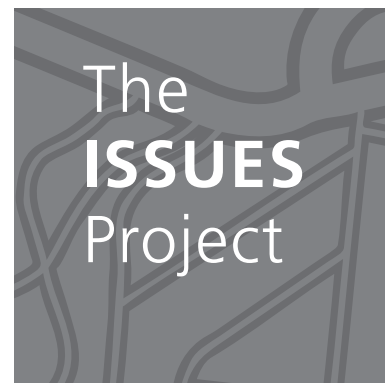


## » Involving Project Partners



“COMING TOGETHER IS A BEGINNING. KEEPING TOGETHER IS PROGRESS. WORKING TOGETHER IS SUCCESS.”

HENRY FORD

### WHY?

Partnerships between researchers and the likely end-users of their research can take a number of forms. In some situations external partners can be integral parts of a research project, whereas sometimes they may play a more limited role or adopt a more reflexive approach. Regardless of their prescribed role, it's important for researchers to see public and private sector partners as an opportunity rather than an obligation, and to maximise the benefits from their involvement.

Researcher-industry collaborations are becoming more commonplace. The reason for this is the realisation that involving end-users in partnerships is essential to the co-creation of knowledge, which can increase the relevance of a piece of research and make it more likely to be used outside academia. An additional benefit for researchers is that partnerships can also be conducive to the type of cross-sectoral, multidisciplinary work that is now well-regarded by research councils and grant giving bodies.

Policymakers and practitioners tend not to enter into partnerships for purely philanthropic reasons. Partnerships need to be mutually beneficial in order to ensure the involvement of external figures. These arrangements can be beneficial for end-users in different ways, for instance they can help to keep them informed about innovative developments in their industry, or they can help them develop ideas to bring back to their own organisations. For these partnerships to accrue benefits however, engagement needs to be genuine: if external partners are brought in merely as a token gesture, then they are unlikely to get much out of the arrangement. On the other hand, if partners are closely involved then the benefits of their involvement will become more apparent. This will make them more likely to continue to engage with the project, and hopefully be in a position to make meaningful contributions.



## HOW?

Regularity and structure are often central to a partnership's success. There has been research to suggest that decision makers are more likely to take an active interest in programmes where a minimum investment of time has been specified (Ross et al., 2003). To that end, it is wise to arrange regular meetings, and to try to ensure that key figures are present. Central to this is ensuring that a schedule of meetings is planned and adhered to. Partners should be made aware of the expected frequency of meetings and their obligations, to ensure committed participation. Ad hoc engagement is useful too, of course, but this can often fit in around a framework of more formal arrangements.

As with knowledge transfer in general, differences in timescales and languages can be a barrier to successful partnerships between academics and end-users (Nutley et al., 2007). It is crucial that partners in any collaboration try to understand each other's goals, backgrounds and levels of commitment to the project in order to establish more effective working practices.

Finally, partnerships should not be an afterthought in the research planning process. Input from the public and private sectors can help to establish a research direction that is more vital to the needs of policymakers and practitioners and which may also be more attractive to funders. Largely, the purpose of collaboration at the inception stage of a project is "to broaden the range of choices in defining problems and assembling methodologies" (Denis and Lomas, 2003). It should influence the research direction and inform future thinking and future project formulation.

### » Stories from SUE

SUE consortium Urban Futures managed to make an early impact on practitioners, largely because of the way in which they engaged with their project partners. As part of their research, they developed a set of 'future scenarios', which are essentially projections of how cities in Britain might look in the future, if particular legislative and social pathways were followed. This was done so that the scenarios could be used to test the effectiveness of sustainability measures in diverse contexts.

As part of their dissemination and collaboration plans, Urban Futures hold regular workshops and steering group meetings with their project partners. It was during one of these workshops that they announced their plans to develop the future scenarios. This idea appealed greatly to one of the project partners, engineering firm CH2M HILL. Their representative on the steering group had been considering how to incorporate an element of 'futureproofing' into their forthcoming projects.

As a result of this participation CH2M HILL expanded their engagement with Urban Futures, in order to help make the scenarios robust enough to be used in their line of work. From this engagement, Urban Futures were able to enlist the services of a top professional in the field, and they were able to see their work being used in the sustainability planning of a multinational company. This was made possible because the engagement with their partners was genuine: they involved their partners in their affairs, and were prepared to make their collaboration closer when the opportunity arose.

## REFERENCES

- KIERNAN, V. (2003) Diffusion of News about Research. *Science Communication*, 25, 3-13.
- RHIND, D. (2003) Great Expectations: The Social Sciences in Britain. *Commission on the Social Sciences*.
- RICKINSON, M. (2005) Practitioners' Use of Research. Retrieved September, 21, 2006.

## RESOURCES

Knowledge Transfer Partnerships - These are initiatives organised by the Technology Strategy Board that link universities and industry by employing 'associates' to promote linkages and knowledge exchange:

[www.ktponline.org.uk](http://www.ktponline.org.uk)

Urban Futures research project:

[www.urban-futures.org](http://www.urban-futures.org)