vision and purpose	Articulate why 'together is better' in a way that resonates with people across different sectors and positions	Give collaboration a 'mission focus'. Set ambitious collaborative goals that tap into people's intrinsic motivation and are too bold and exciting to ignore.
Collaborative behaviours	Support those who are already enthusiastic about collaborative research to work together across organisational boundaries. Identify opportunities to experiment and	<p>Strategically embed collaboration and take a systems approach.</p> <p>Create collaborative measures for impact that recognise</p>

	<p>deliver collaboration supported by small funding/grant opportunities.</p> <p>Showcase your collaborative work so people can see what is already happening and the impact its having, and be inspired by others' examples</p>	<p>the process as well as the outcome</p> <p>Build collaborative activities and behaviours into people's job descriptions and make this part of how they are appraised. Value collaborative activities alongside research outputs when considering progression.</p>
Shared learning	<p>Understand 'research' as a process of shared exploration and learning, in which many people and roles participate and multiple forms of knowledge are needed.</p> <p>Encourage people to reflect on their experiences of collaboration, what went well and what they'd do differently next time.</p>	<p>Invest in creating a learning culture (across organisations and hierarchies) across the local research system so everyone understands their role in enabling ongoing learning and improvement.</p> <p>Create learning loops that connect those undertaking collaborative work on the ground with those who are able to reshape the conditions in which they are working e.g. by changing policies and guidance.</p>
Collaborative infrastructure	<p>Create a shared post working across the university and council to broker connections and match-make.</p> <p>Use governance structures such as a steering group or MOU to give collaborative efforts a home and create clear permission for this work.</p>	<p>Nurture healthy systems for collaboration by investing in system stewardship (relationship building, shared learning, convening, inspiring hope and collective responsibility).</p> <p>Build the conditions and infrastructure to make collaboration the default choice, not a workaround</p> <p>Identify processes and procedures such as ethics, intellectual property and how people are recognised and rewarded for their work that need to change to enable collaboration, and make the changes. Align these across organisations to create aligned incentives.</p> <p>Invest in and lobby for long-term flexible funding that allows space to truly explore collaboration and co-production.</p>

Find out more

[Read the full report at our website.](#)

If you'd like to discuss how to strengthen the collaboration between universities and other partners in your local place, [get in touch](#).