

Finding Common Cause:

Building research collaborations between universities and Black and minority ethnic communities

Race equality or Black and minority ethnic (BME) organizations are a key part of civil society in Britain and have a strong history of contributing to our country's economic, cultural and political institutions. Recently, funding for this work has become more scarce and competitive, with many BME organizations facing the prospect of closure and consequent effects on equality and inclusion.

At the same time, universities forming collaborative research projects with local community groups has emerged as a steady feature of the UK funding landscape. This briefing gives an introduction to collaborative research partnerships with universities and offers some practical guidance for BME practitioners about establishing such partnerships. After providing a brief background to the Common Cause project, we first outline five key themes particularly for BME groups considering partnerships with universities. The next section focuses on some 'dos and don'ts' for academics, universities and funders considering such collaborations, with a concluding section outlining some principles for fair research.

Universities have recently emerged as places where resources can be accessed, projects activated and the viability of BME voluntary and community groups developed. They have added to the funding infrastructure BME groups can contemplate, providing a funding option distinct from government or local authority contracts, business venture capital, funding through trusts and foundations, or the more ad hoc, project-based funding available for arts and heritage. Find funding through a university, and the focus is likely to be research and knowledge exchange.

Research can enable BME-led voluntary and community work to become much more sustainable and a more permanent force for change in British society. Through improving knowledge and skills, practitioners can better support BME groups and make more compelling arguments for and about their work to funders. Undertaking research has a role in promoting reflective practice, building confidence and allowing those engaged in BME-led work to better understand and articulate what their work is about, further underpinning their primary goal of social change.

“ There are acknowledged gaps in the existing information about the BME Third Sector which prevent a comprehensive national picture being drawn. This in turn diminishes the voice of the sector and the role it can play in building a cohesive civil society in the future.

Voice4Change England (2007)

Key themes

The themes below summarize some of the key issues that BME community organizations must navigate as they consider and develop partnerships with universities.

Power

BME groups need to acknowledge and constantly work with 'the fundamental economic, cultural and social inequality that underpins the relationship between a large well-funded organisation such as a university and smaller community organisations' (Common Cause, 2018). There may be a sense of 'David and Goliath' in such partnerships, but BME groups can also positively work with this reality, because within university campuses there are academics and other university staff who are allies for them and their work. Indeed, a 'common cause' can be discovered or can emerge between them and their work

Background

This briefing draws on the fuller report *Common Cause: Building Research Collaborations between Universities and Black and Minority Ethnic Communities*, published by Bristol University and the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) Connected Communities Programme (2018). A groundbreaking, two-year research project looking at BME community-university partnerships has been completed, and is itself a partnership between Bristol, Nottingham and Liverpool Universities, management consultants Xtend Ltd, and the race equality think tank the Runnymede Trust. This AHRC-funded project combined analyses from a nationwide survey, mapping of past and current collaborative BME community-university partnerships, primary data from a series of six nationwide workshops, and a detailed narrative analysis of 19 individual case studies. The final report encourages but at the same time advises caution to BME groups contemplating this new funding source.

for social change on the one hand, and academics working at the boundaries of research and knowledge production on the other.

“ I was in fear of the institutions that administered the degrees. It's because there was this assumed perception that somehow, they knew more, these spaces knew more, had the authority, these spaces had the books that you would have to study in a language that was often alien, these spaces delivered the individuals that created the laws, you knew these spaces historically rejected you, and didn't reflect your history, the faces in these spaces didn't represent you and often didn't like you.

From case study 'Bass culture', a collaboration between Black Cultural Archives and the University of Westminster

“ [At] first it was an opportunity that was massive ... working with a university, that's a good thing. We're gonna learn a lot working with the university. However, the way the collaboration worked out was not what I was expecting ... because [the] writing of the project, the conception of the project was done by the academic partner.

From case study 'Minding black histories', a collaboration between the African Community Heritage Club and Birmingham City University

This appropriation echoes the sense of voicelessness that BME communities experience in the wider society. They are familiar with being researched about rather than with, and being spoken for rather than speaking and being heard in their own voice and on their own terms. Thus, BME community and voluntary groups need to assert themselves as equal partners in community–university partnerships. They need to be quite conscious about this stance and proactive in its ongoing application, ensuring that they are part of the decision-making process right from the start, shaping the design of the research project; that the budgeting process allocates fairly for their costs and expertise; and that participants and students that they draw into the research project are also paid expenses for their time. As a final resort, BME groups must be prepared to walk away from a prospective partnership.

Structural inequalities

Both parties, and funders, need to acknowledge that existing funding regimes exacerbate the structural inequalities faced by BME groups. Funding regimes reward already-established funding relationships, higher-profile organizations, core-funded groups, and those groups and organizations which have the financial and staffing capacity to respond to short-timescale funding calls. The reality of BME voluntary and community groups is often diametrically opposed to this ideal position. BME groups are more likely to be project-funded, under-funded and under-resourced. They are more likely to be in the position of coping with overwhelming demand while at the same time working with minimal resources. While funders see university overheads as a legitimate cost, they are likely to look with suspicion on any costs that cover the community partner, as these do not immediately seem linked to direct project costs. Costs which address the capacity of community groups to spend time developing prospective partnerships, or which speak to maintaining and renewing their resources, are not deemed as legitimate.

“ the community are applying for bids, kind of anything up to about £12K or £15K, which is a short-term project. My bids are like £1.5million, right ... because I recognise what needs to be invested to move the landscape into a better place ... part of a vicious circle was if you only ever get funded for a small project you're never seen as a big project, you cannot scale up.

Common Cause (2018)

Community-based knowledge

“ I think to communities to hear 'research' means someone's going to come in and use ... or someone's going to come in and take, and that's it. It stems from this very short-term nature of research that universities tend to do ... it's a very quick 'we're going to get what we need and then we're going to leave' and people in communities do notice that.

Common Cause (2018)

Knowledge which comes from the lived, practical realities of BME communities is as valid as knowledge held by universities. Often universities see themselves as the final arbiters of what constitutes knowledge, and yet BME community and voluntary groups are also experts. They know the communities they serve and work with, they have an in-depth understanding of the issues, they know what may be a better approach, and they know the history and circumstances of their client groups. The report argues that universities need to give recognition and status to this kind of knowledge. Traditionally, knowledge is deemed to have authority when it is held in texts, journals and reports, presented in conferences or symposiums. But knowledge can be held in non-traditional and creative sources as well.

“ there are a lot of research methods that aren't really engaging and put people off ... we got really excited about ... using photography, and photography's really easy – anyone can take a picture ... it allowed people to just sort of actively go into their community and show you an answer to a question without necessarily having to speak about it or write it down.

From case study 'Green and black – photovoice: through my lens'

The report encourages BME groups to embrace the use of research methods as a fundamental part of their activities. If BME groups can include qualitative and quantitative data collection methods in their processes, this has the potential to shift their work from what can be an over-focus on a short-term cycle of activities into a longer-term, more strategic process of development and permanent change. Not only is research an opportunity to create content, but deepening their own knowledge base strengthens BME groups' ability to initiate projects on their terms, ultimately making that research deeply relevant to the communities the groups affect.

The picture for BME groups is made even more unequal structurally and pressurized still further. The report argues that BME groups applying for funding may self-censor in the application process, choosing smaller pots of funding that they consider to be more realistic. Further, their funding applications are pressurized into being 'diverse' and 'representative' of multiple communities. Still further, it is not unknown for funders to pressurize already over-stretched BME groups into taking on an unremunerated advocacy role for them, as funders attempt to make themselves 'look good' by attracting an increased number of applications from BME groups for their funding schemes.

BME groups need to focus on the longer-term, bigger picture, seeking funding which invests in their capacities, vision and push for social change. They need to step away from short-term activities, build long-term relationships with funders and move beyond competitive relationships with other community organizations, wherever possible building consortia and collaboration with them instead. Although they are reliant on funders to acknowledge and enable this, they should also argue and push for a sustainable infrastructure responsive to their needs and vision.

Knowledge and knowledge production

“ There is, however, very little analysis of how questions of race intersect with the design and conduct of research.

Common Cause (2018)

This report intrudes on a series of complex and topical debates about knowledge taking place in the academy and in wider society, many of them quite fundamental in nature. What role have universities played in excluding the knowledge of marginalized communities? How do we include knowledge systems not traditionally present in the academy? What role can participatory methods and community-engaged or community-centred research play in disrupting the reproduction of longstanding structural inequalities?

For the arts and humanities in particular, there is a concern about whose voices, experiences and cultures are being reflected in the research process. This is fundamental because, the argument goes, robust knowledge cannot be produced without addressing it. Ultimately, these debates circle around the question: what are universities for?

Currently, just like the Research Excellence Framework (REF), the newer Knowledge-Exchange Excellence Framework (KEF), still under development, presents an exciting prospect for the longer term. These frameworks are ways in which universities demonstrate their impact and relevance to their wider communities, and have created a drive for them to seek partnerships and collaborations with community organizations.

The National Co-ordinating Centre for Public Engagement (NCCPE) runs a website, including the online journal *Research For All*, which is an excellent starting point for BME groups interested in developing their knowledge about this field.

Time and trust

“ We had a language in common already ... it was really a question of creating space, understanding the constraints

in terms of time and so on and getting on with it. We didn't need to spend long thrashing out a shared understanding. It would have been very, very difficult had we not already had that shared understanding to do this work in the time that we had.

From Case Study '60 untold stories of black Britain', a collaboration between Friends of Marsha Phoenix Trust and Goldsmiths, University of London

Some of the most successful collaborative relationships have seemed to come out of nowhere, reacting to a funding call, but in reality they are often built on years of informal contact and mutual knowledge. Some have been achieved through the mutual appreciation and trust built while working together on smaller projects. In addition, collaborations are often complicated by the need to build trust with community participants – the people with the knowledge and raw data that both the university and the community partner depend on. It takes time to really understand the intentions, aims, agendas and expectations of each party and to begin to knit those into a mutually beneficial research project.

“ The initial meeting with the academic partner was very uncomfortable. Nevertheless, honest conversations did take place and sometimes there were heated exchanges about what was not working.

From case study 'Slave trade legacies', a collaboration between Bright Ideas, Nottingham, and Nottingham University

In the process of asserting their equal role in developing and shaping a research project, BME groups need to be prepared to have difficult conversations, or to hit points of fundamental disagreement with their university partner. The report argues that this is part of the process of building trust and may well be necessary to ensure that the final works are a true co-production between partners. Conversations about intentions, expectations, needs and priorities all take time to become apparent. Arriving at points of disagreement is a chance to further clarify and deepen the partnership, and should not be avoided.

Ownership and legacy

In the pressure to get a funding bid finalized, questions of intellectual property, ownership of materials, the documenting and archiving of materials, and the project's contribution to the public knowledge base should also be considered and discussed.

“ With most projects we publish everything under Creative Commons licensing, the University has their stamp on it and the Chinese Cooperative or ... equivalent community project will have their stamp on it. We worked very closely with all the archives and all the library services regarding copyright, use of materials, etc. And then they are placed in a community-accessible place – library services, archives – under Creative Commons licensing as a production of this project ... but it is essentially owned by no one really.

From case study 'Chinese digital storytelling project', a collaboration between Swansea Chinese Community Co-op Centre and Swansea University

“ *The relationship with the performance and the community is the main tangible output. It means that ... we've got a stronger chance of working with these communities again in the future.*

I suppose in legal terms the outputs are owned by the University. It's not something that we've been concerned with on this project, although perhaps we ought to be ... but it's not something we should ignore on an ongoing basis. It needs future discussion. And it needs it from an equitable point of view.

From case study 'In flux', a collaboration between Excavate and the Centre for Hidden Histories

Questions of ownership and legacy need to be talked through at the earliest stages of shaping and developing the research project. Intellectual property rights can be shared, but practical consideration also needs to be given to the thorough documentation of and long-term public access to knowledge, and to closer and longer-term connection with the university itself. Community partners could contribute to teaching programmes, take on fellowships or seek follow-on funding, extending the life and application of the original project.

The report found that 'questions of ownership of intellectual property, particularly in relation to cultural outputs, were more common in those projects associated with artistic endeavour and collaboration. In other projects, however, the question of who "owned" the data and in particular the materials, writing and reports that came out of the project was less commonly discussed or if discussed, it remained unclear.'

Other stakeholders – dos (and some don'ts)

In addition to the guidance given to BME groups, the report also offers direction to other stakeholders interested in BME community–university collaborations, namely universities, academics and funders.

Universities

Developing a relationship with a university can offer community groups access to resources such as venue and meeting space, networking with other local community groups, specialized and skilled bid-writing, and strong existing funder relationships.

For universities interested in better working in partnerships with BME voluntary and community groups:

DON'T engage in 'extractive research' which uses local community groups for short-term funding purposes, leaving damaged trust and relationships in its wake.

DON'T, if applicable, deny the institution's historic links to slavery, colonialism and their proceeds, entrenching the gulf between the university and its surrounding communities who are often still living with the legacies of slavery and colonialism.

DO overhaul bureaucratic human resources (HR), finance and payment systems, making them responsive to non-core-funded community groups working with tight cash flows and limited resources.

DO seek to reflect the makeup of your local community in your staff and student cohorts.

DO seek to reflect the makeup of your local community in your senior management team.

DO locate responsibility for public engagement and co-produce research at the highest level in the university, e.g. at pro-vice-chancellor level.

DO have open and transparent systems for community outsiders seeking initial contact with academic insiders.

Academics

Developing a relationship with an academic can offer the BME community group both subject knowledge and expertise in research methods, which, in turn, can enable the BME practitioner to form a different way of engaging with their own area of work.

For academics leading a collaborative research project with BME voluntary and community groups:

DON'T expect ideas, knowledge and skills to be expressed in ways similar to your own.

DON'T over-state your position in your institution and the resources you are able to access, leading to the fundamental basis on which the research project is premised being flawed right from the start.

DO be transparent about costs and budgeting, paying close attention to the available staffing, resourcing and financial capacities of the community partner to be able to deliver their part of the research project.

DO create time and space for informal dialogue and relationship-building.

DO allow meetings and gatherings to be held off campus, and engage with the wider imperative BME groups might have to create safe spaces for their participants and stakeholders.

DO think and plan for legacy and intellectual property rights, for the thorough documentation of the research project and for the public accessibility of archives.

DO consider working in multiple languages.

DO consider using creative/arts-based methods as alternative ways of holding knowledge.

Funders

Funders can and do profoundly shape the life and development of BME organizations and groups. A recent study of over 300 Connected Communities projects funded by AHRC found that over 50 per cent of community partners in those projects were already connected with universities, squeezing out more-isolated and un-networked BME organizations.

For funders interested in supporting BME-led work:

DON'T increase the representative burden of BME-led funding applications by expecting groups to reach communities beyond their expertise.

DON'T exploit the potential for advocacy of community-based groups and individuals without giving remuneration and recognition for that expertise.

DO focus on projects which develop longer-term capacity, rather than short-term project activity.

DO encourage follow-on funding applications that allow collaborative teams to continue to deepen their expertise and relationships, and, in the longer term, impact social policy.

DO use your power to define allowable and disallowable costs to support the core costs of smaller organizations.

DO support research which will document the loss and contraction of the BME voluntary sector, including secondary, infrastructure support organizations, that has taken place since the coalition government's imposition of austerity cuts.

DO recognise the need to fund secondary infrastructure organizations that identify and support the needs and vision of BME voluntary and community groups.

DO create consistent monitoring variables in national, regional and local databases, in partnership with other national and regional funders.

DO fund and support higher education institutions which have research centres focused on race and race equality.

Fair research: 10 principles for community–university partnerships

Finally, we outline ten principles intended to support funders, universities and community partners in understanding and assessing what would constitute a non-exploitative and productive research partnership between universities and smaller civic, voluntary, cultural and community organizations, groups and individuals.

1. A commitment to strengthening the partnering community organization

Any partnership between a university and a community organization or group should be premised on leaving that organization stronger than before the participation.

2. A commitment to mutual benefit

There should be sufficient time in the development process for the project to identify each partner's needs and concerns and to clearly articulate the mutual benefit for each partner prior to projects being funded.

3. A commitment to transparency and accountability

Transparency and accountability need to operate at multiple levels, from the institutional level to the individual project level, encompassing creative, business or research objectives, bid-writing, budgeting, ethics and project management.

4. Fair practices in payments

This means that the process for payments is clear and transparent, ensuring that payment is made in a timely manner, and in advance if necessary given the needs of the project.

5. Fair payments for participants

This means agreeing payments for participants commensurate with the costs they will face from not engaging in other activities.

6. A commitment to fair knowledge exchange

This means that no single partner will be expected or entitled to bear the full weight of theorizing or interpreting the work of the project, and that all partners will seek to build dialogue across different sets of knowledge and experience.

7. A commitment to sustainability and legacy

Project participants will be expected to develop plans for longer-term legacy and sustainability by agreeing how data and outputs from projects will be protected, shared and accessed over the long term, and by whom.

8. A commitment to equality and diversity

All communities have multiple identities, and the intersection of those different identities should be considered wherever relevant. While this principle is targeted at project partnerships, it also applies to universities and community organizations separately, encouraging them to actively promote equity and inclusion and engage in dismantling structural racism and discrimination.

9. A commitment to sectoral as well as organizational development

Fair research partnerships are understood to be making a contribution to the wider knowledge landscape and public good. This means paying attention to questions of documentation, archiving, attribution, communication and publishing.

10. A commitment to reciprocal learning

Fair research projects will be expected to contribute to the wider knowledge base about how to build better university–community collaborations, and to reflect on and document what has been learned about partnership processes during the project.

Public reporting on progress against these principles will be essential to compliance with them.

Case studies and links

60 Untold Stories of Black Britain. A collaboration between Friends of Marsha Phoenix Trust and Goldsmiths, University of London.

Bass Culture. A collaboration between Black Cultural Archives and the University of Westminster.

The Bigger Picture: Impact of Intergenerational Arts Programmes on Minority Communities. A collaboration between Nottingham Contemporary, New Art Exchange, the National Justice Museum, Bright Ideas Nottingham, Midlands3Cities, Nottingham Trent University and the University of Nottingham.

Chinese Digital Story Telling Project: Immigrant Experience of First Generation Chinese, Immigrants in Swansea and Surrounding Areas. A collaboration between Swansea Chinese Community Co-Op Centre and Swansea University.

Green and Black—PhotoVoice: Through My Lens. A collaboration between Ujima Radio and the University of Bristol.

Imagine: Writing in the Community. A collaboration between communities in Rotherham and the University of Sheffield.

In Flux. A collaboration between Excavate and the Centre for Hidden Histories.

Instruments India: Intercultural Creativity in Electroacoustic Music. Integrating Indian music cultural sound emblems into new works. A collaboration between Milapfest and Liverpool Hope University.

Khyal: Music and Imagination. A collaboration between GemArts and Durham University.

Life Chances: Reimagining regulatory systems for low income families in modern urban settings. A collaboration between University of Bristol and South Riverside Community Development Centre.

Making Histories: Teaching community, heritage and diversity in the National History Curriculum. A collaboration between Runnymede Trust, the University of Manchester and the University of Cambridge.

Minding Black Histories. A collaboration between the African Community Heritage Hub and Birmingham City University.

PASAR: Participatory Arts and Social Action in Research. A collaboration between Praxis Community Projects and the PASAR Project.

Slave Trade Legacies: Colour of Money and Global Cotton Connections: East meets west in the Derbyshire Peak District, UK. A collaboration between Bright Ideas Nottingham and the University of Nottingham.

Hidden Histories of World War One: Ramgarhia Sikh Tapestry Project. A collaboration between the Ramgarhia Social Sisters and the Centre for Hidden Histories.

The Southall Story. A collaboration between independent artists and the University of Exeter.

The Bench Project. A collaboration between Greenwich Inclusion project and the University of Sheffield.

What I'd like you to know about me: Translating the Experience of Emotional Distress (part of Researching Multilingually at the Borders of Language, the Body, Law and the State). A collaboration between Glasgow Clyde College and the University of Glasgow.

Vernacular Religion: Varieties of Religiosity in the Nepali Diaspora. A collaboration between the Centre for Nepal Studies UK and the University of Oxford.

Useful reading and links

Common Cause (2018) *Common Cause: Building Research Collaborations between Universities and Black and Minority Ethnic Communities*. Bristol University and AHRC Connected Communities Programme.

Facer, K. and Enright, B. (2016) *Creating Living Knowledge*. University of Bristol and AHRC Connected Communities Programme.

Foldy, E. (2016) 'The location of race in action research', in H. Bradbury (ed.), *Handbook of Action Research* (3rd edn). Sage Publications.

People's Knowledge Editorial Collective (2015) *People's Knowledge and Participatory Action Research*. Practical Action Publishing.

Voice4Change England (2007) *Bridge the Gap: What is Known about the BME Third Sector in England*. London: Voice4Change England. www.voice4change-england.co.uk/webfm_send/6

www.commoncauseresearch.com

www.dur.ac.uk/beacon/socialjustice/ethics_consultation

www.publicengagement.ac.uk/nccpe-projects-and-services/research-all-journal

<https://re.ukri.org/knowledge-exchange/the-higher-education-innovation-fund-heif/>

www.ref.ac.uk/https://www.ukri.org/

<http://voice4change-england.co.uk/content/who-bme-voluntary-sector>

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