Stage 4: Collaboratively designing research projects, and clarifying ethics, roles and responsibilities

Whether you are planning a collaborative research project in response to a shared interest, or a request from a partner, or a funding call that you feel aligns with your aims, make sure you discuss these questions with your partners.

WHY?

What are your goals for collaborating? Consider using exercises such as Purposeful Partnership[1] cards to discuss and prioritise your goals (these focus on museum-university partnerships, but can be applied to any research collaboration).

- What would you like to achieve in the next 2-5 years?
- What key outcomes would you like to be able to report on?

You can develop your research question and approach together, based on these shared goals.

WHAT?

What is your research question? Consider the following prompts:

- What challenges are you aware of, or facing?
- Which UN Sustainable Development Goals[2] inspire you?
- What practice-based experience and learning would you like to reflect on and share?

WHO?

Who else might you want or need to collaborate with? What additional knowledge, perspectives, and skills might be needed to address your research question? Who might approach this issue differently, and might bring complementary skills and knowledge? (See also Checklist 1 on identifying stakeholders). Aim for diversity and balance across your research team.

Who can support you internally? Make sure to discuss the developing plans with your line manager or academic supervisor, at an early stage. They can be a valuable ally as you set up your collaborative project. You can also find useful guidance in TU Dublin's Collaborative Research with External Partners Policy. The Pre-Award unit in Research Support Services can help you identify funding streams and prepare budgets. The Innovation & Knowledge Transfer Office can advise on whether legal documentation, particularly where intellectual property may be created. Legal agreements can be complex and may strain relationships if not managed carefully. Investing time in relationship-building from the start can help reduce any strains (see Checklist 3 on building relationships).

WHEN?

How much time is realistically needed to conduct the research? What level of time commitment can each partner offer? Are there competing deadlines or other priorities to consider? If you're starting with a small research project, to build your relationship, do you have time and capacity to complete the research yourselves? If you're applying for funding, what is the funder's expected timeline?

[1] National Coordinating Centre for Public Engagement, "MUPI Purposeful Partnerships cards", accessed November 13, 2024, https://www.publicengagement.ac.uk/resources/tools-and-frameworks/mupi-purposeful-partnerships-cards.
[2] "The 17 Goals", United Nations

HOW?

What challenges might arise, and how can they be addressed? Potential issues might include:

- Time constraints (especially if partners have existing commitments)
- Resource limitations (e.g. if people change roles during the project, or move organisation; or if there are delays in recruitment following a funding award)
- Differences in timeframes, expectations, communication styles, or working cultures
- Changes in external context or unforeseen pressures
- Conflict, which is almost inevitable, and needs to be prevented and managed effectively.

Are you happy to proceed with the collaboration despite these potential challenges?

What roles and responsibilities best suit each partner? This might depend on what strengths each wants to develop, or build on, and how involved each wants to be, given their context. Will you need funding to recruit someone to help with the research? Which funding bodies might have goals that fit with yours, and what funding calls are opening or closing soon? Which partner(s) will recruit and supervise any new staff, administer and manage the funding and necessary reporting, contribute time to the project (which should be costed and included in the budget), and work to make sure that research output(s) are used to make change happen? How will all partners be compensated for their contributionsin an efficient and fair manner?

Will your research involve collecting data from people? If your research involves collecting data from individuals, it must undergo TU Dublin's ethical review process. You also have an ethical responsibility to safeguard participants and ensure that your work does no harm.

Key ethical questions to consider:

- How can you make sure that everyone you collaborate with is treated with care, and benefits from the research?
- How can you engage a diverse range of stakeholders, especially those whose voices are often unheard in research (e.g. children, young people, vulnerable adults)?
- How can all relevant perspectives be included in research decision-making processes, particularly those of marginalised groups?
- Can the goals of the research be clearly explained, in simple and accessible language? Are key terms and concepts understood consistently by all stakeholders?
- Can you also agree and explain in plain language how participants' rights and data will be protected? If people don't want to be identified, how will you ensure this?
- As the project progresses, how will you check with stakeholders that their views are accurately represented? Is the research still addressing their concerns and priorities, and will it positively impact on society?
- How will you ensure transparent communication of research results, even when findings differ from you or your stakeholders' expectations?
- How do you and your stakeholders intend to use the research to create meaningful change?