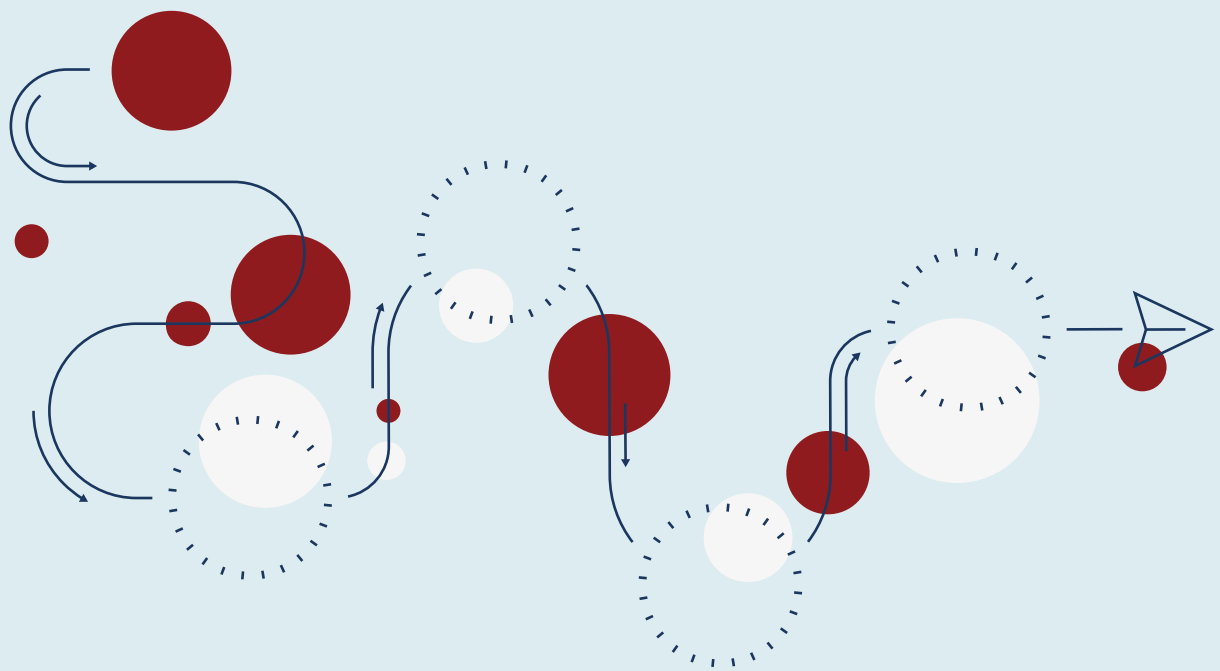


UNIVERSITY OF COPENHAGEN
QUEEN MARY'S CENTRE



TRANSFORMATIVE RESEARCH PARTNERSHIPS

– A GUIDE



By Brigitte Dragsted, Maja Ejrnæs, Birke Jessing and Bjarke Oxlund



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WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF THIS GUIDE?

When researchers and stakeholders from public organisations, civil society or private enterprises work together, they can solve complex societal problems and facilitate research innovation. Research partnerships have the greatest potential for success when the partners jointly conduct a problem analysis at the onset of the project and exchange knowledge throughout the project period. However, designing a project and making it a success is not easy. Researchers and practitioners come from very different institutional contexts with different mindsets and conditions.

The purpose of this guide is to provide researchers and practitioners with a set of tools for designing and conducting successful collaborative projects. While many have experience with cross-sectorial collaboration within disciplines such as education or health, there is a need for more collaboration across disciplines as well as post-project experience gathering focussing on the potential pitfalls and what worked well in a given project.

WHO IS THE GUIDE FOR?

The guide is aimed at researchers from the humanities and social sciences and at stakeholders from public organisations, civil society or private enterprises, who have established contact and wish to collaborate on a joint project that involves academic research and impact in practice. It offers advice on how to design and conduct research-practice collaborations, and while it does not focus on fundraising specifically, it may be useful in the process of writing funding applications.

WHICH TYPES OF PARTNERSHIPS IS THE GUIDE AIMED AT?

The guide offers advice on planning and organising research partnerships based on a problem that needs solving. It supports projects that give equal weight to practice- and research-based knowledge, respectively, and aim to create new research insight and societal impact. We will refer to such projects as *transformative research partnerships*.

How do we know?

The guide is based on three scientific studies conducted in 2022 under the auspices of the Copenhagen Change Academy at Queen Mary's Center, University of Copenhagen. The project focussed on describing what constitutes a "successful research-practice collaboration" and consisted of four case studies, one literature survey and an expert interview study. Throughout the guide, we shall refer to the results of these studies, which have been published in the following papers:

- **Case studies:** [Knowledge exchange between educational theory and practice](#), [Local government study of care for senior citizens from an ethnic minority](#), [Research-based co-creation of learning environments in schools](#) and [Humanistic industrial research in a fertility clinic](#)
- **Literature survey:** [Literature survey](#) on research-practice collaborations
- **Expert interview study:** [Experts' experiences](#) with "successful research-practice collaboration"

On page 10, you can read more about the [Copenhagen Change Academy](#), the three studies and our definition of a "successful research-practice collaboration".



HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE?

The guide consists of six focus points that we urge the partners of transformative research partnerships to adopt. The six focus points are based on the results of the three studies mentioned above, which led to the identification of six dimensions characterising a successful research-practice collaboration:



The **problem** that requires solving.



The **resources** facilitating the project.



The **roles** of the project partners.



The **meeting place**, where the partners can exchange and co-create new knowledge.



The **process** that follows once the project has begun.

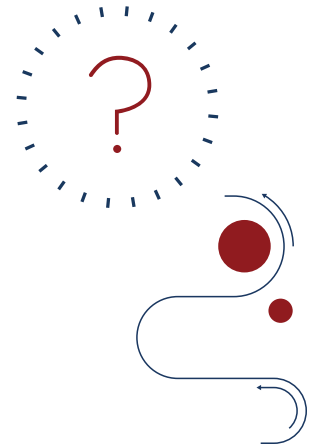


The **impact** that the project contributes to.

Each of the following chapters will focus on one of the six dimensions.

PROBLEM

Researchers and practitioners often have very different definitions of what constitutes a problem suitable for a research project. For the research partnership to be transformative, it is vital that the partners jointly conduct an analysis of the problem that the project aims to address. Subsequently, they must formulate a corresponding research question that may lead to new insight that can help solve the problem.



OUR ADVICE:

- **Start by distinguishing between the practical problem and research question.** They are two different things. Solving a practical problem requires knowledge that can lead to action, whereas the research question will prompt the project partners to ask questions while consulting with the existing literature.
- **Find a good match between the practical problem and research question.** The project partners should describe the practical problem in detail and formulate a corresponding research question. This is to make sure the project leads to new insight which not only contributes to the given research field, but which also supports the development of solutions to the practical problem. It is vital that the practitioners are actively involved in describing this problem.
- **Invest sufficient time and energy in finding a good match.** Finding a good match between the practical problem and research question takes time and requires insight into the other party's conditions and working methods. If the partners have limited experience with cross-sectorial collaboration, it may be a good idea to get a third party with knowledge of both practice and research to help you.

What have others done?

The case [Knowledge exchange between educational theory and practice](#) shows how you can match problem and research question. In the case, the researchers knew that something had to be done to reduce dropout rates in adult and vocational education, so they invited practitioners to help formulate a research question. The case [Humanistic industrial research in a fertility clinic](#) shows how a research design can be adjusted to fit an existing development process in practice. In the case, the researcher focused on an app the company was working on at the time.

What does the literature say?

[Aiello et al. \(2021\)](#), [Buckridge et al. \(2002\)](#) and [Penuel & Hill \(2019\)](#) explain why practitioners should help formulate the research question. [Morris \(2016\)](#) and [Nelson et al. \(2021\)](#) provide examples of how the partners can work together on formulating a research question before kick-off and during the project period.

What do the experts say?

This focus on the need to distinguish between practical problem and research question is inspired by Associate Professor Mark Vacher and the HumanImpact project. See the chapter on Problem in [Experts' experiences](#) for an account of the differences between problem and question and other experts' experiences with securing a match between the two.



RESOURCES

When drawing up a budget for a transformative research partnership, you need to focus on three things: Projects of this type often take more time than you expect, they are particularly vulnerable to staff turnover, and it can be a good idea to get each partner organisation to invest money in the project.



OUR ADVICE:

- **Allocate sufficient funds to meeting facilitation, regular communication and project management.** Participating in a transformative research partnership is time-consuming, especially for the partners who are responsible for facilitating cooperation across institutional contexts. Failure to allocate sufficient funds to project management can lead to staff exhaustion and resignation.
- **Divide the responsibility between several practitioners and limit the number of temporary contracts.** Transformative research partnerships are particularly vulnerable to staff turnover. Their transformative potential is largely rooted in the knowledge and capacities created, and they are lost if one person is responsible for the entire project and that person finds a new job.
- **It can be a good idea to get each partner organisation to invest money in the project.** Transformative research partnerships depend on the active participation of the management of the participating practice organisation. If the practice organisation does not invest money in the partnership, they may not take ownership of the results and are thus likely to give a low priority to the project.

What have others done?

According to the case [Humanistic industrial research in a fertility clinic](#), the partners need to discuss and adjust their expectations before project kick-off as regards their individual investment in the project and what they expect to gain from it. In the case, the researcher and private enterprise held a series of meetings to agree on i.a. data rights. The case [Research-based co-creation of learning environments in schools](#) demonstrates the importance on attracting sufficient funding. When the project in question ran out of funding, the university agreed to fund it until the partners had managed to secure new funding.

What does the literature say?

[Coreau \(2020\)](#), [Duxbury et al. \(2020\)](#) and [Witten et al. \(2018\)](#) urge the partners to consider the level of investment required of the other party, and [Agans et al. \(2020\)](#) explain why it is important that the partners benefit equally from the project.

What do the experts say?

See the chapter on Resources in [Experts' experiences](#) for advice on how to distribute the resources to avoid project vulnerability and for more on why it is important that each partner invests in the project.



ROLES



Our studies suggest that partnerships benefit if the partners have previous experience with research-practice collaboration. Awareness of the institutional context and working methods of the other party is a vital factor in the process of dividing roles and responsibilities between the partners. So, if the partners lack knowledge of each other's institutional context, they should consider appointing one or more "knowledge brokers" to help the project get off to a good start, e.g. a facilitator with knowledge of both research and practice.

OUR ADVICE:

- **Ask yourself whether you have sufficient knowledge of each other's institutional context and working methods.** Our studies suggest that such knowledge takes time to build. Therefore, if none of the partners have previous experience with research-practice collaboration, they should consider appointing a "knowledge broker", e.g. a facilitator who can help establish contact and translate between the two contexts. See examples in the cases below.
- **Consider engaging a facilitator who is familiar with both the academic field and the practice setting.** A facilitator who understands both contexts can help ease communication between the partners and avoid misunderstandings. This may be particularly useful in large-scale projects with partners from a number of different organisations. When recruiting a facilitator, you might focus on finding a candidate with experience from both research and practice.
- **Divide roles and responsibilities among the partners.** Sometimes, the partners will benefit from working closely together on solving a problem; at other times, they should divide the roles and responsibilities between them. In the literature below, you may find inspiration on how to divide the roles and responsibilities between you.

What have others done?

In the case [Local government study of care for senior citizens from an ethnic minority](#), the researchers needed someone who could help them get in touch with relevant local government staff and citizens as well as decipher organisational charts and terminology. After some time, they managed to find a facilitator who could help them do both. The case [Research-based co-creation of learning environments in schools](#) engaged a facilitator with experience from research as well as practice. The facilitator had trained as a psychologist and specialised in autism and was employed first as a project research assistant and later as a development consultant.

What does the research show?

[Buckeridge et al. \(2002\)](#) and [Piza et al. \(2018\)](#) show that differing institutional contexts can act as a barrier to cooperation, and they emphasise the importance of project management. [Börjesson \(2011\)](#), [Buckeridge et al. \(2002\)](#) and [Siegel \(2019\)](#) each describe examples of projects where the researchers and practitioners have divided the tasks between them.

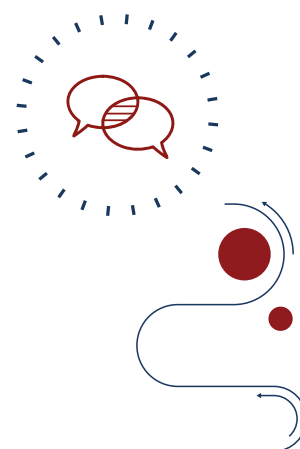
What do the experts say?

The chapter on Roles in [Experts' experiences](#) shows why it is important for the partners of a research-practice collaboration to have knowledge of each other's institutional contexts, and how the partners can divide the tasks between them.



MEETING PLACE

For humanities and social science research to support transformation in practice, the practitioners must act as co-developers rather than as end users of the knowledge created. Therefore, research partnerships must be rooted in a forum for exchange and co-creation of knowledge between researchers and practitioners – not to be confused with the coordination of activities. We shall refer to this forum as the *meeting place*.



OUR ADVICE:

- **Create a space for interaction and knowledge exchange between the researchers and practitioners.** In doing so, make sure to address hierarchical structures proactively and choose a meeting design that supports equal participation among the partners. You should also think about the physical surroundings and how you can create a space where the partners feel comfortable sharing problems and ideas.
- **Look for inspiration.** The research-practice meeting place can be structured in a number of different ways and used differently at the different stages of the project. Find inspiration below.

What have others done?

The case [Knowledge exchange between educational theory and practice](#) shows how ongoing knowledge exchange can be structured in accordance with the method 'research circles'. Here the practitioners contributed with practice-oriented reflections, while the researchers contributed with theoretical perspectives, and then they tested new insight in-between meetings. The case [Research-based co-creation of learning environments in schools](#) demonstrates that practitioners should be acknowledged as co-developers. Here the participating researchers made a point of emphasising the value of the practitioners' contribution.

What does the literature say?

Based on research into the impact of humanities and social science research, [Aiello et al. \(2021\)](#) argue that it is vital that the practitioners act as co-developers. We have compiled a series of descriptions of what a space for research-practice knowledge exchange may look like: 'training sessions' ([Alazmeh et al., 2018](#)), 'learning arenas' ([Hurley et al., 2017](#)), 'workshops' ([Arribas Lozano, 2018](#); [Coreau, 2020](#)), 'jam sessions' ([Börjesson, 2011](#)), 'action meetings' ([Piza et al., 2018](#)), 'discussion sessions' ([Irby et al., 2013](#)), 'biweekly meetings' ([Carise et al., 2002](#)), 'reflection meetings' ([Börjesson, 2011](#)), 'dialogue arenas' ([Rosenlund & Rosell, 2017](#)) and 'idea labs' ([Duxbury et al., 2020](#)).

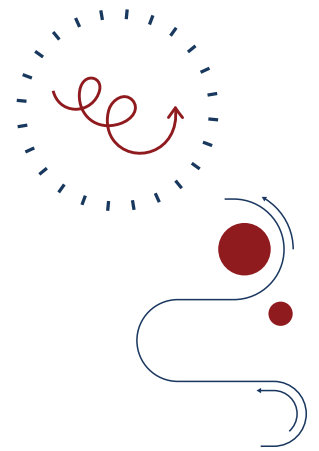
What do the experts say?

The chapter on Meeting Place in [Experts' experiences](#) describes i.a. how you can invite the practitioners to address unanswered questions together with the researchers and the importance of developing a shared language.



PROCESS

The process of any research-practice collaboration will to some extent be unpredictable. First, the project design should allow for busy periods at the different organisations, e.g. exam periods at a university or a budgeting process in a public organisation or private enterprise. Second, research is about building knowledge of a problem as you go along, and therefore, the project design and budget should include some degree of flexibility.



OUR ADVICE:

- **Make the project design and budget as flexible as possible; you should be able to adapt to unforeseen circumstances.** This may include types of activities, the time allocated to activities, the focus of the project or planned end products.
- **Make sure that staff and management in the practice organisation continue to support the project.** The practice organisation is likely to consider the partnership a development project, and development projects tend to be assigned a lower priority than the primary activity of the organisation. Therefore, make sure the practitioners continue to support the project. Find inspiration in the literature below.

What have others done?

The case [Humanistic industrial research in a fertility clinic](#) shows how researchers can adapt to the daily routines in an organisation, i.a. by holding short, flexible online meetings and recruiting interviewees during the day-to-day contact with patients. The case [Knowledge exchange between educational theory and practice](#) shows how the ongoing involvement of managers can help build support and strengthen project rooting. In this case, headmasters were i.a. invited to participate in knowledge exchange at research circle meetings.

What does the literature say?

[Baviskar et al. \(fc.\)](#), [Rhodes et al. \(2016\)](#) and [Schensul et al. \(2006\)](#) describe experiences with adjusting the project design, while [Clodfelter et al. \(2014\)](#), [Israel et al. \(2006\)](#) and [Minkler et al. \(2006\)](#) describe experiences with ensuring that the project is embedded in the practice organisation. [Alazmeh et al. \(2018\)](#), [Börjesson \(2011\)](#) and [Ndulue et al. \(2012\)](#) describe ways of building support among management and staff.

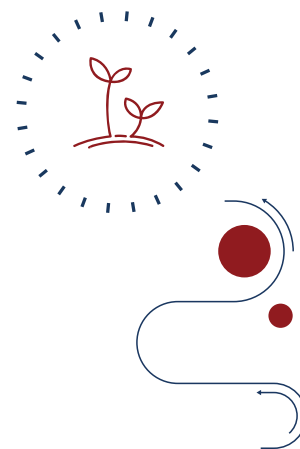
What do the experts say?

The chapter on Process in [Experts' experiences](#) explains why project flexibility is important, and that it has to do with the inherent unpredictability of any research project.



IMPACT

Academic research classically aims to engage in scholarly discussions in order to develop theoretical thinking within research fields. Transformative research partnerships aim to generate academic impact as well as changes in “the real world” – also known as societal impact. Throughout the project period, the partners should reflect on how the project helps address the practical problem and continue to adjust the project design to support this aim.



OUR ADVICE:

- **You should have an ongoing conversation about the intended impact.** We recommend that you regularly reflect on the aims of the project and make adjustments to the project design if necessary.
- **Be open – impact can take many different forms.** Research partnerships can work towards impact by producing visible end products, (invisible) learning outcomes, a change in practice or new perspective. It can be useful to distinguish between immediate benefits generated by the project in the short run and more long-term change that the project aims to contribute to. In the literature, you can read about different ways in which research-practice collaborations can generate impact.
- **Towards the end of the project, the partners should reflect on the impact created by the project.** Post-project reflection on the transformative potential of the project may help facilitate support, future collaboration and new projects. Don't forget that while the partners may have different objectives, it doesn't prevent them from sharing a vision.

What have others done?

The case [Local government study on care of senior citizens from an ethnic minority](#) is an example of how a research partnership can contribute to improvements in social services at local government level. While one of the local governments that participated in the study had already launched a development process, the research partnership helped propel this process by making the management aware of the problem in question. The case also demonstrates the importance of application-oriented research communication, oral as well as written.

What does the literature say?

[Aiello et al. \(2021\)](#) describe a series of strategies for promoting impact from humanities and social science research. [Numans et al. \(2019\)](#) suggest distinguishing between *participatory impact*, *collaborative impact* and *collective impact*. Several studies argue that a shared vision can support different objectives ([Carise, Cornely & Gurnel, 2002](#); [Clodfelter et al., 2014](#)).

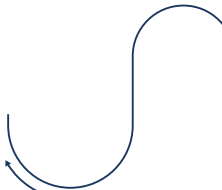
What do the experts say?

The chapter on Impact in [Experts' experiences](#) describes how research partnerships can work towards impact in a variety of ways, including concrete end products and (less visible) learning within the practice organisation. Impact may be the result of the individual project or of the creation of new fields of knowledge.

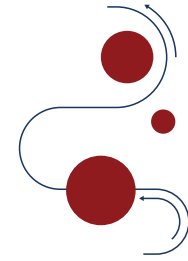


TRANSFORMATIVE RESEARCH PARTNERSHIPS – IN SHORT

THINK ABOUT	WHY?	HOW?
The problem that requires solving.	For the research partnership to be transformative, it is vital that the partners jointly conduct an analysis of the problem that the project aims to address. Subsequently, they must formulate a corresponding research question that may lead to new knowledge that can help solve the problem.	• Start by distinguishing between the practical problem and research question. • Find a good match between practical problem and research question. • Invest sufficient time and energy in finding a good match.
The resources facilitating the project.	When drawing up a budget, you should focus on three things: Research-practice collaborations often take more time than you expect, they are particularly vulnerable to staff turnover, and it may be a good idea to get each partner organisation to invest money in the project.	• Allocate sufficient funds to meeting facilitation, regular communication and project management. • Divide the responsibility between several practitioners, and limit the number of temporary contracts. • It may be a good idea to get each partner organisation to invest money in the project.
The roles of the partners.	Awareness of the institutional context and working methods of the other party is a vital factor in the process of dividing roles and responsibilities between the partners. If they lack such knowledge, they should consider appointing one or more “knowledge brokers”, e.g. a facilitator with knowledge of both research and practice.	• Ask yourself whether the partners have sufficient knowledge of each other’s institutional contexts and working methods. • Consider engaging a facilitator who is familiar with both the academic field and the practice setting. • Clarify the individual partners’ roles and responsibilities.
The meeting place , where the partners can exchange and co-create knowledge.	In a transformative research partnership, the practitioners must act as co-developers rather than as end users of the knowledge created. Therefore, the project must be rooted in a forum for exchange and co-creation of knowledge between research and practice.	• Create a space for interaction and exchange of knowledge between researchers and practitioners. • Find inspiration in the literature.
The process that follows once the project has begun.	The project process will be characterised by some degree of unpredictability, as universities and practice organisations have different rhythms and busy periods, and because new knowledge of the problem is likely to emerge in the process.	• Make the project design and budget as flexible as possible; you should be able to adapt to unforeseen circumstances. • Make sure staff and management in the practice organisation continue to support the project.
The impact that the project contributes to.	Throughout the project period, the partners should reflect on how the project helps address the practical problem and continue to adjust the project design to support this aim.	• Throughout the project period, the parties in the research partnership should have an ongoing conversation about the change that the project contributes to. • Be open – impact can take many different forms. • Towards the end of the project, the partners should reflect on the impact created by the project.



ABOUT THIS GUIDE



What is a “successful research-practice collaboration”?

If you ignore the mistakes and hiccups, you won’t learn anything. This guide on the “successful research-practice collaboration” is meant to help researchers and practitioners avoid some of the pitfalls they are likely to face in a research partnership. And the best way to do this is to look at what can go wrong and what has worked well in the past.

Join the debate!

Prior to a user-driven innovation process scheduled for 2023 – the aim of which was to develop models and tools for specific target groups together with researchers and practitioners – we produced this temporary guide (in 2022). We hope it will inspire future projects.

The guide is based on previous experiences. Like any other recipe, though, it should be adjusted to the given project and the needs and preferences of the partners. We have identified six dimensions characterising a successful research-practice collaboration, but we believe and hope a seventh dimension is out there somewhere. So, if you have input or comments, please get in touch. Our contact information is available at www.marycenter.ku.dk.

What did we do?

In 2022, we conducted three studies to determine what characterises a successful research-practice collaboration, and what the partners should focus on before and during a project:

- **Case studies:** Four [case studies](#) of Danish research-practice collaborations based mainly on interviews with researchers and practitioners.
- **Literature survey:** A [literature survey](#) of Danish and international literature describing experiences with designing and conducting research-practice collaborations.
- **Expert interview study:** An [expert interview study](#) among stakeholders with knowledge of research-practice collaboration.

While the aim of the three studies was to gather insight from researchers, practitioners, experts and existing literature, this guide is based on our own experiences.

Who are we?

The authors, Brigitte Dragsted, Maja Ejrnæs, Birke Jessing and Bjarke Oxlund, have conducted the three studies and produced this guide under the auspices of the Copenhagen Change Academy, Queen Mary’s Center, University of Copenhagen. The Copenhagen Change Academy aims to support research-practice collaborations by promoting experience exchange and designing relevant tools.

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