Stage 3: Building Relationships for Mutual Benefit - with stakeholders/ partners/ interdisciplinary teams

1. Make the time to get to know each person you will be collaborating with - their interests, motivations, and how they like to work – and help them to get to know you.

- Whenever possible arrange an in-person meeting. Meet over a coffee, not just in a formal setting – this gives you a better opportunity to get to know them, identify common interests and preferences, learn about their work context, and start to build a relationship. Your work together will depend on this relationship, particularly when things inevitably become more challenging.
- At all stages of your collaboration, listen actively to other people's perspectives. Listen for ideas, language or positions that you don't fully understand, and ask clarifying questions. Encourage people to ask you questions if there's anything they don't understand. This supports everyone to keep learning.

2. Be open, honest, dependable, committed, and trustworthy.

Collaboration involves compromise, taking risks, and building trust. When it works well, it is very rewarding. Trust is built in stages[1] and is essential to effective collaboration.

- Start any collaboration with a relatively small project or task, that will benefit all partners. Partners learn that they can trust you when you play your part to make it happen. You can also assess their commitment based on how they work with you. If you find you work well together, you can build on this towards more collaboration.
- Only commit to what you can confidently deliver. If anything happens that might delay or prevent you from meeting a commitment, or you make a mistake, make sure to communicate openly with your research partners, explaining what has happened and suggesting how to proceed (e.g. moving the deadline, getting other people involved). This kind of communication makes you a reliable partner and will make people more inclined to collaborate with you.
- If partners communicate that they are experiencing challenges, or have made mistakes, make sure to respond with empathy and offers of support.
- Make sure to have an open conversation if a person's behaviour is affecting you negatively. They may be unaware of the impact it's having. Talk to them on their own, and explain clearly what the behaviour is, how it's making you feel (which they probably didn't understand), and how you would like them to change their behaviour so that you can work more effectively together. These conversations can be difficult, and it can feel easier to just let some things go, but if the behaviour is likely to become more of an issue if the collaboration grows, then it will make things easier in the long run to name the behaviour.

3. Think about how you can make relationships sustainable.

People may fall ill, change roles, move organisations, or retire. How can you make sure that your collaboration continues if this happens?

[1] Chris Huxham and Siv Vangen, *Managing to Collaborate: The Theory and Practice of Collaborative Advantage* (1st ed.), (Routledge 2004), https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203010167

- Does everyone involved know where to find all relevant documents (including work-in-progress)?
- Are there at least 2 people in each organisation involved in the collaboration? If not, is there a second person in each organisation who is aware of it and has access to relevant documents, and knows where they are?

Power dynamics and imbalances can undermine relationships and trust.

- Does everyone feel they have equal say in decision-making? If not, how can you improve the processes to address this?
- Are all team members contributing equally in meetings, and are meetings designed to enable everyone to have a say (e.g. work in pairs or small groups which then feed back to the main group)?
    - Is someone consistently quiet? This can be because they are taking on a more reflective role, but it can also be that they feel vulnerable, or don't feel equipped to contribute, or don't feel their knowledge is valued. It's important to check with them privately if they're happy with how the collaboration is working. Would they like to contribute more, and if so, how could they be supported to do this?
    - Is someone dominating the conversation? Is there a good reason for this – e.g. are they leading on a piece of work with an approaching deadline – or is there an imbalance of power in the group? It can be useful to suggest that people who haven't yet spoken in a room might like to share their thoughts. It can also be worth checking in privately with someone who talks a lot, to see if they're aware that they're doing this, and to think about its impact on others.
- Are you engaging with people from marginalised or less powerful groups in society? For example, young people and vulnerable adults often feel excluded from power, and from research. Their contributions can be invaluable, and additional encouragement or support can help them to share their ideas, particularly in a large group.[2] You must prioritise caring for their wellbeing during any collaboration.

Key components of building research relationships and trust:

- identifying shared interests and goals, whether personal or organizational, to build common ground
- respecting different kinds of expertise and knowledge
- collaborating on research design and co-producing knowledge
- discussing potential challenges to collaboration - including contexts, histories and stereotypes that create inequalities and power imbalances
- developing sensitive and robust ethical procedures
- distribute funding across partners in a fair manner
- creating welcoming meeting spaces, both on and outside the university campus

(Adapted from Bryan et al, 2018)[3]

[2] See for example the Hub na nÓg resource pages for academics and researchers, for support for working with children. The Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth planning Checklist is particularly helpful. See also the National Disability Authority's guidance for collaborative research with disabled people.

[3] David Bryan et al, *Common Cause Research: Building Research Collaborations Between Universities and Black and Minority Ethnic Communities*, (University of Bristol and the Arts and Humanities Research Council Connected Communities Programme 2018), http://www.commoncauseresearch.com/files/2018/09/CC_Enablers_Barriers_final_sp-2c2f4bh.pdf.