

Understanding collaborations with businesses and other non-academic organisations

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Who is this guide for?

This guide is to provide insights for researchers who are starting to think about collaborating but still need to understand more about what this might entail.

This guide will help you discover what “collaboration” and “research impact” mean and develop your own understanding of different sectors. It will show you why different sectors and organisations might be more similar than you think and it will explain the many benefits of collaborating.

CONTENTS

- 01 **Why collaborate? – The broad picture**
 - 02 **What do “collaboration” and “research impact” mean?**
 - Collaboration**
 - Research impact**
 - 03 **Who can I collaborate with?**
 - Non-academic sectors**
 - Insights into other sectors**
 - 04 **What benefits can I gain from collaborating?**
 - 05 **Solutions to exercises**
 - 06 **Links to helpful resources**
-

Why collaborate? – The broad picture

What do “collaboration”
and “research impact” mean?

Collaboration

Research impact

Who can I collaborate with?

Non-academic sectors

Insights into different sectors

What benefits can I gain
from collaborating?

Solutions to exercises

Links to helpful resources

Why collaborate?

The broad picture

Collaborating with a business, a public or not-for-profit organisation can be extremely beneficial for your research as well as for your future career. Many researchers think that they should try to connect with businesses or other non-academic organisations only if they are considering transitioning out of academia.

This is not the case. Increasingly, criteria for hiring academics, especially in more senior positions, include research impact and engagement with non-academic partners. Similarly, a growing amount of research grants require the involvement in the project of a non-academic partner and the production of evidence of research impact through clearly planned out engagement activities.

Moreover, collaborating might be a means to obtain data and insights that would not be available otherwise, ongoing buy in and feedback on your work and extra funds for your research project. Obviously, collaborating is also helpful to broaden your career options or test other career paths before you commit to academia.

For all of these reasons, it is important to consider collaborations carefully from early on.

Why collaborate? – The broad picture

What do “collaboration”
and “research impact” mean?

Collaboration

Research impact

Who can I collaborate with?

Non-academic sectors

Insights into different sectors

What benefits can I gain
from collaborating?

Solutions to exercises

Links to helpful resources

What do “collaboration” and “research impact” mean?

COLLABORATION

Collaboration is intended as the co-operation between two or more people and/or organisations to realise something together. In the academic context, there are usually two types of collaboration:

- a) the one between two or more academics
- b) the one between one or more academics on the one side and non-academic professional(s) or organisation(s) on the other side

This guide (and the other guides of this set) always refer to collaboration as the co-operation for any purpose between academics and external organisations. We define collaboration as “working with businesses, local partners, government, NGOs and individual citizens to shape research, diffuse findings or trigger changes in society”.

Collaborations can have multiple purposes, from jointly writing a report or organising an event, to creating and conducting new research projects or translating data into research impact. For a full list of potential forms of collaboration please go to the online guide on “Deciding what type of collaboration works for you”.

Why collaborate? – The broad picture

What do “collaboration”
and “research impact” mean?

Collaboration

Research impact

Who can I collaborate with?

Non-academic sectors

Insights into different sectors

What benefits can I gain
from collaborating?

Solutions to exercises

Links to helpful resources

RESEARCH IMPACT

The Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) defines research impact as: “the demonstrable contribution that excellent research makes to society and the economy. This can involve academic impact, economic and societal impact or both”.

This contribution, can take three forms :

- **Instrumental**
Influencing policy, legislation, practice or service provision, altering behaviour
- **Conceptual**
Contributing to the understanding of policy issues, reframing debates
- **Capacity building**
Through technical and personal skill development

While research impact might derive from collaborating, collaborations and research impact are two different things which are correlated only in some cases.

If you want to explore examples of collaborations and research impact (and on their potential intersection) have a look at these videos:



The Oxford Climate Research Network aims to develop instruments to improve practice in partnership with government, research and business communities.



The ESRC Celebrating Impact Prize celebrates outstanding ESRC research, partnerships and engagement that have led to significant impact in society.

Why collaborate? – The broad picture

What do “collaboration”
and “research impact” mean?

Collaboration

Research impact

Who can I collaborate with?

Non-academic sectors

Insights into different sectors

What benefits can I gain
from collaborating?

Solutions to exercises

Links to helpful resources

Who can I collaborate with?

NON-ACADEMIC SECTORS

Besides academia, there are 3 main sectors, each with several organisations you can collaborate with:

1. **Business sector**
2. **Public sector**
(including governments, parliaments, international governing bodies (e.g. UN), regulators, hospitals, publicly-owned organisations (e.g. NHS, BBC), schools and local councils, etc.)
3. **Third or civil society sector**
(including non-profits, voluntary organisations, social enterprises, charities, philanthropic organisations and social movements)

Higher education institutions are often portrayed as ivory towers, where academics satisfy their own intellectual curiosity. But is academia really that separated and different from other sectors? Do you believe you have little to share with your friends working in the private, public or third sector? Try out the following two exercises to explore your understanding of academia and of other sectors...your answers and those of your peers might surprise you!

EXERCISE 1.1

What words do you associate with?

Brainstorm and **write down the top 10 words** that come to your mind in association with each of these sectors:

- Academia
- Business
- Public sector
- Third/Civil society sector

What are the key similarities and differences that you notice? What do they tell you about your own understanding of these sectors? Can you identify something you might have in common with organisations in each sector?

Why collaborate? – The broad picture

What do “collaboration”
and “research impact” mean?

Collaboration

Research impact

Who can I collaborate with?

Non-academic sectors

Insights into different sectors

What benefits can I gain
from collaborating?

Solutions to exercises

Links to helpful resources

EXERCISE 1.2

Analysing mission statements

Mission statements are indicators of how organisations would like to be perceived. They explain what an organisation aims to be and do.

PART 1: Connect each mission statement provided to you to one of the four sectors discussed in the previous exercise (academia, business sector, public sector, third sector). Then try to see if you can guess the organisation that published that mission statement!

<p>STATEMENT 1</p> <p>To refresh the world in mind, body and spirit. To inspire moments of optimism and happiness through our brands and actions. To create value and make a difference.</p>	<p>STATEMENT 5</p> <p>Our mission is “to act in the public interest, serving all audiences through the provision of impartial, high-quality and distinctive output and services which inform, educate and entertain”.</p>
<p>STATEMENT 2</p> <p>We offer a hands-on experience that will inspire and entertain people of all ages. Our work is informed by enduring values of authenticity, quality, imagination, responsibility and fun. Our vision is that people will experience the story of England where it really happened.</p>	<p>STATEMENT 6</p> <p>We strive to have a profound impact on the way the world does business, and the way business impacts the world. Our communal spirit creates an environment where we support and inspire, helping our people achieve their fullest potential.</p>
<p>STATEMENT 3</p> <p>The advancement of learning by teaching and research and its dissemination by every means.</p>	<p>STATEMENT 7</p> <p>We exist to make community services and spaces better for everyone. That means providing access to quality community leisure and fitness facilities - and more - at a price everyone can afford.</p>
<p>STATEMENT 4</p> <p>To organize the world’s information and make it universally accessible and useful.</p>	<p>STATEMENT 8</p> <p>Our vision is to create a better everyday life for the many people... by offering a wide range of well-designed, functional home furnishing products at prices so low that as many people as possible will be able to afford them.</p>

03

Why collaborate? – The broad picture

What do “collaboration”
and “research impact” mean?

Collaboration

Research impact

Who can I collaborate with?

Non-academic sectors

Insights into different sectors

What benefits can I gain
from collaborating?

Solutions to exercises

Links to helpful resources

PART 2: Through some reflection and creativity, answer the following questions:

- Can you see any connections between your work/interests and these organisations?
- What could they offer you and what could you offer them?

Now that you completed both parts, check out for solutions to Part 1 in the “Solutions to exercises” section on page 16:

[Click here to view
‘Solutions to exercises’](#)

Insights into different sectors

Common words that emerged from PhD students and Early Career Researchers in connection with each sector tend to reflect general stereotypes about each (see the table below).

Why collaborate? – The broad picture

What do “collaboration” and “research impact” mean?

Collaboration

Research impact

Who can I collaborate with?

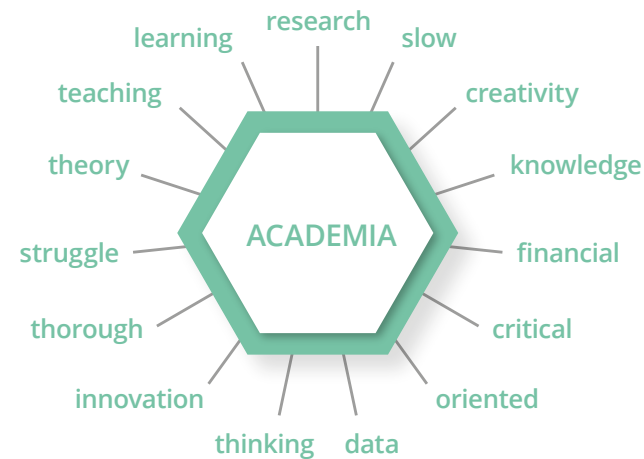
Non-academic sectors

Insights into different sectors

What benefits can I gain from collaborating?

Solutions to exercises

Links to helpful resources



Why collaborate? – The broad picture

What do “collaboration”
and “research impact” mean?

Collaboration

Research impact

Who can I collaborate with?

Non-academic sectors

Insights into different sectors

What benefits can I gain
from collaborating?

Solutions to exercises

Links to helpful resources

If you have a more thorough look, however, and if you start talking to people working in other sectors, you will discover that there are more similarities than you think. For example, academics and organisations in the third sector share their passion for solving a problem they are passionate about, while academics and businesses share an interest for improving practices through leveraging data. The more you think about this, the more connections and similarities you will find!

Sector boundaries are increasingly blurring and people and organisations working in different sectors might actually try to reach the same goals and/or to solve the same problem. Moreover, there are complementarities between sectors that could be beneficial in the context of collaborating. For example, business money could be used to finance research projects, while academic insights on different social groups might inform public sector’s efforts to deliver effective and reliable services for different constituents.

These considerations should help you see collaborations as feasible and as powerful opportunities as long as:

- You are aware of your goals and of those of your collaborator(s)
- You make sure those goals are as aligned as possible
- You step back from your preconceptions and enter into listening mode to learn as much as possible about your collaborator

If you want to start thinking about what specific organisation(s) you could collaborate with, have a look at the online guide on “Identifying potential collaborators and their contact details”.

What benefits can I gain from collaborating?

There are several benefits that you can obtain from collaborating with businesses and other non-academic organisations. These vary a lot depending on the type of collaboration that you are going to set up, on how well you will prepare for the collaboration, how much you will commit to it and how the relationship between you and your collaborator(s) will develop.

Common benefits of collaborating, based on the experiences of PhDs, Early Career Researchers and Senior Academics from the Social Sciences Division, who engaged in collaboration, are:

RESEARCH

- Exclusive access to people and data
- Research funding or extra pocket money
- Research impact
- REF - relevant case studies
- Feedback on your work and findings
- Understanding of research context and users
- Knowledge translation skills
- Exposure to new ideas, ways of thinking
- Opportunity to shape your own field
- Opportunities for future research projects
- Inspirational breaks from your work
- Understanding of data limitations and how to overcome them

SKILLS AND CAREER

- Stakeholders' engagement skills
- Self-branding skills
- Project management skills
- Relationship management skills
- Time management skills
- Communication skills
- Networking skills
- Negotiation skills
- Storytelling
- Ability to deliver under pressure
- Understanding of constraints and timelines of organisations
- Opportunity to test out other career paths
- Connections and visibility to find a non-academic job

Why collaborate? – The broad picture

What do “collaboration” and “research impact” mean?

Collaboration

Research impact

Who can I collaborate with?

Non-academic sectors

Insights into different sectors

What benefits can I gain from collaborating?

Solutions to exercises

Links to helpful resources

04

Why collaborate? – The broad picture

What do “collaboration”
and “research impact” mean?

Collaboration

Research impact

Who can I collaborate with?

Non-academic sectors

Insights into different sectors

What benefits can I gain
from collaborating?

Solutions to exercises

Links to helpful resources

To explore different collaboration opportunities and see how they might be connected to some of the benefits that you might be looking for, have a look at the online guide on “Deciding what type of collaboration works for you” and check out some case studies socsci.ox.ac.uk/developing-researchers. But, before you do, discover through Exercise 1.3 some of the benefits that a PhD student and an Early Career Researcher obtained by collaborating with businesses. These are examples of projects that you could easily undertake at any stage of your work here at the university.

EXERCISE 1.3 Explore the benefits of collaborating

Read the two following case studies and make a list of the benefits obtained by the researcher and by the business they collaborated with. Reflect if any of those benefits or projects might be appealing to you.

CASE STUDY 1

JOHN DOE (fiction name),
PhD in Economics, producing a report for an international cooperative

Why collaborate? – The broad picture

What do “collaboration”
and “research impact” mean?

Collaboration

Research impact

Who can I collaborate with?

Non-academic sectors

Insights into different sectors

What benefits can I gain
from collaborating?

Solutions to exercises

Links to helpful resources

In the second year of his PhD John (fictional name) was approached, together with a colleague, by the consulting branch of a top UK university to create a report for an international cooperative working in the dairy industry. In a moment of great uncertainty following the UK decision to leave the European Union, the company wanted to have a sound and rigorous report, certified by an accredited research institution, quantifying the economic losses and risks that its industry would have faced. The goal was to present the report to the UK Members of Parliament, to lobby for more consideration for and decisions taking into account the risks run by the industry because of Brexit.

This opportunity came to John because he was affiliated with a research centre of the UK. He was not looking into collaborating with businesses but his affiliation to the research centre made his profile easy to find for the consulting branch of the institution. Their request to hire him and

his colleague for the production of a report was quite unexpected since John was fully focused on advancing his PhD and his research was neither on the dairy industry nor on Brexit. However, it made him realise that his quantitative skills and the technical and theoretical knowledge of international trade deriving from his doctoral research could have been helpful also when analysing different problems and settings. Intrigued by the opportunity to produce a relevant output for a business, to apply his skills for a consulting project instead of an academic one and to earn some extra money, when John received the proposal, he decided to accept it and two months later he began the work.

John worked on the report together with his colleague for ten days, looking at the different channels through which Brexit would have affected the dairy industry (i.e. labour market, consumer demand, and trade costs). They first identified the potential changes in each market (e.g. consumers

Why collaborate? – The broad picture

What do “collaboration”
and “research impact” mean?

Collaboration

Research impact

Who can I collaborate with?

Non-academic sectors

Insights into different sectors

**What benefits can I gain
from collaborating?**

Solutions to exercises

Links to helpful resources

losing purchasing power because of Brexit-induced inflation or shipping of products between the UK and the European Union becoming more costly because of the presence of a border). Once identified the markets and related business areas of relevance that would have been affected, John and his colleague produced quantitative estimates of the losses and benefits that the industry could have incurred (e.g. how decreased immigration following Brexit will increase wage costs). At the end of the two weeks, John and his colleague had the opportunity to present their work at the UK headquarters of the company, in front of different industry stakeholders, but John decided not to attend because of other commitments he had in that period.

On the one hand, producing a report for a business was not as big of a change as could have been expected. Given the nature of the collaboration, the contact with the company was minimal and mostly limited to requests of data and specifications whenever needed. On the other hand, John did experience the difference of having to work for a business rather than as an academic. They had a very tight and very close deadline to produce a complete report, since it had to be ready

in just a couple of weeks in order to be available before the parliamentary summer recess. Such a deadline is very unusual in academia and, as such, they had to learn how to speed up calculations and model creation and they had to accept to give up some rigour in the interest of delivering the report on time.

While working on the report did not affect his PhD or his career choices, John enjoyed the opportunity of putting his skills at the service of a different cause and of testing what it would feel like to work as a consultant. He would not necessarily repeat the experience unless it was compatible with his research work and progression. However, given that it was at that time, he is really glad he gave it a try and would absolutely encourage any researcher with a similar proposal for collaboration in their hands to consider accepting it.

Why collaborate? – The broad picture

What do “collaboration”
and “research impact” mean?

Collaboration

Research impact

Who can I collaborate with?

Non-academic sectors

Insights into different sectors

What benefits can I gain
from collaborating?

Solutions to exercises

Links to helpful resources

CASE STUDY 2

DR PHIL GRUNEWALD, Postdoctoral researcher at the Environmental Change Institute,
organising workshops with businesses and stakeholders from the Energy Sector

During his PhD, Phil came across the UK Energy Research Centre (UKERC) Meeting Place, whose remit was to support the creation of workshops bringing together different players and academics interested in the energy sector. At that point in time, he had come to the realisation that there was not yet a community working on energy storage, which was his area of interest. Moreover, he was in need to run a workshop to collect data for his research project. Therefore, he decided to apply to UKERC for funds.

At that time, the prevailing narrative was that energy storage was too expensive and therefore not feasible. His research, however, was showing the opposite and he was curious to explore what the real reasons actually holding back the development of storage technologies and facilities were. He found it surprisingly humbling, rewarding, and, admittedly, a bit overwhelming, to hear experts and policy makers, all with “phenomenal authority”, debating an issue close to his heart at a

high intensity level. Overall, the small workshop he organised was so successful that it led to research funding for a project to develop a whole-system model to explore the value of storage and to the creation of a community of stakeholders.

Given his first successful experience, as soon as he started his postdoctoral appointment at the Environmental Change Institute, a research centre in the School of Geography and the Environment, Phil kept organising at least one workshop a year with key energy sector stakeholders and academics. While the first workshop had been set up for data collection purposes, his subsequent workshops have had dissemination and networking purposes and have been invaluable in terms of refining and advancing his research thanks to the comments received from experts and policy makers.

Phil has now organised several workshops bringing together different academics and stakeholders of the energy sector and keeps enjoying this part of

Why collaborate? – The broad picture

What do “collaboration”
and “research impact” mean?

Collaboration

Research impact

Who can I collaborate with?

Non-academic sectors

Insights into different sectors

**What benefits can I gain
from collaborating?**

Solutions to exercises

Links to helpful resources

his work, with new challenges and unexpected issues always around the corner.

A workshop is one of the most effective ways to gather opinions and information and this is all precious data. Having many experts in the same room means that you can get a sense about which ideas fly and which do not and this can shape current and future research as well as helping non-academic attendees to spot issues and opportunities in their own area of interest. Phil makes sure to always attach a summary report to his “thank you” email after the event. This includes the key findings and action points that emerge from the workshop.

In every workshop, and especially for those involving both academics and industry stakeholders, it is ideal to bring together groups that wouldn’t meet. Based on his experience, Phil would say that to make people really engage with each other, it is helpful to have small groups, inviting maximum 20-30 attendees or having plenty of breakout sessions. While Phil still sees data collection and research validation as important benefits of organising workshops, as he did when he organised his first one, he would now add networking as a key outcome to look

for. People, and especially businesses, can be approached for a collaboration more easily after meeting them in person at a workshop and they can provide new ideas for research projects or insights that support or reject research ideas.

His first workshop was his best to date. It probably pushed others and led to policy change. Now, it is a bit daunting to always find something good and new to offer to the different stakeholders that he invites. Workshops are like a co-creation process and it is hardly possible to control the buzz in the room on the day, which makes planning always a bit tricky. Phil finds it very helpful to have a facilitator because they can act as neutral person, keeping friendliness in the group while dealing with contrasting views, and can also provide ice breakers, bringing people out of their comfort zone. What Phil enjoys about workshops is that he does not have to know everything to still be able to contribute with his own little piece. He discovered that listening is a useful skill, too. As organiser and researcher he often felt the pressure of having something to share. It can be even more interesting to observe the give and take in interactions between industry stakeholders and other academics.

04 —

Why collaborate? – The broad picture

What do “collaboration”
and “research impact” mean?

Collaboration

Research impact

Who can I collaborate with?

Non-academic sectors

Insights into different sectors

**What benefits can I gain
from collaborating?**

Solutions to exercises

Links to helpful resources

Once you are done with this exercise, check the solutions
in the “Solutions to exercises” section on page 16:

*[Click here to view
‘Solutions to exercises’](#)*

Your introduction to collaborating is now complete! Well done! You are ready to move onto the next stage. There are several online guides in this series that can help you set up and manage a collaboration. You are welcome to start from any that you think might suit your needs. Our suggestion would be to move onto the guide on “Deciding what type of collaboration works for you”, which explains what you should consider before elaborating a project idea and reaching out to potential collaborators.

Why collaborate? – The broad picture

What do “collaboration”
and “research impact” mean?

Collaboration

Research impact

Who can I collaborate with?

Non-academic sectors

Insights into different sectors

What benefits can I gain
from collaborating?

Solutions to exercises

Links to helpful resources

Solutions to exercises

EXERCISE 1.2

STATEMENT 1 – Business sector, Coca Cola

STATEMENT 2 – Third sector, English Heritage

STATEMENT 3 – Academia, University of Oxford

STATEMENT 4 – Business sector, Google

STATEMENT 5 – Public sector, BBC

STATEMENT 6 – Academia, London Business School

STATEMENT 7 – Third sector, GLL – Better (social enterprise)

STATEMENT 8 – Business sector, IKEA

EXERCISE 1.3

CASE 1 – JOHN DOE

BENEFITS FOR THE RESEARCHER

- Experience of consulting without long commitment
- Money
- Time management skills & ability to deliver under pressure
- Understanding of businesses’ constraints and timelines
- Learning something new

BENEFITS FOR THE COMPANY

- Research-backed & updated insights
- Stronger evidence to lobby the government
- Opportunity to create a sector coalition around the insights

CASE 2 – PHIL GRUNEWALD

BENEFITS FOR THE RESEARCHER

- Research funds
- Data collection
- Helpful contacts
- Timely feedback
- Achieving impact
- Understanding research questions relevant for the sector

BENEFITS FOR THE COMPANY

- Connection with relevant stakeholders and businesses
- Learning about what is going on in the sector
- Serendipitous opportunities
- Ideas for improvement

Why collaborate? – The broad picture

What do “collaboration”
and “research impact” mean?

Collaboration

Research impact

Who can I collaborate with?

Non-academic sectors

Insights into different sectors

What benefits can I gain
from collaborating?

Solutions to exercises

Links to helpful resources

Links to helpful resources

[Knowledge Exchange and the Social Sciences: A Report to ESRC from the Centre for Business Research](#)

[A PhD is not just a degree – it is an opportunity to develop the skills needed to deliver impact - Hayley Teasdale](#)

[Designing Your Career - Stanford School of Engineering](#)

[Researcher Development](#)

[Economic and Social Research Council on Youtube](#)

[The Science Fair Podcast](#)

[Social Sciences: Applying the social to science](#)

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**COLLABORATION
JOURNEY**

