

# The Collaborative Researcher

## Participant Handbook

**NAME:**

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Dr Vivien Hodges, Research Manager, Vitae

Rosie Beales, Portfolio Manager: Researcher Careers, RCUK

Beata Pedziwiatr, Communications, Vitae

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CB3 0AX

## Introduction

"I genuinely believe that you will not survive as a researcher if you don't collaborate. We are all experts in our own little area, but when you work with other people, you realise that there are questions that you didn't even know existed! Working as part of a bigger team, we can answer the bigger questions."

**What is collaborative research?**

**How do I become a collaborative researcher?**

**What are the skills I need to be collaborative?**

**What helps collaborations to deliver?**

## Collaboration: what is it?

In straightforward terms, collaboration is working with others and as an early career researcher you can do this in lots of ways...

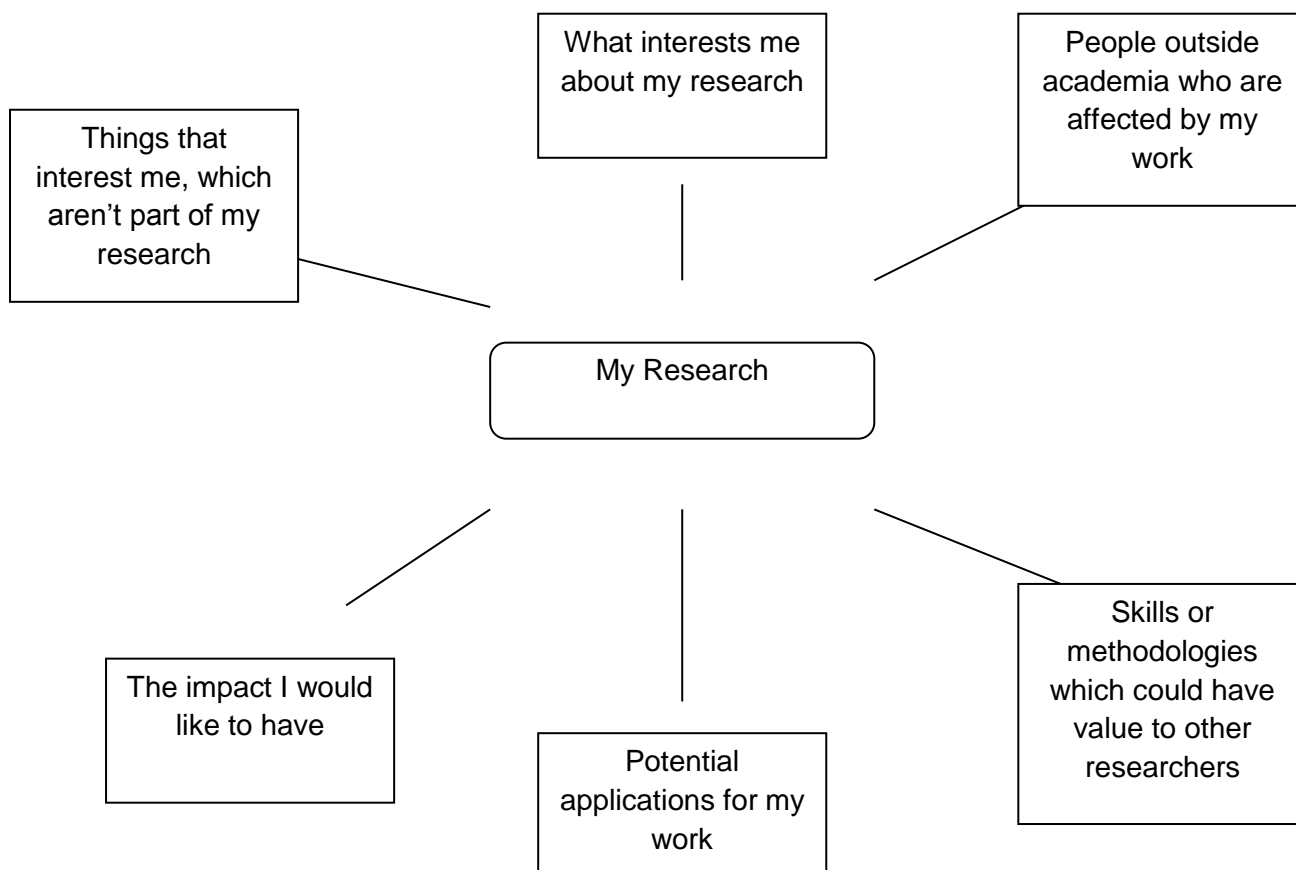
<b>Informal discussions with colleagues, face-to-face and via social media</b>
<b>Working with researchers in your discipline</b>
<b>Working with researchers from other disciplines with predominantly academic focus</b>
<b>Working on projects with a broad impact</b>
<b>Working with non-academic partners</b>
<b>Working with international partners</b>

Giving opinions and reactions to other researchers' work at meetings, online or at networking events	Talking to researchers at conferences about my work and getting feedback on my ideas	Asking advice from researchers in my field
Finding and joining in relevant online discussion on topics related to my research	Helping a fellow researcher with a problem	Asking questions at conferences
Working with another researcher in my department contributing specific knowledge or skills to a project	Acting as a consultant on a project for a short time	Working with researchers in my field, but based in different departments
Working with researchers from similar, but different disciplines, to develop broader answers to research questions	Collaborating with researchers from different disciplines, but providing expertise in our own fields.	Finding new applications for methodologies, data, models or practices from one academic background in a new discipline
Working with other disciplines to contribute to answering economic, societal, health or other broad questions or problems from a practical point of view. Combining disciplines to find new approaches	Working with a number of institutions because each one brings its own specialism to the collaboration or the project may be too large for one institution to manage on its own	Collaborating beyond the academic environment with industry, commercial organisations, the health service(s) or other areas of the public sector
Research that spans international boundaries and may involve individual researchers or groups of researchers from institutions based in the EU or across a wider geographic area	Collaborations supported by funders with a wider remit for the research question and involving institutions in the developed and developing world as well other agencies	Working on international projects with academic partners and other stakeholders in developing countries

“I’m an artist and I’ve found myself collaborating with people from science and technology backgrounds as part of a funded collaborative project and it’s made me realise that our different ways of thinking contributes different dimensions to the project.”

## Exercise

Mind map your research with collaboration in mind



So, you can see some of the different ways in which you can collaborate as a researcher and you’ve started to look at your own interests in more open terms. Next: why collaboration has become such an important topic.

## Why is everyone talking about collaboration?

“Our focus is on **excellence with impact**”

“To deliver impact, researchers and funders need to engage and collaborate with the public, business, government and the third sector.”

“Novel, multidisciplinary approaches are needed to solve many, if not all, of the big research challenges over the next 10 to 20 years.”

### Research Councils UK

These statements, from the principal funder of UK research, give us a clear view of our research environment. Researchers are operating in a challenging global economic situation, in which the drive for the UK to be excellent in research and the expectation that research must have an impact in a world outside academia have made collaborative research vital and relevant.

There are six societal priorities for research as funded by the UK Research Councils:

- Digital Economy
- Energy
- Global Food Security
- Global Uncertainties
- Lifelong Health and Wellbeing
- Living with Environmental Change

All of these six areas draw in research across the spectrum of academic disciplines and no single discipline will be able to address the priority in its entirety. Collaboration and working across discipline boundaries will be a necessity to address these priorities in a research context.

Of course, not all research in the UK is funded by the Research Councils (although they play a significant role in shaping and driving research priorities in the UK and beyond). Research with other stakeholders is at the heart of the collaborative agenda and gives early career researchers great opportunities to develop skills and knowledge of other sectors and the career options they offer.

The Research Excellence Framework for 2014 will consider research impact and research **environment** as well as research outputs. The research **environment** is likely to consider work with other researchers outside the area and support for collaboration. Impact will look at collaborative research with industry, internationally and with the public sector.



“Most funding bodies have twitter accounts which post updates and news. More interestingly, there are also key academics in the UK who have personal twitter accounts, such as @dbkell, Head of the BBSRC and @iain\_gray.” (Head of the Technology Strategy Board).

## Exercise

Read the research strategies for the main funder(s) in your field and identify FIVE areas of common ground between their priorities and your research interests.

Funding body	Parallels with my research (now or future plans)
1	
2	
3	
4	
5	

Having looked at the context of collaborative research, you can explore the benefits of getting involved and strategies for success.

## Is collaborative research right for me?

Let's look at some of the advantages and ways to get it right.

### What are the benefits for me?

As you can see, there are many important supporters of collaborative research so it is likely to be an important feature of any career in research. Additionally there are many personal advantages to working with others which have been identified by talking to successful collaborative researchers

Loan-Clark, J., & Preston, D. (2002). "Tensions and benefits in collaborative research involving a university and another organization". *Studies in Higher Education* 27(2), 169-185

- **Efficiency** – in a mixed team, you will have access to a range of resources and people, who can provide expertise that you might otherwise have to develop yourself.
- **Creativity** – working with others leads to a natural creative environment where ideas and perspectives come together and lead to new and unexpected solutions.
- **Peer support** – you may already have a network of supporters and friends to act as confidantes, cheerleaders, problem solvers and sounding boards. By working closely with others you can extend your personal support network and find new sources of support.
- **Flow of knowledge** – the dissemination of research through formal methods such as papers or conferences represents a tiny fraction of the learning from most projects. The collaborative relationship brings more immediate and richer sharing of all kinds of knowledge— particularly the things that go wrong and stall progress. On the more formal side, working with other disciplines brings new avenues for publishing and new audiences for your work.
- **Complexity** - the combination of different specialisms, networks and competences that a team of researchers brings to a project allow them to address problems that are too complex for individual researchers.
- **Development** - working with others brings opportunities to gain many highly marketable skills, relevant to all employers
- **Network** – working with a range of people beyond your supervisor and research group gives you access to a huge web of contacts, who may be able to help you identify and connect with future employers

"Why do I collaborate? Because I enjoy it. Broadening your horizons is intellectually stimulating because you are exposed to different professional cultures and people. The fact that your overall progress and impact is greater is an added benefit, but mostly it's fun."

"Most of the high impact, important science is collaborative. Papers in Nature, Science etc are published by collaborations. They are the products of lots of different techniques brought to bear on one important problem."

## What do I need to get right?

Although it brings many benefits, collaborative research will bring the most benefit to your career if you get a few things right from the outset.

- **Partners** – working with the right people is critical to both the success and enjoyment of the project. Working with people with a track record of delivering results and are genuinely interested in collaborating will bring the greatest value to others.
- **Balance** – even though collaborative work is important, you must still maintain a personal specialism and build your individual reputation. Choose projects which are consistent with your interests and strengthen your personal research story.
- **Outputs** - publications, conference talks and patents are the potential deliverables from most research projects. The creativity and shared enthusiasm of collaborative partnerships are likely to lead to greater returns, so you should have plenty of opportunities to build your publication record. Be sure to take these opportunities and to build your profile through presenting the work as widely as possible
- **Communication** – new technologies should allow you to keep in constant contact with your partners – you might even communicate more regularly than researchers who work in the same building! The shared expertise of the collaborating team should enable you to find the best means of keeping in touch during the project.
- **Career benefits** – Collaboration has become part of the DNA of research, so early experience of working with others will give you a real advantage as your career develops. You'll have a wider network, a broader understanding of your field and the skills to work with a group of people
- **Independence** – if you hope to have a research-based career, a future employer will be looking for evidence of independence and a capability to identify novel research questions. Working with people other than your supervisor demonstrates that you can operate without their steering, but be sure to publish with your other co-workers to provide evidence of your independence.

"The challenges of collaboration are two-fold. One is based around communication - can you make a connection between what you do and what someone else does? Can you understand each other's work to be able to collaborate?

The other challenge is priorities - it is important to get buy-in, your priorities may differ from those of your collaborators."

### **CV time-travel:**

Imagine you've gone forward in time to the end of a successful collaborative project. What have you added to your CV since the project started?

### **Interview time-travel:**

You're been interviewed for a great job at the end of a successful collaborative project. The interviewer asks you "Why was this project such a success? How did it run so smoothly?"

What do you say?

When everyone in a project feels they are benefiting from the work, it is more likely to succeed. However, just as critical to success is your own skills set. Do you have skills which will make you a better collaborative researcher?

## What are the skills you are likely to need?

All researchers develop a wide range of skills and some of these are particularly important when collaborating. You can learn more about all of the skills that researchers can develop by referring to the Researcher Development Framework on the Vitae website. See the Vitae section near the back of this booklet for details.

### Exercise: a collaborative researcher...

<b>Relates to people</b> – are you easy to talk to, interested in people and their research, do you make yourselves available at meetings and conferences, are you enthusiastic about your own research and happy to talk to people about its value. Do you establish and maintain relationships with people?	I do this well when I...
	I'll get better if I...
<b>Understands people</b> – do you understand and appreciate cultural differences, can you identify the work-related strengths and weaknesses of people you work with, have you invested time in learning about how teams operate and applied any of this learning?	I do this well when I...
	I'll get better if I...
<b>Manages tasks and processes</b> – do you plan projects and activities, deliver tasks when expected and to a high standard, use project planning tools, manage the work of others, set deadlines and identify critical points in projects?	I do this well when I...
	I'll get better if I...
<b>Disseminates effectively</b> – do you deliver academic papers, speak at conferences, write articles or other research outputs? Is your publication record strong and are you maximizing the impact of your published work so people with similar interests are aware of you?	I do this well when I...
	I'll get better if I...

<b>Communicates with style</b> – do you have a fluent, professional approach whether speaking, presenting, writing or using social media. Do you confidently express opinions about your research and offer comments and feedback to others?	I do this well when I
	I'll get better if I...

<b>Has a specialism</b> – are you known for being an expert at something? Do you have a positive reputation in your narrow field and is your work valued by your peers?	I do this well when I...
	I'll get better if I...

<b>Uses all available communication tools</b> - do you have a social media presence? Are you comfortable talking to people face-to-face, on the phone, via video calls, through email and instant messaging and other methods?	I do this well when I...
	I'll get better if I...

<b>Engages with all stakeholders</b> – are you aware of all the people and organisations who are interested in, or could benefit from, your research? Are you aware of their agendas and do you disseminate the findings of your research to them in an appropriate way?	I do this well when I...
	I'll get better if I...

<b>Has a plan</b> – do you have a vision for your career? What will you be doing in 5, 10, 20 years? Are you investing in your own development through courses, involvement in projects, learning new techniques? Do you know what your next employer will be looking for in your CV?	I do this well when I...
	I'll get better if I...

<b>Sees the bigger picture</b> - do you have a strategic view of your research field, funding trends and the factors that are influencing the research landscape?	I do this well when
	I'll get better if I...

Use the RDF tool on the Vitae website to investigate the skills identified above and ALL the skills researchers can develop. Look at the ways these skills can grow in the later phases of a career and think about the choices you need to make to give yourself the best development opportunities. [www.vitae.ac.uk/rdftool](http://www.vitae.ac.uk/rdftool)

These are the core skills which will help you to be a really effective collaborative researcher, but being equipped with the right skills is only part of the process. What can you do to prepare for future collaborations?

## **Becoming a collaborative researcher: First steps**

### **How do you make yourself visible to potential collaborators?**

#### **What should you be doing NOW?**

Although there are many (and increasing) opportunities to work on collaborative research projects, as an early career researcher you will need a strategy to appear on the radar of potential partners. In this section you'll discover what you can do to develop your collaborative muscles. Looking at a range of skills and attitudes, you can ask yourself some critical questions and discover ways to get started and to keep on improving.

#### **Provide Clarity** – what do you do and how do you do it?

In a collaborative project, each partner makes a clear and valued contribution. If you hope to be involved in future projects, your skills and knowledge must be easy to identify and understand.

Could someone in your department (not your supervisor or a close friend) describe your research in simple accurate terms?

First steps – think of the key words that describe your work and use them consistently in your writing, presentations and conversations about your work. Make them key words in your social media use.

**Exercise:** Make a list of those words here:

Next steps – If you are interested in multi- or inter-disciplinary research, ensure this description is equally relevant outside your field

**Become Recognisable** – there are many opportunities to meet other researchers at conferences and meetings on particular topics but time is usually tight and it can be difficult to identify people in a busy room. As a prospective collaborative researcher think about how people will find you in these situations.

Would a key researcher in your field who has attended the same meetings as you in the past be able to identify you by sight?

First steps – get a decent photograph taken and use this on your posters and social media profiles. Ask your supervisor if they will use it in presentations if they are talking about your work.

Next steps – use the same photograph on any web pages or sites you appear on and consider making a video of you describing your research.

**Build your Visibility** – Academic communities now exist in virtual environments as well as in institutions and at conferences. There are many different places to voice opinions and find people with similar interests.

Does your name or work come up in a web search for your research topic?

**Exercise:** List the sites on which you and your work appears and highlight those which have content you can control.

First steps – identify the places where your virtual community live and work and look out for discussions or resources which relate to your interests.

Next steps – start to contribute to discussions and express your interests to this on-line audience.

**Identify Ambassadors** – At this stage of your research career, your main focus is as a hands-on researcher, so the majority of your time is spent in your research environment. For some of you this will be highly collaborative and offer many opportunities to engage with others, but there are sure to be times when your supervisor or other staff attend meetings and conferences without you. In these situations, they could be describing your work when they meet people with mutual interests and encouraging them to make contact.

Do the right people know you are interested in collaboration and would they feel comfortable approaching you?

Has your supervisor introduced or recommended you to someone?



First steps – talk to your supervisor about your desire to work collaboratively and ask for their advice and support to make connections.

Next Steps – identify people who are good networkers – who go to lots of events and meetings and enjoy connecting people. Ensure they are familiar with your research and find out if they know anyone with similar or compatible research interests.

**Be Reliable** – When looking for collaborators most experienced researchers are as interested in the person as their expertise. It is not enough to have the research skills needed for potential projects, you must also be someone they can trust to deliver and work well with others.

Could your colleagues recommend you as a potential collaborator based on your current performance?

**Exercise:** Make a list of things that you need to do for other people and set deadlines for getting them done!

WHO

WHAT

WHEN

First steps – think about your response to requests from others and record of meeting deadlines. Could you improve these?

Next steps – Look at honing your time and project management skills – ask for advice from highly effective researchers about their working practices and try to emulate their techniques.

**Tune in** – the drive to increased collaboration in research is a result of the substantial changes to research culture and funding agendas seen in the last ten years. As the financial situation in universities becomes increasingly difficult, the match between the interests of researchers and funding providers must be genuine and evident.

What do you think the main research questions will be in your field in five years time?

First steps – identify the key funding providers in your field and look at the type of research they are funding and championing in their publications and website. Can you see parallels between this and your work?

Next steps – Look for opportunities to attend seminars or consultation events run by funding bodies and other key research stakeholders.

**Translate** – before collaborations can get off the ground, there needs to be a common language and understanding. Even within the same discipline there is a real danger in assuming the same information is being interpreted in the same way. If collaborating with researchers from other sectors remember that their motivations and definitions of success for the project are also likely to be very different.

Have you described your research in interesting and relevant terms to someone from a different faculty in the last six months?

**Exercise:** Write a 50 word description of your research aimed at someone from a different research field:

First steps – read a few articles from different disciplines to familiarise yourself with the language and research protocols.

Next steps – give a research presentation in a different department or school to researchers who don't share your background and specific knowledge.

**Be Interested** – a naturally collaborative researcher is genuinely interested in the work of other researchers and respects the knowledge and perspectives they bring, even when this creates challenges.

Do you make a habit of talking to other researchers about their work and do you find them interesting?

First steps – find a place on campus where researchers get together – it might be a coffee shop, networking event or graduate school, and start discussing your research with your peers in other disciplines.

Next steps – look for research seminars or networking meetings in your institution – most departments have a broad programme of internal and external speakers. Invite someone from another department to speak in your seminar series.

**Remain Relevant & Current** – The nature of research is that new knowledge and approaches are constantly developed. Individual researchers need to work hard to keep their skills up to date, but also to ensure they are marketable to a range of projects and partners.

Are your skills or knowledge in short supply?

**Exercise:** Make a list of your research skills and highlight those which are unusual and/or applicable outside your research field.

First steps – at conferences in your own field, is there a “buzz” around your technique or topic? Could you create one by highlighting the benefits and innovations provided by your work?

Next steps – talk to other researchers (not in your field) about your work and identify the possibilities they see in your research.

**Achieve Status** – If you aspire to be a key player in potential projects, you need to have a track record and be recognised as the intellectual driver behind your work. Make sure you get full credit for your work and ideas, so you are identified and approached by people who are interested in what you do.

When people discuss your work, do they identify you as the architect of the research?

First steps – ask a mentor to review your publication list and get their perspectives on the impact you are demonstrating.

Next steps – take the lead in research dissemination by writing first drafts or papers, looking for (and taking) opportunities to present and identifying funding sources.

**Turn on your Radar** – Collaborative research is funded and supported by a wide range of organisations. Identifying potential sources of money is a research project in itself. Successful researchers are aware of the likely sources of funding, their objectives and interests and know when deadlines and calls are likely to be announced.

Do you know who could fund your future research interests?

**Exercise:** Think about who might fund the research you are interested in developing. Now go to their website and find **evidence** that they have either funded similar research or are committed to in the future.

First steps – sign up for bulletins from your research support office – they are likely to produce an email digest of opportunities and events.

Next steps – As you start to attend meetings and events with a wider range of researchers, ask them about the funding schemes they think might be a good match with your interests.

**Create Opportunities** – In addition to all these effective behaviours, the successful collaborative researcher is also great at spotting opportunities that others miss. They are confident about the value of their research and can easily communicate the potential connections and contributions to other issues and projects. They are willing to invest time attending meetings and events where they will meet people, taking a calculated risk that some of these connections will be ultimately fruitful.

Can you think of three possible applications for your expertise outside your current project?

First steps – look for networking events locally and try to speak to a wide range of people whatever their background or interests.

Next steps – go to a conference which isn't an obvious choice, but where you are likely to find connections with people.

“I was approached recently by someone who had been looking for someone in my area – they found me through Google! It felt a bit strange at first, as most collaborations come through my network or people meeting me at conferences, but because I've got a reasonably strong web presence – twitter, facebook, blog and website – they were able to learn a lot about me and my work. I control most of what appears on these sites, so the information they found was what I want people to find.” Elizabeth, Education

#### Building your on-line profile – FIVE places to be seen

Twitter – a micro-blogging site popular with a huge range of people and organisations. Common usages are to point “followers” to interesting material; to post opinions; to comment on discussions; to follow trends; to commentate during conferences and events

LinkedIn - primarily professional social networking site which allows users to display their professional network and share information on activities; the “groups” function allow you to join or create private communities with shared interests

Vidiowiki – a video hosting site for academics – post a three minute video talking about your work and why it is interesting!

Blogging - Wordpress/Posterous/Blogger are some of the sites available to host free blogs. Use these to post opinion based articles or reports on your research. Most allow you to embed images, presentations and podcasts.

University webpages – all students and staff at institutions should be entitled to webspace on the university site, although there may be design and content restrictions. Ensure it carries a relevant description of your research, the skills you have which might be of interest to potential collaborators and all your publications and other activities.

Hopefully your head is now full of ideas and actions that you can take to build your visibility and start connecting with potential collaborators. Now take a few steps forward and think about how to work most effectively on current and future projects.

## The environment for success

If you're convinced by the potential benefits of collaboration and now feel ready to launch yourself into the wider world, this section is full of advice on making the right choices and taking the best first steps to establish and run collaborative projects.

Enthusiastic researcher with track record and publications, seeks partner with open-mind and project management skills for intriguing investigations into the meaning of life, the universe and everything!

### Who should I collaborate with?

The process of choosing partners to collaborate with is a personal one – some researchers identify people they find interesting and enjoyable to spend time with and look for potential projects to share. Others see funding opportunities and approach people who can help them to put together a compelling proposal. Sometimes a mutual acquaintance might spot common values or interests and set up academic “blind dates”!

In the early stages of your career there is also a dilemma about the level of your collaborators. There are obvious advantages to working with high-profile researchers, but people may assume you are a very minor partner in the project. Collaborating with large groups gives you access to manpower, but might make authorship discussions complex. Working with a former supervisor may feel safer and efficient as you are familiar with each other, but could undermine the appearance of your independence.

There isn't a right or wrong way to find collaborators, but remember that the project will only go ahead with funding, so anyone in the team must make a clear contribution to the work and be interested in their role.

### Is this the right opportunity for me?

- Is my role in the project clear?
- Am I interested in this work?
- Will this move my research forwards?
- Will I be motivated to do it amid my other commitments?
- Does it deliver clear advantages to me and my career?
- Do I trust the people I'll be working with?
- Are they listening to me and my ideas?
- Am I ready to share my data and ideas with others?
- Am I ready to share the credit for my work with others?
- Is the project being managed effectively with clear objectives and deadlines?

If you have answered “no” or “I don't know” to any of these questions, seek clarification from your potential partners or ask a trusted colleague for advice.

“My supervisor was the initial connection with the collaboration but he said that it would be a good opportunity for me to start to develop a reputation in my own right and I've really enjoyed the opportunity to work with someone from a different faculty.”

## How should projects form?

The critical stage of any project is the ideas generation – if you are bringing together a team to work on a question, each with a different specialism, it makes no sense to develop a project without their input. Projects developed by a single mind or very small core group may bring in other researchers, but their roles will be more minor – acting as technical support to the project rather than intellectual drivers.

It is therefore key to bring together those who will be driving the project forward from the outset and to generate ideas as a group. This is not to say that the project will operate as a leaderless democracy – there needs to be a designated principal researcher – but rather that at the early stages you create an environment in which everyone has a voice and can contribute to the project direction.

Once the central concepts, primary objectives and core team have been identified it may make more sense for individuals or small teams to work on their sub-plans but the overview must be seen and agreed by all who will be responsible for the constituent parts. The greatest strength of a collaboration is the intellectual community – by isolating members and failing to capitalise on their unique value, the project is immediately weakened.

## Starting a collaboration

Once the project vision has been articulated and a plan drawn up, there need to be some more difficult discussions about the potential for things going wrong. There are too many stories in the research world about projects that have begun with aspiration and hope and ended with recrimination and bitterness. In many cases there isn't a villain or a hero – simply two parties who have failed to understand each other's objectives and have inadvertently caused offence or undermined the value of the project.

Clarity will reduce the risk of these lurking disasters. The demands of most funding providers are such that detailed project plans, dissemination strategies and contingencies are increasingly required, so this can be built into the proposal writing. Each collaboration agreement will have its own tailored design, and the following example addresses some common issues:

### Collaboration Agreement

What are we trying to achieve? Are we all motivated by this goal?

What will each team member/sub-group contribute to this goal?

With what frequency and by what methods will we communicate with each other?

Face to face

Written reports

Informal contact

How much communication needs to be shared with the whole team?

What will the criteria be for agreeing authorship of any published work?

Who will present on the work

to academic audiences?

to the media?

How will the plan be revised as the research begins to deliver results?

How will we manage mobility of staff to new institutions or out of research?

This is just a suggested format. For more ideas see

<http://sourcebook.od.nih.gov/eseethicscases/collaborationagreement.htm> or  
[http://ori.dhhs.gov/education/preempt\\_discord.shtml](http://ori.dhhs.gov/education/preempt_discord.shtml) for templates to adapt

To have any value, the agreement must be signed by all parties. Some funding bodies see such value in them that they will insist on a collaborative agreement between partners before funding is released!

### Exercise

Write a retrospective project agreement for your **current** research which addresses any issues that have cropped up. Write it in a way that would have been acceptable to all those involved.

With a collaborative agreement you are better equipped to evaluate potential opportunities and establish them in the most constructive way. Next comes the project life-cycle, with tips for effective communication between project partners.

## Managing communication

During the process of collaboration you will need to use a variety of communication mechanisms to ensure there is an efficient and effective flow of information between research partners.

### The beginning

At the start of the project it is likely that the meetings will have a more creative element to them (particularly if you are involved in the proposal stage of the project) as the elements, process and timeline for the collaborative project are agreed between the collaborative parties. The themes of the meeting are likely to be more strategic to start with and then move into more tactical plans for delivery of the project. This will be the time where roles and responsibilities are likely to be discussed and allocated and where you can highlight the contribution you can make. Depending upon the size of the project this may be covered in one meeting or several.

Preparing for this type of meeting:

- Be aware of who will be leading and participating in this meeting
- Find out about what they are contributing to the project and what their expertise is
- If there are specific ideas and technical requirements that you need to contribute to the project be prepared to talk about them
- Be open minded regarding the possible opportunities that might be available to you in these types of meetings
- Consider your capacity at work to be able to take on additional responsibilities relating to the collaborative project and don't over commit yourself

Other communication strategies

- Establish a virtual infrastructure for the group by agreeing on the technology and websites, for example: videoconferencing software, a private LinkedIn group, a joint project website.

### ...as the project moves forward

As the project gets going the meetings will focus on reviewing how the project is going, what progress has been made and what the next stage(s) of the project will cover. These meetings will be regular and can be shorter than the initial meeting but will often be comprehensive and require all contributors to the project to provide updates and be involved in the decision making processes.



Preparing for this type of meeting:

- Read through the agenda and any papers that accompany the agenda ahead of the meeting.
- Consider any update papers that you need to circulate to the meeting attendees ahead of time and deliver these to the meeting's convenor by the due date.
- Think about how you are going to convey your key points to the group comprehensively and concisely.
- Look at other agenda items where you have a contribution to make or might be asked a question and be prepared to talk about the work you have done since the last meeting.

Other communication strategies

- Ensure meetings also have a social element where possible so researchers have a chance to form stronger ties
- Encourage researchers at all levels to discuss their research with their peers – perhaps having poster displays and presentation slots for students and early career researchers
- If meetings are held in sub-groups of the whole project team, ensure there is a brief report circulated to everyone
- Look for topics on which you can write collaboratively with other team members to extract maximum value from the project

### **A note about teleconferences and virtual meetings**

Telephone meetings are really useful to avoid the cost and time involved in travelling to a meeting (and are a very efficient way of meeting if the people you are collaborating with are spread over a wide geographic area). The lack of face-to-face communication in these meetings can pose some challenges particularly for those new to this type of meeting for a research collaboration.

Preparing for this type of meeting:

- It is important to prepare for this type of meeting in the same way you would for a face-to-face meeting. Teleconference meetings can often be shorter than their face-to-face counterparts because they are more focused and there isn't as much scope for the wider discussion of points that a face-to-face meeting facilitates. Be prepared to be focused in your contribution.
- In this type of meeting you have to listen more intently and be aware of who is speaking. When it is your turn to speak make sure that people know it is you who is making the contribution to the discussion by introducing yourself and reminding others of this as appropriate during the meeting.
- DON'T try and do other things whilst the meeting is happening – answering your email whilst the subject moves away from your contribution means you might miss something important or be called upon to contribute whilst your mind is elsewhere. It is important to consider that if you wouldn't do something in a face-to-face meeting don't do it in a teleconference!

## As a project finishes

Make sure that you take full advantage of the opportunities of the project, particularly in terms of building your network. In the final months of the research, and at the last few meetings, be sure to talk to people about future plans and develop your relationships outside the project. Future mentors, partners and employers could be involved in your current work – don't lose touch with them once the final report is submitted.

“Being geographically apart from your collaborators doesn't have the impact it must have done in the past. We are in constant touch using a range of technologies. If anything I communicate more regularly with my collaborators thousands of miles away than I do with the people working up the corridor!”

“Be prepared to learn another language. Terms that have clear meanings in your field will have sometimes quite different connotations in other academic disciplines. This takes time and lots of interaction”

“Don't expect to instantly be on someone else's wavelength. It can take months or years. Initially you might not even realise you have ways of working that are alien to your collaborators. With distinctive standards and approaches across disciplines, you come to realise that there are subtly different ideas on the nature of truth.”  
Miles, Chemistry

Think about...

What is your preferred communication method? What will your communication strategy be for connecting with remote partners?

Are you collaborating with researchers from other disciplines? How will you ensure they understand your work? What assumptions about language or understanding do you need to discuss with them?

### Exercise

Write down all the different communication mechanisms available and all the different kinds of conversations and interactions you expect to have during the project. Which mechanisms are best suited to the different exchanges? Are you using the technology to best effect?

Communication mechanism/  
technology

Works best for...

Communication is critical to the success of any project. However, even with a great communication strategy, it might not always feel like the project is on track. The next section will help you think constructively if concerns arise.

## Staying on track

Most research projects finish without major issues but if problems do emerge, everyone involved will want to find a solution and quickly. If you are concerned about the project or people, here are some questions to ask yourself.

**Do my collaborators have a different way of doing things?**

Working with people with different working styles can be challenging at first, but once you start to understand these differences, you'll start to appreciate them.

The person who does everything at the last minute, could be brilliant at adapting to changes in the project direction.

The person who wants to spend lots of time socializing and is always emailing you, could be a fantastic networker who will bring the project to the attention of important people.

The person who criticises ideas and questions every decision could review drafts of papers and find weaknesses.

**Need to learn more about different working styles?**

**The Vitae website has a “Working collaboratively with others” section packed with insights into individual preferences and team behaviours**

If you are nervous about collaborating with others, the collaborative agreement should offer reassurance, as it will set out the important deadlines, each person's responsibilities and the overall project plan.

Different working styles might have an impact here again – if you like to plan carefully and in detail, it might feel uncomfortable to see an agreement without the specifics you prefer.

One solution might be to offer to take on a monitoring role in the project and flag up approaching deadlines.

If you are inheriting a project or working without an agreement, why not set one up. It's a great way to understand the needs and expectations of your partners.

**What's in our collaborative agreement?**

**Need to write a collaborative agreement? Look at the example in the Starting a collaboration section.**

**Have I spoken to my collaborators face-to-face recently?**

If people seem to have lost interest in the project, a face to face meeting can often reinvigorate a team and give them an opportunity to rediscover their interest and shared enthusiasm.

Similarly, if the project is moving in too many directions at once, a joint discussion about objectives can help to find the right focus.

**A meeting of all the collaborative partners could be a great opportunity to develop a more coherent team.**

**There are resources on team development on the Vitae website's "Leadership Development for Principal Investigators" programme.**

Research is carried out at the limit of understanding and knowledge. If you are starting to feel like a lot of uncertainty is creeping into the project, could it be a sign of real progress?

At the start of a project, team members will tend to be quite reserved and polite to each other. As they start to work together and have more confidence and knowledge some may become more honest, more critical, more challenging – all signs of increased engagement!

**Are my concerns actually signs that the project is moving forwards?**

**Get to know some of the theories behind teams with the resources on the Vitae website's "Leadership Development for Principal Investigators" programme.**

If a project does fail, be reassured by these comments from academics who have been there and bounced back.

"Failed collaborations can form the basis of future successes. Even if no good comes from a project remember that academia is a small world so try to keep relations cordial."

"Most researchers will have had one project that didn't work out – I certainly have. I did learn a lot from the experience and I'm careful now to establish deadlines and outputs from projects at the planning stage. I also try to find out what I can about people in advance from my network, although sometimes the right person is on the wrong project so don't count on this feedback. I haven't let it put me off working with others because I still do some of my best work in joint projects, but I always have my own work running in parallel in case there are difficulties again."

**Exercise:** Your emergency services: Who could you talk to if you started having concerns? What could they do to help?

These are worst case scenarios! Don't expect problems with joint projects - most researchers have shared interests and motivations. Research is also common with non-academic partners who may have different needs

## Collaborating outside academia

Although the same guidance applies in terms of agreeing the scope and outputs of the projects, there are often other considerations when working with partners from other sectors as they may have different objectives and uses for the data and results produced.

Commercial partners will usually want to derive a commercial advantage from the work, so the issue of intellectual property must be clearly established before work begins. In some cases, partners may want to delay or restrict publication, so be sure to agree publication timing and content in advance. Your institution will have a set of procedures for dealing with external partners and these can be complicated, so it is important to look into these at an early stage of project planning.

Collaborations between universities and companies can be eligible for additional government funding, so talk to your internal research support staff about schemes (such as the Knowledge Transfer Partnerships) that may be relevant to your research interests.

<http://www.ipo.gov.uk/lambert>

The Lambert toolkit is for universities and companies that wish to undertake collaborative research projects with each other.

Think about...

What are the expected outcomes and impact of your project? Could a non-academic partner enable you to achieve these more effectively?

Who is interested in the results of your work? Might they be interested in providing data, materials or access to people to build a more effective project?

Take action...

If you are considering collaboration with an industrial, public sector or other partner, you must seek specialist advice. Start by talking to another researcher who has worked with other sectors about their experiences and ask them who needs to know, or might be able to help, in your institution.

“Talk about IP issues up front. Researchers in industry are much more clued up on how to acquire and exploit intellectual property than academics. They won't be offended if you have taken advice from your research contracts department which helps you to negotiate a better agreement.”

“The direct connection to application can be very fulfilling if you are feeling a little bored with academia (and academics!)”

The information about collaboration in this handbook has been written to inspire you to build connections and projects around your research. You now have the tools to start and manage effective collaborative projects and that you are now keen to develop your research profile and activities. The final pages of the booklet point to some of the many resources available to help with this as well as giving you space to reflect on your next steps.

Good luck with your collaborations!

## Resources for Collaborative Researchers

[www.linkedin.com](http://www.linkedin.com)

An opportunity for you and your professional research network to keep in touch. The “groups” facility is particularly useful as it allows you to create a closed community that can share resources, hold discussions and keep each other up to date.

<http://www.rin.ac.uk/>

The Research Information Network supports the development of effective information strategies and practices for the UK’s research community. Their **Social Media Guide for Researchers** offers great advice on many of the issues surrounding visibility, sharing of ideas and developing a research reputation that are relevant to collaborative researchers.

<http://www.meetingzone.com/>

One of a number of teleconferencing providers.

<http://www.wallwisher.com>

A virtual post-it wall.

<http://www.doodle.com/>

A resource for arranging times when everyone is free to meet.

[www.dropbox.com](http://www.dropbox.com)

A way to manage your documents on-line whilst working with others.

<http://www.delicious.com/>

Social bookmarking allows you to share interesting resources and information with colleagues.

<https://ccrod.cancer.gov/confluence/display/NIHOMBUD/Home>

Collaboration and Team Science: A Field Guide is intended for anyone currently participating in or leading a research team, considering becoming involved in a research team, or contemplating building a research team.

<http://www.hhmi.org/resources/labmanagement/moves.html>

Making the Right Moves: A Practical Guide to Scientific Management for Postdocs and New Faculty includes a chapter on collaborations.

[www.ukrsa.org.uk](http://www.ukrsa.org.uk)

UKRSA UK Research Staff Association, UKRSA, is the voice of UK research staff. They conduct research on issues affecting research staff and research staff associations, which is interdisciplinary by its nature.

## How Vitae can help

Vitae is a national organisation championing the personal, professional and career development of doctoral researchers and research staff in higher education institutions and research institutes.

Vitae plays a major role in the drive for high-level skills and innovation and in the UK's goal to produce world class researchers. Its vision is for the UK to be outstanding in supporting the personal, professional and career development of researchers.

[www.vitae.ac.uk](http://www.vitae.ac.uk)

Across the website are many resources to help you be the most effective researcher you can be, so look for the information which best suits your career stage and interests. There are dedicated sections for researchers, supervisors, staff who support researcher development and employers.

After reading "The Collaborative Researcher" you might be particularly interested in:

[www.vitae.ac.uk/rdf](http://www.vitae.ac.uk/rdf)

The Researcher Development Framework (RDF) is a major new approach to researcher development, which aims to enhance our capacity to build the UK workforce, develop world-class researchers and build our research base. The RDF describes the knowledge, behaviours and attributes of researchers and encourages them to aspire to excellence through achieving higher levels of development.

[www.vitae.ac.uk/dr11](http://www.vitae.ac.uk/dr11)

Digital Researcher 2011 is a resource to help researchers make the most of new technologies in their research. Developed from a conference that ran in early 2011, it includes links to many resources to help you integrate social media and other technologies into your life.



Aimed at research staff, these pages contain simple tools to help you understand how you like to work, how you might work more effectively with others and how you could improve the operation of the teams that you work in.

<http://www.vitae.ac.uk/pi>

Developed as a convenient resource for new and aspiring PIs, this section offers advice and resources on people management skills, impact of research, and managing research teams.

## Ten reasons to collaborate

1. **It's fun!** Collaboration gives you opportunities to work with interesting people, on research that delivers a clear benefit, on topic that really engage your enthusiasm and interest.
2. **Funding** Most major funding providers are keen to promote collaborative research as a means to answer bigger questions. The skills and knowledge you gain will strengthen your position to apply for future funding.
3. **Improve your research vision** Developing close ties with other researchers also gives you a community with whom to discuss your current and future plans. Their feedback and suggestions will help you to enhance or redefine your vision.
4. **Boost your CV** A group of researchers should produce more results than an individual! With a team of people writing on various aspects of interconnected work, there is a greater chance of adding to your publication list.
5. **Connect with many people** Collaborations are a good way to work with many people at once – in a few years you could work with more researchers than you would during an entire career pursuing solo projects.
6. **Improve your judgment** Working with new people can be risky, so you'll need to develop your own strategies for being sure you can trust your co-workers. Once you learn how to spot evidence of integrity and trustworthiness, you'll be well positioned to find future partners.
7. **Publish more widely** Each researcher in a collaboration will want to reach their own audiences, broadening your reach if you are publishing with them. Multi-disciplinary projects are also more likely to publish in high-impact, wide readership journals.
8. **Improve communication and project management skills** If you are involved in helping to write a project plan and communication strategy to manage the different partners, you'll have marketable skills for the future.
9. **Learn to manage and minimise risk** By having a Plan B ready and a process for monitoring progress, you are increasing the likelihood of a successful project and will learn how to establish future research in the most effective way.
10. **Develop a niche** As a specialist on a project you have a chance to showcase your expertise and develop your reputation in a particular field.



## Your action plan

1. Use the RDF and other resources to identify your top five skills for collaboration:
2. What are the benefits of collaboration for you, your institution and potential funders?
3. Opportunity spotting – where will you go and what will you do, say and present in order to connect with potential research colleagues?
4. What do you think needs to go in a collaborative project agreement?

## About the authors:

Sara Shinton and Janet Wilkinson have a successful track record of working collaboratively to develop materials for use in universities in the UK for early career researchers, post-graduate researchers and the development of women in academic and professional life. Additionally, both have experience of developing and delivering material for the Crucible programme (originating from NESTA and now running across the UK), which fosters collaborative interdisciplinary working amongst talented researchers.

Sara and Janet are co-authors of the Effective Researcher programme (now run at many UK universities) and have been developing materials collaboratively with Vitae for over 10 years.

Sara and Janet also work independently developing learning materials, facilitating and leading courses on a range of professional topics.

[www.shintonconsulting.com](http://www.shintonconsulting.com)