

Managing the planning phase of a collaboration

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Who is this guide for?

This guide is for researchers who have secured a collaboration with a business or other non-academic organisation and are starting to work on it.

While getting a collaboration going is already a major achievement, thinking that the tough bit ends there might be risky. Collaborations need to be planned carefully and in conversation with your collaborator, before diving into them, in order to make sure that all parties will gain benefits and, therefore, will be keen to contribute. This guide will help you to manage the planning phase of a collaboration by highlighting key things you need to think about and by providing you with relevant project management tools.

You are ready to work on this guide if you already have a broad agreement for a joint project (e.g. publication, workshop, multi-year research collaboration, etc.) with a non-academic organisation and are starting or have yet to start the actual work for it. If you do not have a broad agreement yet, please have a look first at the online guides on “How to start a collaboration” (guides 1-5). If you have already started to work on the collaboration, you might instead want to skip to the online guide on “Managing the execution and monitoring phases of a collaboration”.

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01 —

What are the common phases of a collaboration?

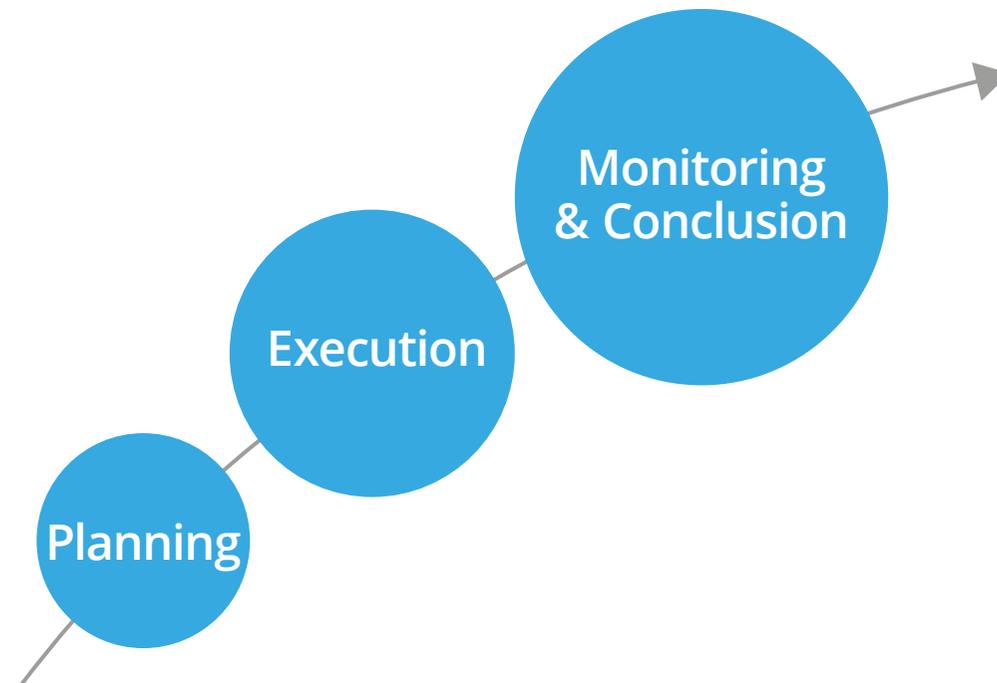
Like any other project, a collaboration is characterised by three typical phases:

What are the common phases of a collaboration?

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This guide will accompany you through the planning phase.

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What shall I do in the planning phase?

The key objective of the planning phase is to make sure that there is a common understanding among all the parties involved about what the collaboration is about and what the outputs to be achieved in the specified timeframe are. This phase is fundamental to reduce the possibility that issues will emerge later on, when it might be more difficult to change direction.

The planning phase starts when your collaborator(s) informally agree to work with you based on the value proposition that you presented to them and it finishes when you sign an official contract (which we recommend in all cases except for joint publications and workshops) or a written agreement. Even if the agreement will not have legal value, having a record of the respective responsibilities and outputs can be very helpful later on to keep the collaboration on track.

There are 4 key activities that you should do while still in the planning phase of a collaboration;



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What shall I do in the planning phase?

STEP 1 – CHECK OUT THE PREMISES

The analysis of previous collaborations highlighted the presence of five key premises that increase the chances of success of a collaboration. As soon as you agree to collaborate, you should check if those premises exist in your project and, if not, if there is anything you can do to create them.

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Check out more details about the case studies mentioned above at this link socsci.ox.ac.uk/developing-researchers

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EXERCISE 6.1

Check the premises

Fill in the following table by thinking about the project you are about to undertake. Once you are done, assess what favourable premises are already in place and make plans for those you need to create.

Premise	Exists?	Why does it exist or what shall we do to make it happen?
Goal alignment		
Experience		
Leveraging strengths		
Tangible benefits		

Once you have filled in this table and reflected on its implications on your own, share it with your collaborator(s) to see what they think and to start the negotiation process.

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What shall I do in the planning phase?

STEP 2 – NEGOTIATE GOALS AND A CLEAR PLAN AND TIMEFRAME

While negotiations will vary depending on the type of collaboration you chose, on your collaborator and on your own characteristics, you should aim to do the following when undertaking a negotiation:



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MEET IN PERSON

Meeting in person in order to develop a shared set of goals, activities and timeframe is fundamental to get to know your collaborator and for them to get to know and understand you. Face-to-face communication is the most effective way to appreciate the approach and way of thinking of each party and to clarify things as they are being negotiated.

The Economic and Social Research Council suggests to spend time and effort in this phase to understand the motivation driving each collaborator into the project. This will help you explore reciprocal expectations, whether they are realistic, and to check if the approach you are planning to adopt will fulfil them or not.

In the words of a senior academic who collaborated with a business: “Meeting face to face was determinant in understanding each other’s need, what knowledge exchange is or could be, and establishing a shared vision. Time together was short. However, keeping the time short helped us stay focused on our objectives.”

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THINK ABOUT THE PRACTICALITIES OF COLLABORATING

When you are planning, it is important to think in practical rather than abstract terms. Examples of key questions you should ask (and answer) are:

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Answering these questions and thinking about the day-to-day necessities of the project will help you notice early on what you need to do and to make the necessary arrangements. If you are asking for extra funds and support, being able to describe in detail what the project is going to look like will also help you in securing such resources.

You should always write down detailed plans and arrangements and then share them with your collaborator(s) to receive their feedback and to check that they agree with the outlook of the project.

AGREE ON A SPECIFIC TIMEFRAME

There are many possible timeframes, depending on the length of the project. As in a logic model, to build a timeframe it is helpful to start from the end date of the collaboration (or the planned date for the delivery of outputs) and work backwards to check out what intermediate outputs should be delivered and what activities should be put in place (and when) to deliver them.

A basic example of a timeframe that could be built for the organisation of a workshop is here below. The more details you can provide in terms of outputs and activities at different points in time, the better.

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Example of a timeframe to jointly organise a workshop:

STARTING POINT: Length of funding 6 months for realising a report on the development needs of rural coastal towns in the UK with a real estate company.



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EXERCISE 6.2 **Building a timeframe**

Think about a project that you conducted recently as part of your research, voluntary activities or job/internship. Then create a timeframe for it, specifying the different activities that were involved in the project, their duration, the intermediate outputs and deliverables and the overall duration of the project.

When you are ready, ask a friend or colleague to check it out. Their reaction will give you an idea about the level of detail you should put in developing a timeframe for your collaboration, while the exercise will help you think about all the small components of a project that need to be considered and planned.

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DISCUSS MONEY AND RESOURCES

As a final step in the negotiation phase, it is important to consider the amount of money that will be needed to carry out the activities that you have in mind and to discuss with your collaborator how to secure them at the start and/or during the collaboration . The easiest option would be to ask your collaborator to fund them, but this might not be possible in many cases. If it is not, you should think about applying for impact-related grants offered by your department, division or by research councils and foundations.

While money is important, so are other resources that you and your collaborator could bring to the project, such as time, competencies, knowledge or networks. Before the planning phase is over, you should be aware of what each party could contribute and how and when that contribution should be delivered. This will have a significant impact on how the collaboration will evolve and on the outcomes that you will produce.

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What shall I do in the planning phase?

STEP 3 – DIVIDE RESPONSIBILITIES

Once you know what needs to be done, by when and for what purpose, it is important to re-check with your collaborators that everyone understands what is expected of them for the duration of the project. For each item in the timeframe that you developed, there should be someone nominated to be accountable for it.

This is a good time to make sure that who is accountable for each activity or output has the power to make that happen and can commit enough time to do so. If there are doubts, this is also the right time to negotiate a feasible solution.

If you are leading the project, it is important that you feel comfortable in reaching out to those who are accountable and in nudging them, when the time comes, if they are not delivering the agreed activities and outputs. Again, if you have doubts, you should think about ways to tackle them or have a contingency plan ready in case things go wrong and you have to “make do”.

For the project to be successful, each collaborator should contribute something and invest time and resources proportionate to what they are going to get out of the project. If there is the feeling that one of the collaborators is not contributing enough, it is wise to re-think the collaboration and keep negotiating reciprocal duties before signing a contract or agreement.

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What shall I do in the planning phase?

STEP 4 – DRAFT AND SIGN A CONTRACT OR AGREEMENT

When you are confident that the goals of the project are achievable, you should write down the key terms of the agreement. The level of complexity of the project and its origin will shape whether you need something as simple as an email exchange confirming your respective contributions (e.g. for the participation of or organisation of a workshop) or if you will need to sign a legally-binding contract (e.g. for a multi-year collaboration or internship).

Before you complete this phase, check out suggestions on how to protect your Intellectual Property (IP), contact relevant University administrators or talk to someone who has done a similar project before.

The more you seek for help and clarifications and involve the university administration at this stage, the better the university will be able to support you and protect your interests and work at a later stage if things go wrong.

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EXERCISE 6.3

Mock agreement

Fill in the mock collaboration agreement template below using the details of the collaboration you are planning or of a project you did before. Check out if you can convincingly fill in all the points and, if not, go back to some of the steps indicated in this guide to see if you can draft a better agreement. Keep this draft as reference for future agreements.

If you did this exercise using the collaboration you are currently planning, fill in this template with your collaborator(s) and use it as a basis to draft the official agreement or contract for the project.

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MOCK COLLABORATION PROJECT TEMPLATE

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ITEM	AGREEMENT	
Parties involved		
Goals/desired outcomes		
Outputs/deliverables and relative milestones		
Activities and responsibility for each activity		
Budget & resources and sources thereof		

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Once you have engaged with Exercise 6.3, you should have done all that it takes to plan a collaboration! Well done! To know how to manage a collaboration once it enters its execution phase, have a look at the online guide on “Managing the execution and monitoring phases of a collaboration”.

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[Creating Living Knowledge Report](#)

[Knowledge Exchange and the Social Sciences](#)

[Tips for Doing Knowledge Exchange](#)

[Lessons for Collaborative Research](#)

[Project Management](#)

[Business Engagement](#)

[Intellectual Property Agreements](#)

[ESRC Impact Acceleration Account at Oxford](#)

the **COLLABORATION JOURNEY**

