

# What use is academia for small businesses and community interest companies?



*Pressures to demonstrate the impact of research has led to increasing numbers of academics looking beyond their peers for new audiences for their research findings, including to small businesses and community interest companies. But how can academia be of use to these groups? **Emily Rainsford, LJ Rawlings, Lauren Mistry and Eve Forrest** share reflections on a successful collaboration and skills exchange between a social sciences researcher and community interest company Youth Employment UK, with perspectives from academic, community interest company, and funder.*

What use is academia for small businesses and community interest companies? Both within and outside of academia, this question is becoming more and more relevant. Pressures to demonstrate the impact of research has led to increasing numbers of academics looking beyond their annual conferences and workshops for new audiences for their research findings, audiences who may or may not prove receptive.

This post provides three perspectives reflecting on a successful collaboration, funded by the ESRC Impact Acceleration Account (IAA), between Youth Employment UK, a community interest company (i.e. social enterprise), and Dr Emily Rainsford, a research associate in the politics department at Newcastle University.

Emily was seconded to Youth Employment UK for a skills exchange as part of the ESRC secondment scheme, which targets social scientists to collaborate with businesses around the industrial strategy – not necessarily as natural a match as in other fields. Below, all parties – academic, business, and funder – share their reflections on why this collaboration proved to be a success. Rather than a prescriptive account of how to undertake such work, this post is instead a reflection on the development of the relationships involved.

## Emily Rainsford – the academic



At the time I saw the call for the ESRC IAA secondment, I didn't know much about Youth Employment UK, other than they were the secretariat for the All Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on Youth Employment. The call was focused on early-career researchers looking to foster a skills exchange with business. I was initially taken aback by the criteria: as someone from the social sciences, and politics in particular, working with a business doesn't feel like a natural match!

I realised the main skills I have to offer are research skills and expertise, so I approached Youth Employment UK with the offer of a methods workshop in exchange for being shown the ropes of the policy domain. Luckily this was exactly what they wanted, to become more authoritative with data and research but lacking the skills or capacity at that particular time. Having that clearly formulated mutual benefit at the outset was key to the success of our collaboration.

My research is on the role of family in pathways to youth employment, so clearly of relevance to young people, their families, and society. My main motivation for applying for the IAA money and working with Youth Employment UK is I care about what I'm researching and am determined to share the knowledge created with those who are affected by it, and those with the power to make a difference. Youth Employment UK is a key player in this field and so seemed a fitting partner with whom to develop effective pathways to impact. In addition to a wide-ranging membership, including all sizes of businesses, charities, youth organisations, and young people, they work with civil servants and politicians and run the APPG.

It was clear from the beginning that we had complementary skills, knowledge, and contacts. Early on I visited their office in Kettering to deliver the methods training, while we also spent a day planning our report. That initial, face-to-face, intensive meeting was really valuable in establishing trust and understanding. The methods training has been one of the main impacts on Youth Employment UK, as they have now started their own data collection. In exchange, I've gained some invaluable contacts and new avenues through which to disseminate my research – from national organisations delivering employment programmes, to businesses like Pret, as well as charities like the Saints Foundation. I've also been given access to their political networks and now represent them on the European Social Fund's national sub-committee on employment, skills, and social inclusion. I'm due to speak at the [APPG on Youth Employment](#) in London in September.

For me, there are a number of key factors that made our collaboration successful. I'm fortunate to have a very flexible schedule and am able to move my schedule around to attend meetings in London at short notice. This isn't the case for everyone; something all academics and our would-be collaborators must be aware of. Furthermore, both sides were clear from the outset on time and resource commitments, and what our intended outcomes were. This focus was really important given the short length of the secondment. Last but not least, it would not have worked so well so quickly without the positive relationship with Youth Employment UK staff, particularly LJ and Lauren, wonderful people with whom I get along really well.

### **LJ Rawlings and Lauren Mistry, Youth Employment UK – the small business and community interest company**



Youth Employment UK champions the voice of youth. Founded in 2012, we work tirelessly to ensure young people have a view on the issues that matter. While we have worked with young people on a national scale, albeit in smaller focus groups, larger pieces of research have proved beyond our capacity. Despite this, an ambition of ours is to become an authoritative research voice, and so collaborating with Emily has helped us make vital progress towards this goal.

While we enter into collaborative partnerships frequently, this type of skills exchange wasn't something we had any knowledge or experience of before. But we certainly found it a valuable and enjoyable learning and development opportunity. The senior leadership team received thorough training in the research process and, with Emily's support, could subsequently plan impact and evaluation measures of our existing programmes. We have been able to put some of this learning into practise when planning and designing our Youth Voice Census, and gaining this extra capacity and experience sets us up for more ambitious research projects. The new skills will not only enable us to improve our programmes, but also potentially attract more or different funding in future. The training has also made us better critical thinkers, more able to interrogate the big data and statistics we use frequently, such as the Labour Force survey. Too often previously we would be confined to what we thought we knew, repeating the same stats and information.

We take away two important lessons from this collaboration. Firstly, it is important to manage expectations and clearly understand the resources your business will need to allocate from the start. You're not hiring someone to undertake work for you; it's a project that demands equal collaboration. Secondly, embrace working with academics and universities. The business sector and social scientists don't always engage with one another but there is certainly potential for fruitful collaborations.

### **Eve Forrest, ESRC IAA Officer at Newcastle University – the funder**



ideas.

Of the many successful ESRC IAA projects and secondments we have funded, a number of common underpinning factors can be noted. Good relationships take time to develop and often begin before projects have even been conceived. Whether through chance encounters at sector-specific events or working through ideas at targeted workshops, collaborations frequently start softly. I would always recommend that people, regardless of the sector they're in, are open to networking opportunities in their own and related fields. These networks can be a great source of – and sounding board for – new

Also crucial is to bring partners into the project at the earliest opportunity. Irrespective of whether or not the work ends up bearing fruit, partners appreciate the chance to contribute to the process and indicate what support they can offer, which is frequently more than you might expect. To encourage pre-submission discussions, we ask IAA applicants for confirmation that all partners involved have had oversight of the application. We've found that co-production applications that have been discussed at length with partners beforehand are stronger and more nuanced in the impact they deliver.

Another key success factor is making clear partners' mutually beneficial outcomes, as LJ and Emily have outlined. At the beginning of any project, researchers should consider things from the perspective of their collaborators. How much time will *realistically* be required? What are the advantages of being a part of the work? What are the tangible benefits of involvement? This needn't necessarily be focused on monetary gains – is there any part of the project they could shape an approach to, or offer insight to others? Is there any help you could give them in return for in-kind support? Being mindful of these advantages can help a project have a lasting legacy.

Of course, you can't beat good, old-fashioned chemistry and if you get on with a collaborator right away, the rest will come naturally, as it did with Emily and LJ's project. Yet all strong relationships must start from somewhere. Whether through a chance meeting or a more targeted approach you should always expect the unexpected with any collaboration, but start slowly and it might blossom into something beautiful.

*The final report on this project, "[The Role of Family in Social Mobility](#)" is available for download from the Youth Employment UK website.*

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*Note: This article gives the views of the authors, and not the position of the LSE Impact Blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please review our [comments policy](#) if you have any concerns on posting a comment below.*

## About the authors

**Emily Rainsford** is a research associate in the School of Geography, Politics and Sociology at Newcastle University. She has been working on the [CUPESSE](#) project looking at the role of family in young people's pathways to employment and achievement of economic self-sufficiency. She has long been involved in various impact and outreach related activities relating to young people but also an internship in the Cabinet Office, and occasionally tweets at [@EmilyRainsford](#).

**Laura-Jane Rawlings** is Founder and CEO of Youth Employment UK. She is a passionate campaigner for youth employment and for the rights for all young people to access employment and have their voices heard on the issues that affect them. Recognised as a leading youth employment expert, Laura-Jane provides support, insight, and expertise to many groups such as the All-Party Parliamentary Group for Education and Youth Employment, the Education and Skills sub-committee, and sits on the steering group for the Cabinet Office Inclusive Economy Partnership for Youth Employment. She also sits on two ESF National sub-committees: Employment, Skills and Social Inclusion, and Equality and Diversity. Laura-Jane has also worked on consultative projects with organisations such as the Cambridge Local Authority, Northamptonshire Learning Partnership, Chilled Food Association, OCR, Plotr, PiXL, and the National Citizen Service.

**Lauren Mistry** is Communications and Operations Director at Youth Employment UK. She oversees the organisation's operations and content management, ensuring that information shared with young people meets their needs. Lauren led the redesign of the Youth Employment UK site and manages the extensive content plan, campaigns, and messaging. She has led key research projects as part of her role, exploring employability skills in the 2017 literature review, supporting on the Role of the Family in Social Mobility report published in 2018, and is leading on the Youth Voice Census research. Most recently Lauren has joined the IEP West Midlands Pilot project to lend her support and expertise.

**Eve Forrest** manages the ESRC Impact Acceleration Account (IAA) at Newcastle University and is based within the Impact team in the Faculty for Humanities and Social Science. She has an interest in widening engagement and awareness of social science research with various local and national partners. Her research interests include embodiment and everyday technology practices with particular focus on photography and blogging.