

AHRC Partnership Guide Podcast Transcription

VO: Since it was set up in 2005, the AHRC has put in place a number of activities to encourage partnerships and knowledge exchange, to make sure the value of the research they support goes beyond the academy itself.

Today, knowledge exchange and partnership working are central themes for the AHRC as they go about creating opportunities for arts and humanities researchers to reach out to new and diverse audiences, markets and organisations.

As Susan Amor, AHRC's head of Knowledge Exchange explains, the current focus for research impact is the UK's creative economy.

SA: We're talking about the creative industries primarily, but the creative economy is much broader than just the creative industries and does involve wherever creativity appears within a business or policy organisation - we're certainly very interested in working directly with the private sector - but it also involves working with other organisations such as cultural organisations and our independent research organisations comprise a number of leading museums and galleries. Essentially it's wherever creativity is an essential part of what they do.

VO: Jim Playfoot is managing director of White Loop, an SME working in education and life long learning and based in London

They discovered the benefits of working in partnership after becoming involved with a digital story-telling initiative.

Project Aspect involves partners from the AHRC, the University of Falmouth, and the Department of Energy and Climate Change.

JP: I knew a guy called Mike Wilson who was the principle investigator on the project. We had been talking for some time about the role of story-telling and narrative in an educational context and also in a public policy context, and out of those conversations came an idea for a project, and the University of Falmouth were interested in having an SME on board for that project, so we actually worked with University of Falmouth in developing the idea and developing the proposal, so we were kind of in at the beginning.

VO: Of course, bringing together academic and non-academic organisations is not without its challenges. Jim Playfoot questioned whether such collaborations would be good for business development; he even questioned the cultural differences between small firms and academic institutions, where working practices, commercial pressures

and individual expectations can vary hugely.

JP: I do very much think it comes down to the individuals involved. In the case of Project Aspect I really didn't have too many problems because the individuals involved were very dynamic, very creative and kept things moving and I think that perhaps there is more a perception of cultural difference in some cases than there actually is; that's more of a characterisation of what is like rather than what is like in practice, and I didn't really find that to be a problem on this project.

VO: In setting about encouraging its research community to work more in partnership, the AHRC acknowledged that the creative industries are known to be fast paced and often driven by highly innovative companies.

At the same time, the need for clear, easy to understand guidance on how to approach this complex activity became apparent, and work started on bringing together people's ideas and experience into one easy to read booklet.

SA: We developed the guide over quite an extended period of time, drawing on others' experiences and the perspectives of a range of individuals both from within the AHRC and across our stakeholder communities, and we wanted to present it in a user-friendly way based on real experiences, as a way of supporting the community and their potential partners in an activity which is becoming an increasingly important part of our agenda. It's intended as a practical self-help and dip in and out resource that provides real life hints and tips from those who have been there and come out the other side!

To be clear though, this isn't the AHRC telling the community and others how to do it and it's not a guarantee of success but it does offer some pointers on what works and what doesn't from those who have been through the ups and downs and come through smiling.

VO: Primarily, AHRC's new guide to partnership working is aimed at both researchers and their potential partners in the private, public and cultural sectors.

It includes tips from Jim Playfoot's White Loop organisation, as well as guidance from university Knowledge Exchange Managers and Research Managers, AHRC staff and others with an interest in developing this type of partnership.

In reaching out to this wide audience, Rob Keegan, AHRC's Knowledge Exchange Portfolio Manager, explains how they set out to produce something that would have broad appeal.

RK: We wanted it to be bright and colourful, easy-to-use - the hard copy is in a ring binder. It's also designed to be a working document, because this is a fast moving environment, things change, we're learning new things all the time, so things that we have in here today may not be applicable in a few years time or there maybe new insights that we have we can add to this guide, so it's designed to be something that's used, something that can be adapted and changed, but also it's meant to be fun and accessible and written in a language that people will find easy to understand and it will make sense to them.

VO: Since knowledge exchange is essentially about partners from different backgrounds working together collaboratively on a project that brings mutual benefits, the guide has been developed to support that process, and in particular to encourage discussion and help partners work more effectively together.

SA: It's to prompt specific issues and different stages through the partnership that they might want to sit down and talk about together; it'll certainly help them plan how they're going to work and their methodology - that's where the practical hints and tips come in - it's from people who've done this stuff, who've actually worked in this way - this is what works, this is what doesn't work so well, so here's the benefit of our experience.

VO: The advice contained in the guide aims to encourage both private businesses and researchers, and the process isn't meant to be a one way street, as Rob Keegan explains.

RK: It isn't just a one way thing it's not about academics going out and finding partners, it works the other way as well because there is a big demand out there in the world for organisations and businesses to work with academia, to have access to high quality research, so this guide will help them as well, because it will help them think how they can access... how can they get into what is often seen as... universities are often seen as hard edifices that you can't break into and what this guide will hopefully do will make that process a lot easier.

VO: And as one of the guide's business contributors, Jim Playfoot has included his own hints and tips on how to go about setting up partnerships. His experience with Project Aspect helped him understand that businesses like his have much to gain from working in collaboration with academia and believes that AHRC's partnership guide will go along way to encouraging and supporting those wanting to work more with others.

JP: It's often just a lack of information of what's involved that can really hold up that engagement. I think it's also important for a guide like this to speak to the institutions involved and get them thinking

about what they can do better to attract and engage with small businesses; some institutions that perhaps do it really well and some that do it less well, so I think there needs to be just more information, understanding on both side about how these partnerships can actually take off.

VO: It's hoped that once people appreciate the benefits to be had from working in partnership, new collaborative relationships will develop, creating interdisciplinary research by academics new to knowledge exchange, and engaging a range of partners from other sectors.

Susan Amor hopes that these innovative and challenging projects will actually push the boundaries of conventional approaches to knowledge exchange and research, and improve the outcomes for everyone concerned.

SA: The guide itself really will have an effect and we'll see more and more quality partnerships coming through, a wider range of academics working with a much wider range of partners. We're always keen to encourage academics who are new to knowledge exchange to work in a knowledge exchange project, but again it's going back to that building awareness.

VO: And for those from the business sector, such as Jim Playfoot, one thing is clear: working in partnership has been a hugely rewarding experience in itself, helping to encourage new collaborations in the future...

JP: The really novel and exploratory aspect of the work has been a real revelation - often the work that I do is very much more defined and more rigid in terms of the outputs; this was very open ended and its a joy to actually be involved in a project that is that open ended. And it's also given me a great deal of access to some very interesting people; it's been a very valuable experience personally, it's been a learning experience and its been a really enjoyable project to play a senior role in.