

## Common Cause: action needed to create fair and mutual research partnerships between universities and Black and Minority Ethnic Communities

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Common cause network workshop.  
Photograph by Chris Cronin

### About the research

In the UK, Black and Minority Ethnic (BAME) groups are under-represented in all areas of research-intensive universities and in research leadership roles in higher education. Action needs to be taken to address this, and such action necessarily includes widening participation, action on the curriculum, and attention to structural inequalities within the university. The Common Cause project focused on addressing this inequality in research.

The Common Cause project explored where and how common cause, or shared objectives and ethos, can be made between change agents in universities, communities and funding bodies who are looking to create an Arts and Humanities knowledge base that fully reflects the cultures

and experiences of the UK's Black and Minority Ethnic communities. Over two years the project reviewed case studies of collaborative research between universities and BAME communities, artists and creative organisations to understand the barriers and enablers to these partnerships.

“ So the main sort of line going [...] has been co-production, and so we acknowledge that we need to all be on the same equal level playing field at the table, having an equal say in everything. (Community partner)



People at Solas Festival as part of the What I'd Like You to Know About Me Project. Photograph by Karen Gordon.

**When research collaborations between universities and BAME groups are successful they can have significant impacts – on government policy, scholarship, the creation of new artworks and archives and the capacity of individuals and organisations to contribute to new knowledge.**

However, there are profound structural obstacles to these collaborations, including:

- The fact that research partnerships tend to emerge from existing social and institutional networks which exclude communities without strong social or cultural links to individuals within universities.
- The lack of investment in organisations that support and represent BAME communities, leading to a limited capacity to become involved in research.
- The negative impact of previous extractive research and mistrust of universities, which are perceived as white majority institutions.

“ I think to communities to hear ‘research’ means someone’s going to come in and use ... or someone’s going to come in and take, and that’s it. It stems from this very short-term nature of research that universities tend to do. So they’ll get funding to carry out a certain amount of research with a certain amount of time, normally like three or five months or something, unless there’s a huge bit of funding and then it can be a long-term thing. But because of the short-term nature it is a very quick ‘we’re going to get what we need and then we’re going to leave’ and people in communities do notice that. (Community partner)

### **Universities often compound these issues through:**

- Low numbers of BAME staff, particularly at leadership level. Where there are BAME staff members in post they are often expected to take sole responsibility for developing partnerships.
- Tokenistic relationships with BAME communities, and racism and stereotyping towards members of the community when they engage with universities.
- A lack of transparency and impenetrable organisational structures that prevent those interested in engagement from making connections.

“ I think most people who’ve been in the sector for a while can smell tokenism. And I think that could be more damaging than strategic engagement. I think if it becomes tokenistic you know it almost feels like this is classic... it’s about anti-racism really, not diversity. So if this ends up being a splash of colour all around [this funder’s] projects, then you know we’ve got a significant problem, we’ve got a significant problem. (Community partner)

“ You know, there are not many professors like them, they are still massively under-represented. So having that representation in the academy really makes a difference on obviously what gets taught, what gets researched, but also whether or not it touches the third sector at all. So that’s massively important. And that does determine the type of collaborations that might exist in future. (Community Partner)

## Recommendations for university leadership and research support services:

**Staffing and Brokerage** – Universities should ensure staff, particularly public engagement teams, and governance bodies reflect the ethnic diversity of their local communities, using paid community brokers to work with communities where expertise does not exist in the university. Engagement strategies, training and employment should be subject to monitoring and review.

“ Where do you start with making contact? Universities should have a first contact point for university-community collaborative work, this would really help communities to explore or initiate research that they see as relevant or want to do. (Community partner)

**Funding Development** – Funding needs to be available at two levels for collaborative partnerships; institutional level to develop and sustain partnerships; and project level funding of research activities. Universities should aim to create long term partnerships beyond project funding and should be willing to provide for additional costs that may arise in collaborative projects.

**Leadership and Monitoring** – All universities should establish a Pro-Vice Chancellor level post for developing fair and mutual university-community partnerships with pay related Key Performance Indicators and responsibility for addressing BAME under-representation.

**Campus Development** – Where new campuses are being developed, universities should consider how BAME organisations can share in the space or how the location of campuses can open up relationships with diverse communities.

**Finance and Contracts** – University services should work to ensure that internal processes do not have a negative impact on partnerships. They should ensure that contracts and information are in plain English, make payments in a timely manner, without burdensome form-filling, and have contacts for community partners who are trained in and aware of the issues facing smaller community organisations.

**Communication and Openness** – Universities need to improve accessibility for potential partners and communities more broadly, they should have clear points of contact for external organisations and work with partners already engaged in work around inclusion, diversity and equality. Where universities have historic links to slavery this should be acknowledged and investments made with relevant communities.

“ I was in fear of the institutions that administered the degrees. It's because there was this assumed perception that somehow, they knew more, these spaces knew more, had the authority, these spaces wrote the books that you would have to study in a language that was often alien, these spaces delivered the individuals that created the laws, you knew these spaces historically rejected you, and didn't reflect your history, the faces in these spaces didn't represent you and often didn't like you ... So, when entering these spaces, you didn't feel comfortable. (Community leader and academic)

**Ethical Procedures** – Ethical procedures need to be developed to reflect the complexities of partnerships with diverse groups with different cultural traditions and acknowledge that some groups may have experienced risk and exploitation in previous partnerships or procedures.



Still from a performance of *In Flux*.  
Photograph by Andy Barrett

## 10 Principles for Fair and Mutual Research Partnerships

- 1. A commitment to strengthening the partnering community organisation**  
Any partnership between a university and a community/cultural organisation or group should be premised on leaving that organisation stronger than before the participation.
- 2. A commitment to mutual benefit**  
Any partnerships should address mutually beneficial needs and concerns. There should be sufficient time in the development process to clearly articulate the mutual benefit for each partner prior to projects being funded.
- 3. A commitment to transparency and accountability**  
Transparency and accountability need to operate at multiple levels from the institutional level to the individual project level.
- 4. Fair practices in payments**  
The process for payments is clear and transparent; ensuring that payment is made promptly in a timely manner, and in advance if necessary given the needs of the project or the partner.
- 5. Fair payments for participants**  
Payments to participants in research projects should recognise the time and valuable expertise that partners are contributing to the project.
- 6. A commitment to fair knowledge exchange**  
Research partnerships should build upon and recognise the knowledge and expertise of all participants.
- 7. A commitment to sustainability and legacy**  
Project participants will be expected to develop plans for longer-term legacy and sustainability by agreeing how data and outputs from projects will be protected, shared and accessed over the long-term, and by whom.
- 8. A commitment to equality and diversity**  
Projects should actively seek to avoid reproducing and intensifying already existing prejudices and stereotypes within and between communities.
- 9. A commitment to sectoral as well as organisational development**  
Arrangements will need to be made to ensure that project outputs are captured in ways that enable them to be shared with a wider community, and that the learning from these projects is available and accessible.
- 10. A commitment to reciprocal learning**  
Projects will be expected to contribute to the wider knowledge base about how to build better university-community collaborations, this will involve learning that is reciprocal and in which the process of dialogue is ongoing. Public reporting by universities and funders on progress against the principles of fair and mutual research partnerships will be essential to compliance with these principles.

### Further information

You can download the 10 principles as a poster. This and the full end of project report is available here: [www.commoncauseresearch.com/report/](http://www.commoncauseresearch.com/report/)

The case studies can be viewed as short films or reports:

[www.commoncauseresearch.com/case-studies/](http://www.commoncauseresearch.com/case-studies/)

A briefing for community and creative organisations is also available: <https://commoncauseresearch.com/resources/>

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Supported using public funding by  
**ARTS COUNCIL ENGLAND**

