

# **Academia and charities sharing resources and knowledge**

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### Abstract

This research briefing discusses the potential for generating socially impactful projects and research through the sharing of resources and knowledge in charity-academia partnerships. The knowledge and resources of the respective sectors are, in many cases, complementary. This is particularly evident with regards to how their topic-specific expertise, knowledge of policy processes, access to research databases and social networks, if combined, can result in powerful, well-informed and evidenced projects. There are numerous benefits of charity-academia partnerships for both parties. These benefits range from greater (evidenced) impact of projects to new ideas that can result in further engagement. Indeed, through the sharing of resources and knowledge, transformative work can be achieved, benefiting the individual actors involved, the wider sectors and society at large. People Know How's Connect Four network is built on this conviction and is a positive example of what cross-sectoral partnerships can look like in practice.

### Keywords

Charities, academia, partnership, knowledge exchange, social innovation

### Key points

- Charity-academia collaboration takes different forms and includes different levels of involvement, ranging from specific research projects to more general sharing of knowledge and resources.
- Academic research can further the reach and investment into charity initiatives, especially when evidencing impact for funding purposes.
- Charities tend to have good practical knowledge of the policy-making process and local issues, thus complementing academic topical and research design knowledge.
- Overall sharing of resources, such as research databases and networks, ultimately requires institutional and organisational action

### Introduction

Charities and academic institutions have a shared interest in finding impactful ways of meeting the needs of society (Shucksmith 2016). Whereas charities are

commonly regarded as important social actors, the perception of many academic institutions being so has decreased over the last decades in line with an increased

specialisation of academics into narrow fields of study (Knowledge Translation Network [KTN] 2016). It has been noted that to successfully achieve and evidence social impact, a combination of academic, practical and local knowledge is required (KTN 2016; Shucksmith 2016). As such, charities and academia have the potential to be effective and socially impactful partners if their knowledge and resources are combined. This research briefing discusses the benefits of charity-academia partnerships. Here, the term 'charity' refers to an organisation that has been set up for charitable purposes and that provides public benefits in achieving its aim (Scottish Charity Regulator 2017). Furthermore, in the context of this review, 'academia' refers to universities and individual academics operating within them (Johnes 2013). The research briefing starts by providing a general background for the rationale for such partnerships, highlighting People Know How's Connect Four network as an example of what cross-sectoral initiatives can look like in practice. How knowledge and resources of both academia and charities can be combined to further the creation of (evidenced) socially impactful research and projects will then be explored; focusing on their respective expertise, skills, databases and networks. Lastly, the research briefing concludes by noting that a transformative partnership requires that both parties are perceived as knowledge producers and social actors in their own right.

### **Charity-academia partnerships**

Charity-academia partnerships have ranged from knowledge-sharing networking events, to collaboration in specific research projects, to extensive

partnerships spanning both research and service-based learning opportunities for students (Bell et al. 2014; KTN 2016). Regardless of the scope of the partnership, engagement across sectors has been noted as key to successfully put socially innovative ideas into practice (Holliday et al. 2015; Lozano-Casal and Rutherford 2016; Ziegler 2017). People Know How's approach is similarly built on this conviction. Specifically, the Connect Four network was set up in 2019 to encourage and inform meaningful action through cross-sector discussions (People Know How 2019). Through providing an opportunity to network, share knowledge and build relationships during organised events, it encourages ample possibilities to initiate socially innovative partnerships – thus exemplifying what the sharing of knowledge across sectors can look like in practice.

Charity-academia partnerships can similarly be initiated with a specific goal in mind, such as a research project. KTN (2016) outlines what such partnerships can look like, noting three different levels of involvement. Low level involvement has the academic leading the research, with the charity's main role being in endorsing and disseminating the project, but without actively participating in the research process. In medium level involvement, one party takes the leading role whereas the other provides information and advice throughout the process. Lastly, high level involvement projects have both parties contributing equally at every stage of the process. Here, both the charity and academic(s) play an equal part in the development of research questions, collection and analysis of data and the communication of the findings (KTN 2016). Emphasised in both medium and high level involvement

partnerships is the view of academic and charity knowledge and resources as complementary in furthering the impact of the research – taking it outside the walls of academia and into the community but, crucially, also bringing community-based research to academic attention.

### Knowledge exchange

Regardless of what form the partnership takes or what level of involvement it entails, they present numerous benefits for both charities and academia. Academic knowledge is largely perceived as the most trusted source of evidence (Talbot and Talbot 2014). However, it has similarly been found to be one of the least used sources of evidence outside of academia (McCormick 2013). In fact, widely accessible online material, including information issued by the third sector, is far more used (Shucksmith 2016). As a charity, People Know How contribute a Research Briefings database to this third sector knowledge, literature-based writing that highlights social issues and how the charity helps tackle them through socially innovative projects and services. Despite the knowledge emanating from charities being more widely engaged with, it is not attached to the same level of credibility as academic knowledge since it lacks a direct connection to established scholarship (Shucksmith 2016). Therefore, working in collaboration with academics who have expertise in a particular area of study or specific research methods can benefit a project's evidence base and design, but also grant the findings more credibility in the eyes of policymakers and in funding application contexts, because of its association with an academic

institution (Bell et al. 2015; KTN 2016; Shucksmith 2016). Furthermore, if the findings are disseminated in academic forums, such as at conferences or in journals, the awareness of charity work may similarly increase (KTN 2016). As a result, the publication can lead to new potential partnerships and collaborations. Academic skills transfer to third sector workers, especially in relation to data collection and analysis, has similarly been noted as a benefit of knowledge exchange activities, such as collaborative research projects and academic publication (Shucksmith 2016). Such skills are then transferable to future projects, be that in charity-academia partnerships or not.

It is crucial to note that knowledge exchange in charity-academia partnerships is indeed an exchange; academia has much to learn from charities. Charities are often well-informed on current policy-relevant databases and opportunities (Shucksmith 2016). Increased awareness of the needs of the third sector and communities is similarly invaluable for academics, as they can potentially explore or address those needs further in subsequent research projects (Wilson et al. 2010; Bell et al. 2015; Shucksmith 2016). Utilising the shared bank of theoretical, empirical, practical and local knowledge in charity-academia partnerships can offer the potential to further the reach and evidenced impact of the work for both parties, as well as for society at large (Morton 2012; Cooper et al. 2014). Thereby, the combination of knowledge can be used for practical ends – strengthening academia's position as influencers of policy and practice and charities as rigorous and impactful social actors (Abreu et al. 2009; KTN

2016; Williamson et al. 2016). This can be further advanced as the level of credibility for, and demonstration of, evidenced impact increases, which is beneficial for funding application purposes (KTN 2016). Increasing the chance for successful funding applications increases the chance for further engagement and evidence for the impact of the project(s); directly benefitting the communities the projects are based in or around (Wilson et al. 2010; Morton 2012; KTN 2016).

### Sharing resources

Both charities and academia can similarly benefit from sharing more tangible resources, outwith knowledge and expertise (Wilson et al. 2010). 'Resources' can be understood in a variety of ways in the context of charity-academia partnerships. One such way is procedural related, here especially the utilisation of university ethical review processes to confirm that projects are ethically sound before any research is conducted. The ethical review process is integral to all research within academic institutions, and whereas some charities have an internal ethical review process most do not. Having access to such procedures would provide charities with the opportunity to conduct independent social research, which can benefit the development and evidence of project impact (KTN 2016). Another resource worthy of note is the access to academic journals. Most academic journals require a subscription for access, the costs of which are too high for many charities – thus limiting the accessibility of potentially relevant research (Day et al. 2020). Indeed, Shucksmith (2016) reports that access to academic journals is one of the most sought-after

resources among third sector workers. Charities, such as People Know How, that utilise literature to inform projects before they are initiated, would greatly benefit from having access to academic journal databases for this purpose. Notably, the majority of the discussion of charity-academia partnerships in this research briefing has been structured around the notion of charities working in partnership with individual academics. This is a viable option in the context of conducting specific research projects or sharing knowledge in practical or direct ways. However, as Murdock et al. (2013) note, for true sharing of resources and knowledge to be achieved – such as the access to internal ethical review processes or journal databases – it has to become embedded in organisational and institutional structures. This presents a considerably larger task, the discussion around which is outside the scope of this research briefing.

Resources can similarly be considered in terms of access to people and networks. Indeed, sharing networks can be beneficial for both parties in the partnership; with academia gaining access to local and community networks and charities benefitting from organisations associated with other university partnerships, as well as academic staff (KTN 2016; Shucksmith 2016). Bloice and Burnett (2016) argue that the ability of third sector organisations to achieve their objectives often rely on the expertise and skills of their staff and volunteers. Therefore, having access to academics and students offer the opportunity to involve qualified individuals who can effectively contribute to the organisation, partake or lead research projects, and function as a bridge between the charity and

the university. Partnerships may similarly present internship and/or volunteering opportunities for students (Bell et al. 2015) and collaborative projects can provide case studies that academics can refer to when teaching that may encourage students to engage with the charity. In this way, the partnership can become more established, long-lasting and its scope broader (Shucksmith 2016). Importantly, most charities can also provide invaluable connections to local communities and publics. Working directly with communities, using a bottom-up approach, can result in socially relevant research and ensure that interventions are tailored to that community's needs and that their voices are heard in the process (Wilson et al. 2010; Strier 2011; People Know How 2019). Thereby, charity-academia partnerships do not only benefit the respective collaborative party but can ultimately result in better addressing and challenging social problems and achieving social change (Curwood et al. 2011; Williamson et al. 2016).

### Conclusion

In sharing resources and knowledge, charities and academia have the potential to be a powerful force in generating socially impactful projects and research. There are numerous benefits for both parties, with the credibility of evidence from charities increasing in the eyes of policymakers and the general public, and academics having more opportunities to apply their knowledge outside the walls

of academia. Indeed, working in partnership can be an important contributor in improving the wellbeing of individuals and communities, both through hands-on projects, but also through policymaking processes. Evidencing impact similarly increases the chances for further funding investments into projects and initiatives and, by extension, communities (Wilson et al. 2010). Key to the potential of charity-academia partnerships is their complementary knowledge, skills and resources that, if combined, have the potential to lead to exceptionally impactful and innovative results for the respective party and society at large (Bell et al. 2015; Shucksmith 2016). As such, it is crucial to position both sectors as equal knowledge producers and social actors in this process (Shucksmith 2016). Many of charity-academia partnerships take place on a small-scale basis – with individual academics working alongside charities for specific ends. Wider involvement on an institutional and organisational level is required for more substantive partnerships to be realised however, especially in relation to the sharing of resources and internal procedure that both parties can benefit from. Thereby, a willingness to challenge the existing boundaries between the two sectors, in light of the socially impactful tools and knowledge that exist in the intersection, is a necessary ingredient in achieving impactful and evidenced social change on a long-term and far-reaching basis.



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