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# The dynamics of working at intersections: Reflections from exploring inequalities

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## Abstract

This commentary provides a first-hand account of a year-long collaborative academic–policy synthesis project – Exploring Inequalities: Igniting Research to Better Inform UK Policy – between University College London (UCL) and the Resolution Foundation. We brought together leading experts from over fifty organizations, convened six roundtables and conducted additional in-depth interviews. This collaboration resulted in a series of action notes and a final report, *Structurally Unsound* (Morris et al., 2019). By reflecting on the 'nuts and bolts' of *doing* this type of project, we reveal the hidden realities of knowledge exchange and open up new possibilities for understanding successes and failures for future projects of this kind.

**Keywords:** intersectional, inequalities, knowledge exchange, public policy, interdisciplinary

## Key messages

- This commentary is an example of how the complexities of knowledge exchange and the inequities within partnerships can have a significant effect on both the final outcomes of a project and the collaborators who are involved.
- Complexity in collaborations is not a reason to avoid cross-sectoral partnerships or to exclude participants, but it requires a significant amount of labour, time, flexibility and trust to ensure that it is truly equitable.
- It is important to make transparent the dynamics and uncertainties in knowledge exchange, engaged research projects, as these can contribute to a more nuanced understanding of project successes and failures.

Choose any year at random over the past fifty years and you would be almost certain to find at least one piece of equalities-focused legislation enacted in that year in the UK. From the Equal Pay Act 1970 to the Employment Equality (Sex Discrimination) Regulations 2005, the Race Relations Act 1976 to the Racial and Religious Hatred Act 2006, successive governments have put considerable resources into outlawing discrimination and promoting a more inclusive society.

Alongside this, focus on tackling inequalities has increasingly risen up research, policy, funders' and business agendas. In the UK, we are seeing an intensification of relationships between universities and public policy. Higher education institutions, their researchers and programmes are leading and co-developing projects in partnership with think tanks and policy actors. In England, this has been amplified

by the introduction of Research England's Knowledge Exchange Framework (KEF), and further supported by dedicated funding streams, such as the Higher Education Innovation Fund and Impact Acceleration Accounts (IAAs) (see Skidmore, 2019).

It has been suggested that 'universities now have the opportunity, as never before, to consider and explain their unique approach to knowledge exchange' (Clare, 2020: n.p.). As universities are pushed to be more ambitious and to get better at telling their stories (see Frost, 2019), this commentary provides a first-hand account of a year-long collaborative academic–policy synthesis project – Exploring Inequalities: Igniting Research to Better Inform UK Policy – between UCL and the Resolution Foundation that took place in 2019. The collaboration resulted in a series of action notes for researchers, policy professionals, employers and third-sector organizations, and a final report, *Structurally Unsound* (Morris et al., 2019). The project was jointly funded through a Research England Higher Education Innovation Fund award, in-kind contribution from the Resolution Foundation, and funding from UCL Grand Challenges and UCL Public Policy.

The collaboration explored here reveals the realities of knowledge exchange and the mechanisms that underpin it, by providing a reflection on the 'nuts and bolts' of *doing* this type of project. We start by focusing on the physical dynamics of partnerships, including people, location, space and practicalities, and describe each of these, before moving on to explore intra-project team dynamics. The commentary concludes with consideration of the management and evaluation of inter-project participant dynamics. Throughout the paper, the term 'project team' is used to refer to the individuals based at UCL and the Resolution Foundation who were responsible for setting up and administering the project, convening the roundtables and delivering the project outputs. 'Project participants' is used to refer to individuals drawn from policy, the third sector, business and academia across the domains of education, employment, health and housing, who participated in the roundtables and evidence-gathering interviews, and contributed to knowledge exchange throughout the project.

## Exploring the physical dynamics of partnership

Bogenschneider and Corbett (2010: 15) show that communication between knowledge producers and knowledge consumers is complex, because each operates 'within distinct professional and institutional cultures with different goals, information needs, reward systems, and languages'. Yet bringing communities together to exchange knowledge, they suggest, can have significant effects on each other, their organizations and the communities they share. Recognizing this point, the project set out to be deliberately broad in scope, and to bring together leading experts from the spheres of academia, policy, the third sector and business. Project participants were drawn from over fifty organizations, and six roundtables were convened, each four hours long. Project participants were invited to all roundtables, but they did not always attend, although about twenty participants attended them all. The roundtables deliberately did not seek to include community groups or the wider public. Instead, we included leading charities and public engagement specialists, who provided summaries of the views of their interest groups. Alongside the roundtables, additional one-to-one in-depth interviews were held to widen participation.

The roundtables took place in the physical space of the Resolution Foundation's offices. Situated in the heart of Westminster in London, the Resolution Foundation's offices are within a period house and have views over the Royal Park of St James. The building has a private garden, a lecture space, meeting rooms, library and offices. The

decor is grand and imposing, full of large marble works of art and heavy furniture. It was striking how often participants commented on the setting – noting the beauty of the space, but also the contradiction between the feelings of grandeur the building evokes and meeting for a project on structural inequalities.

The building itself, however, was not a factor in our decision to hold the roundtables there; rather, it was for its location. Being so close to Whitehall ensured that the civil servants and policy professionals clustered in the area could more easily attend the roundtables. Equally, it was close to an accessible tube station, which ensured that participants with disabilities and those with caring responsibilities could participate. Due to the effects of COVID-19, this plan would naturally be updated today. Yet even before the pandemic, on reflection, we realized that such a model did not easily allow for regional and devolved policy professionals to participate in a UK-wide project. This meant that most of our stakeholder interviews with devolved policy professionals were held over the phone, undoubtedly changing the nature of such engagement and their contributions.

A key logistical take-away from conducting the project was the multitude of effects that meeting facilities, room layouts and physical space have on engagement and the nature of discussions that can occur. Within the project, we set out to have non-hierarchical, multi-directional communication (see Bergman et al., 2016), where all participants could equally engage with one another and with the chairs. A necessary consideration to enable such communication is the room set-up and the furniture within it.

Physical dynamics intersect with both room set-up and the heavy lifting of participating in and doing project work. At the roundtables, the furniture was fixed within the room, and often the main table could not accommodate everyone around it (see Figure 1). But, as Rau et al. (2018: 268) acknowledge, efforts to be inclusive and to have equity of knowledge exchange bring up ‘considerable conceptual, epistemic and practical challenges’ that require skilful moderation. During the roundtables,

**Figure 1: A typical roundtable (credit: Shutterstock)**



**Box 1: An exemplar roundtable agenda**

Exploring Inequalities – Igniting research to better inform UK policy  
Inequalities in Housing

12.00–16.00 Tuesday 25 June 2019

Resolution Foundation, 2 Queen Anne's Gate, London SW1H 9AA

Agenda

- 12.00–12.15 Arrivals and lunch
- 12.15–12.25 Welcome and introductions
- 12.25–12.30 Inequalities in housing: An overview
- 12.30–13.30 What we know: Intersections and links
- 13.30–14.30 What don't we know?: Evidence gaps
- 14.30–14.45 Break
- 14.45–15.30 What change do we want to see?
- 15.30–16.00 Concluding remarks and space for open discussion

then, those chairing the sessions had to be attentive to the inner and outer 'circles' that formed due to the physical space of the room. This required using techniques to stimulate dialogue to ensure that everyone had a voice and could participate equally in discussion, dialogue and debate, regardless of whether they were 'at the table'. Practically, this meant providing the conversation with some structure (see Box 1), ensuring presentations were brief and focused on the 'so what', making room for plenty of discussion both formally and informally over breaks, and consciously and actively drawing everyone in at different points, based on their expertise. It also meant scanning the room for signs that participants wanted to speak, and observing body language throughout to know both when to bring a participant in, and also when to move conversations on.

The movement of bodies through space and time is also a significant dimension of knowledge exchange work – not only the time spent by those formally engaged as part of the project team, but also the physical and often invisible bodies that contribute to knowledge exchange projects. In our project, this included Resolution Foundation event staff, concierge, caterers, and the cleaners who serviced the space before and after use. They are part of the wider knowledge exchange landscape, and it is vital to make their contribution to the project visible, because, as Crain et al. (2016: 5) remind us, 'work that is not seen is not valued, either symbolically or materially'. This invisibility can have significant effects, as it serves to further entrench patterns of inequalities that we are seeking to dismantle.

There was also substantial behind-the-scenes planning and project management required prior to and after each roundtable. Since 2005, the Resolution Foundation has been at the forefront of running projects of this nature (see Resolution Foundation, 2020). Even so, they significantly underestimated the number of project hours, and in the end, they doubled their contribution. This highlights how the sheer amount of time required for this type of project is hard to gauge from the outset, and is not easily accessible when the focus of impact is on a single project output, or when success is measured *purely* in download statistics or qualitative testimonials from project participants. While we might have become more comfortable with developing metrics for assessing research impact, the level of time and resource required to deliver knowledge exchange, especially in public policy, is rarely detailed, let alone accounted for in indicators for success. (The Higher Education Business & Community (HE-BCI) survey is an exception to this. This survey methodology is currently under review, and it is not publicly available.)

The next section of this paper will explore these points further by highlighting the hidden labour that goes into a project of this kind through reflecting on the intra-project and inter-project participant dynamics.

## Intra-project team dynamics

Alongside the physical dynamics of cross-sectoral partnership collaboration, consideration must also be given to the importance of dynamics among the project team.

The project was jointly chaired by Professor Nick Gallent, Professor of Housing and Planning at UCL's Bartlett School of Planning, and Matthew Whittaker, then Deputy Chief Executive of the Resolution Foundation. The co-chairs were responsible for running the roundtables, advising on topics for discussion and reviewing the final outputs. To minimize demands on the co-chairs, the project was led overall by Siobhan Morris, an inequalities practitioner, and supported by Dr Olivia Stevenson, a policy broker (the authors of this paper). The team also included Fahmida Rahman, an analyst at the Resolution Foundation, and two part-time research assistants from UCL, Oliver Patel and Dr Clare Stainthorp.

Utilizing an inclusive way of working in a multi-partnership and multi-agency project is complex. On the one hand, it provides opportunities to work with collaborators to learn and benefit from each other's knowledge and information, thus helping to build consensus, strengthening partnerships, and breaking down professional boundaries and possible parochial attitudes. On the other hand, balancing voice and the multiple roles and responsibilities takes considerable time and energy. A flat hierarchy can result in a lack of clarity about roles and responsibilities, which are constantly in negotiation. These opportunities and challenges raise critical questions about how to ensure equality within the make-up of project teams, and how to ensure that all contributions are acknowledged equitably. Our approach was to keep this as an open dialogue, and to ensure inclusive intra-project team dynamics and diversity of thought in project set-up, and that all project team members presented at the roundtables, contributed to pre- and post-meeting materials, and to the final report. Project team members received full public acknowledgement for these contributions.

Beyond this, when operating across multiple sectors, there is also a significant challenge in continually aligning project goals for the success of running a project, and for each individual participant's needs, ideals and views. In our experience, this required the project team to give up a degree of knowledge 'ownership'. We needed to put aside how we might normally have done things – and, in some respects, this is the entire purpose of an exploratory partnership project with different collaborators. Yet, to truly do so is not straightforward.

As Kliem and Ludin (1992) suggest, effective leaders require good interpersonal skills and the ability to inspire. We recognized this early on, and we adopted a flexible leadership style that was sometimes soft, sometimes firmer, to ensure both that the project had shape and that participants could recognize their meaningful contributions, and thus avoid the sense of 'talking into a void'. This helped participants to feel a sense of being an active part of the project. However, this can pose personal risks to those delivering projects, as 'doing this work also requires awareness of a deeper set of concerns around ownership of and legitimate roles in knowledge creation' (Romich and Fentress, 2019: 84). Reflecting on our experience, we attempted to provide an atmosphere that actively dismantled the privilege of certain types of knowledge in

order to enable multiple forms of research and evidence to intersect. However, this had the hidden effect of making us question whether project participants valued our contributions as knowledge brokers.

Likewise, we often walked a tightrope between ensuring progress towards our project objectives and taking care not to dominate discussions, so that all views were valued equally. A significant amount of emotional intelligence is required to navigate the wishes and expectations of project participants, and this consequently places a heavy psychological burden on the core team.

Alongside consideration of the leadership styles, thought must also be given to the literal *practicalities* of working across different sectors. The next section therefore offers reflective discussion on managing and evaluating cross-sectoral knowledge exchange projects.

## Managing and evaluating inter-stakeholder dynamics

A critical practicality when undertaking knowledge exchange activities is the potential for a clash of cultures of communication. Different sectors operate under specific contexts, and communication is therefore naturally different. In a university, encouragement is given to having a voice, to questioning, critiquing, probing and convening discussion. Yet, within the civil service, for example, it is the minister who has the 'voice', and the role of the civil servant is to provide the evidence base on which others make decisions.

Such a clash of communicative norms, and the resulting potential for an unequal power dynamic, meant that it was extremely important to do work outside the roundtables to build rapport and develop sound understanding of the agendas of individual participants. This included, for example, one-to-ones, follow-up phone calls and desk research about participants' organizational priorities. Only through such work to actively manage inter-project participant dynamics, and by investing time to build relationships, could we work in a truly collaborative way that navigated power dynamics and sectoral communicative cultural norms. It is important to recognize that this works both ways. At the same time, as brokers, project participants also saw us as a vehicle through which their agendas could be heard in alternative and cross-sectoral spaces.

Drawing project participants from over fifty organizations resulted in divergent expectations of what the final output of the project should consist of and be a vehicle for. By way of example: third-sector organizations envisaged a set of defined policy recommendations around which to organize lobbying and campaigning activities; business sought three bullet points providing defined actions for firms; national government wanted clear policy recommendations to direct immediate action; researchers wanted a comprehensive overview of the latest research insights across all disciplines; others sought a traditional research paper in a peer-reviewed journal. The expectation was that the project team would produce all these.

Managing these divergent expectations was not straightforward. Delivering outputs to satisfy different audiences takes extensive resources – intellectual and physical resources, and time. Indeed, much of our time and relationship building was about managing the expectations of participants, and working to find a way to devise a final 'output' that could work for all. All too often, such work is underappreciated and excluded from discussions of how to conduct successful knowledge exchange projects. Yet, to do truly engaged research with multi-sector stakeholders, this is required.

Similarly, focus and value are frequently placed upon a final *output*, rather than appreciating the importance of the *process*, and that the bringing together of expertise is itself a valuable 'product'. As a result, there are few avenues through which to publish a final output derived from knowledge exchange, engaged synthesis projects, aside from traditional academic publishers. Yet, the style demanded by traditional academic journals is not of use to those involved in multi-sector collaborations, and it is also often not accessible for wider public consumption. Our report was designed to be a synthesis and reference point for key policy and research considerations of business, the third sector, academia and government. Aside from the national press, we found that no clear avenue exists through which to publish in a way that addresses these asks.

Additionally, given that the final report had to be many things to many people, it led to questioning: Will this land?; Is it truly reflective of the expert discussions? Does it meet the expectations of those who have invested six months of their time in the project? In the process of the project, we therefore spent many hours discussing how to reconcile the fact that the final output would be authored by ourselves, but the content would be driven by project participants. While an author always naturally shapes output to a degree, we strived to co-create and ensure equity of views, for example, dedicating the entire concluding roundtable to a discussion of the content and form of the final report.

Doing so, however, necessitates giving up personal 'gains' from the output, limiting the opportunities to be 'named' for individual pieces, restricting avenues through which outputs can be placed (for example, in the press, given that the media prefer single author by-lines) and setting aside personal agendas in order to ensure balanced, fair representation. Asking how you articulate individual contribution and value in a collective cooperative endeavour became a key question for us: one on which we did not reach a firm conclusion – and nor did we expect to. This is a perennial conversation during this type of knowledge exchange work. Ultimately, we concluded that a marker of success for us was if our output spoke beyond our own agendas.

The reflections collected from project participants (set out below) further demonstrate the multiple agendas involved in such a project, and the consequent difficulty of evaluating knowledge exchange. The indicative examples demonstrate the strong feeling of the intrinsic value of being part of this type of project, but also the varied and multifaceted impacts of the project on both participants and their work.

A civil servant noted:

Government is set up to do incremental interventions. This project and set of conversations has shown this isn't enough.

An academic commented:

I've moved out of my silo! I've learned a lot about having impact on policy.

A research and policy analyst remarked:

I asked to be assigned to work on this project. It's been a great opportunity to bring discussions about intersectionality into the policy space. This concept is overlooked in many policy discussions and arenas, so this has been a positive step forward.

The Confederation of British Industry (CBI) noted:

Being involved in this project has provided the CBI a new avenue through which to highlight businesses' role as problem-solvers, innovators and key actors in tackling societal inequality. It has also helped form some of the early



thinking around our first ever internal working group on social justice. The project has undoubtedly helped sharpen the internal focus on businesses' wider role and what platforms we have available to land these points.

Stonewall remarked:

Through the project we have developed a stronger understanding of the wider factors shaping inequality, particularly along lines of class and ethnicity, which we didn't have before. We'll be using the findings to ensure our work has stronger class considerations and ensure we consider intersectional issues. Perhaps we also need to be more challenging of government and push harder on these cross-cutting issues.

The Resolution Foundation commented:

The project had two main aims from the Resolution Foundation's perspective: to broaden its expert network and to share best research practice across individuals and organizations working in different fields. On both measures it was a success. The work had the added benefit of supporting internal recruitment and HR [human resources] processes within RF [Resolution Foundation] ... culminating in the establishing of a multi-organisation working group spreading best practice on recruitment into research and policy roles and providing outreach into under-represented communities. The continued engagement of the original working group beyond the project's formal conclusion is generating further benefits, with more individuals and organisations getting involved and focus turning increasingly towards formulating shared policy positions and ideas.

Such reflection prompts the question of how knowledge exchange projects can be 'measured' and evaluated in a way that takes account of tangible outcomes (for example, new networks established as a result of the project), as well as equally valuable 'soft' impacts (for example, changes to individual thinking and an attitudinal moving of the dial). Furthermore, it leads us to ask: What truly constitutes success in a collaborative, multi-collaborator, agenda-setting synthesis project? Is success the creation and dissemination of a final report with which all team members and participants are happy? Is success a defined set of shared policy priorities? Is success a majority of participants asking to continue to meet so as to drive the agenda and take a lead through organizing knowledge exchange activities? Is success gaining further funding? Is success the generation of multiple partnerships or collaborations formed out of the connections made at the project's roundtables?

In reality, success looks different dependent upon the different stakeholder perspectives, and, as a result, knowledge exchange practitioners and frameworks should be responsive to this, and go beyond the simplicity of standard measures of success. Frequently, 'top tips' for knowledge exchange are authored from a university perspective, rather than from partners or being co-created. A more reflective, flexible vision of what success 'looks like' is required that is validated on different sides of the knowledge exchange partnership.

## Conclusion

With increasing focus on knowledge exchange agendas, and a shift away from siloed research taking place within the academy, engaged research projects have multiplied in number and profile and, in turn, so has the literature on the theory of knowledge

exchange. However, while these types of project have helped to grow awareness of the benefits and need to cross discipline and sectoral boundaries and provide new ways of working, there remains a lack of a body of evidence on *how* to do knowledge exchange work in an equitable way. As a result, there are few points of reference about what success looks like, and consequently a misperception of this type of collaborative project work, leaving it with a lowly status within academia.

To address this, greater appreciation is required of the complexity of leading knowledge exchange projects, the importance of the physical elements of partnership working, the hidden labour and emotional intelligence required to build partnerships and manage stakeholder relationships, and of how to ensure equity within project teams. The physical, intra-project team, and inter-participant dynamics all represent critical points for determining the success of knowledge exchange projects. Our experiences of working at the intersections and navigating critical points have demonstrated that to overcome the challenges requires project leaders to be comfortable with uncertainty, to be flexible in approach and leadership style, to set aside personal agendas, and to realize that success may be hard to define and quantify. Indeed, in many ways, if knowledge exchange is done well, then it should feel difficult and uncomfortable. Progress, after all, is always won by stepping outside comfort zones. Success metrics for knowledge exchange need to reflect this, but so too does the knowledge base, through bringing the theory and *practice* of knowledge exchange closer together. Otherwise, we risk a generation of eager brokers and collaborators being undervalued for the ways they contribute to delivering public good.

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## Conflicts of interest statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest with this work.

## Originality statement

The authors confirm that the article is not under consideration for publication anywhere else, nor has it been published in any form prior to submission to any UCL Press journal.

## Notes on the contributors

**Siobhan Morris** is Head of Programmes for UCL's Grand Challenge of Justice & Equality, working with academics and external partners to facilitate research and cross-disciplinary collaborations. Siobhan conceived of, and subsequently led, the

UCL–Resolution Foundation project Exploring Inequalities, and was lead author of its report *Structurally Unsound* (2019). More broadly, Siobhan has experience in working on and leading award-winning research projects, centres and public engagement activities.

**Olivia Stevenson** is Deputy Director of UCL Public Policy, UCL’s flagship initiative to support academic–policy engagement. Olivia is a co-founder of the Universities Policy Engagement Network (UPEN), and is involved in their Areas of Research Interest and Equalities and Diversity work. Olivia has delivered a range of internationally recognized high-impact research projects, and has published widely, most recently on structural and relational inequalities. Currently Olivia is UCL co-lead on a £10 million Research England project, Capabilities in Academic–Policy Engagement (CAPE).

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