



## What types of knowledge do voluntary and community organisations gain from hosting an Interchange student?

*A summary of research into the experiences and perspectives of voluntary and community organisations (VCOs) who have hosted a student researcher in partnership with Interchange.*

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### What is Interchange?

Interchange is a registered charity based in Merseyside. It aims to connect voluntary and community organisations (VCOs) with social science students who are looking for a social research project. Students work in partnership with a VCO to deliver a research project, work-based learning project or a social policy review. The aim is for collaborative, participatory research projects that lead to useful knowledge for the community.

### Aims of the research

Interchange commissioned a small-scale study to explore the experiences and perspectives of some of the VCOs who had taken part in the Interchange programme. This study complements previous research that has revealed many of the benefits to students of taking part in this kind of university-community partnership (Kirton et al., 2014). The research presented here focuses on the perspectives of the Link Workers who are nominated by their VCO to work closely with an Interchange student. The aim was to explore what draws VCOs to partner with Interchange and the potential benefits associated with hosting an

Interchange student. The study reveals some of the kinds of knowledge that can be gained by this specific form of university-community partnership.

### Research methods

Link workers from VCOs that had hosted an Interchange student were invited to take part in the study. There was a mix of those that were working with Interchange for the first time and those that had hosted multiple Interchange projects in the previous five years.

#### VCOs represented in the research:

- Predominantly 'small' or 'micro' in size (those with an annual income of £100,000 or less)
- Providing wide range of services, including support to: children, young people, women, asylum seekers, drug users, ex-offenders, housing tenants, members of BAME communities, people with mental health problems and welfare claimants.

#### FOCUS GROUPS:

Link workers were invited to a community event consisting of a presentation of an Interchange PhD student project, followed by focus groups. 16 link workers took part in two focus groups (8 in each). These explored what participants felt were the pertinent issues for their organisations and the local voluntary sector. They looked at some of the benefits and challenges of collaborating on an Interchange project.

#### QUALITATIVE INTERVIEWS:

In the second phase of the study, 6 link workers took part in a qualitative, semi-structured telephone interview. This group was chosen because of their participation in a focus group and their recent experience of hosting a student. The interviews were timed just after the completion of

a project, once the link workers had received the students' final reports. The interviews focused on the experience of hosting a student and on what had been learnt during the process.

## Key Findings

### The policy and funding context: Motivations for working with Interchange

Our research shows that the fast-changing and challenging external environment is a primary motivator for VCOs to engage with Interchange. Participants spoke about the significant challenges facing their organisations as a result of government austerity policies and cuts to funding across the voluntary and statutory welfare sectors. Local authorities in more deprived areas such as Liverpool have been disproportionately affected by central government public spending cuts. In turn, this has substantially reduced the funding pool available to support local voluntary organisations (Jones et al., 2017).

*"THE LACK OF FUNDING FORCES ORGANISATIONS TO LOOK OUTWARD AND DEVELOP LINKS AND PARTNERSHIPS LIKE WITH THE INTERCHANGE PROGRAMME." (LINK WORKER, CHILDREN'S CHARITY)*

Link workers in our study reported that their organisations were faced with increased demand on their services at the same time as the cuts to their resources. Some organisations were overwhelmed by crisis referrals not being picked up by statutory services, particularly in relation to mental health. A women's charity had seen GPs referring women directly to their free counselling service, due to the reduction of NHS counselling provision. Participants from wellbeing and educational charities reported an increased workload as they tried to fill the gaps left by statutory support for children and young people with mental health problems. They had been forced to turn to charitable trusts and foundations to seek funding to meet the extra demand.

Our research also revealed significant concerns about the impact of government welfare reform policies. 20 major changes to working age welfare benefits have impacted on 55,000 out of a total of 65,920 households in Liverpool (LCC, 2017). A link worker from a housing association reported profound hardship among their service users due to cuts in their welfare benefits. Participants from a diverse range of welfare organisations reported that welfare reforms had increased poverty and led to increasingly complex needs among service users.

*"WE ARE HAVING TO CHANNEL WORK INTO SUPPORTING PEOPLE THROUGH THE HARDSHIPS OF WELFARE REFORM WITH BENEFITS REASSESSED, PEOPLE COMING OFF DISABILITY LIVING ALLOWANCE, AND DELAYS AND SANCTIONS IN BENEFITS." (LINK WORKER, WELFARE CHARITY).*

In summary, VCOs that had partnered with Interchange were looking for research project help to support them face an external context of increased demand for services and reduced funding to meet community need.

### Knowledge gains: for link workers

We found evidence of link workers building on their skills, confidence and experience through the participatory process of an Interchange project. One felt that being involved in the programme had reminded her of what was involved in academic research and had encouraged her to reflect on how to improve her own report writing. Another recognised that they had learned more about rigorous methodologies and ethical practice. Most of the link workers in the study spoke of gaining a better understanding of the research issue – for example a worker from a children's charity said *"they bring theories to the whole process and its new and interesting"*.

*"I'M NOT ACADEMIC AT ALL – ALL THE REFERENCING AND EVERYTHING. I HAVE LEARNED A LOT ABOUT THAT-IF YOU'RE PUTTING ANYTHING IN A FUNDING REPORT, TO REFERENCE WHERE IT HAS COME FROM. THERE IS A LOT I'VE LEARNT THAT HAS ENABLED ME TO PUT THINGS INTO A FUNDING*

*APPLICATION AND REPORTS TO FUNDERS... AND THE BOARD OF TRUSTEES.” (LINK WORKER, EX-OFFENDER CHARITY)*

All the participants had been to at least one of the community events run by Interchange. They reported that these led to discussions about the challenges faced by the voluntary sector and opened up other opportunities for collaboration. Link workers talked about the benefits for practice of accessing scholarly knowledge not otherwise available to the sector.

### Knowledge gains: For organisations

Many VCOs had worked with Interchange on projects to provide evidence of the value and effectiveness of their work. Our research found that organisations had used the student project reports for monitoring and evaluation purposes, or as evidence for funding applications. Link workers told us that their organisations valued the independent, external perspective of an Interchange student, and their use of robust and credible methodologies. In a context where resources are severely limited, they also highlighted that they could not conduct their own in-house research or employ a consultant. They therefore highly valued the chance to invite a student to do this work.

*“I JUST WANTED TO SAY HOW VALUABLE IT IS THAT, IN TIMES OF AUSTERITY, INTERCHANGE CAN DO A PIECE OF RESEARCH WE WOULD LIKE TO DO OURSELVES BUT WE DON’T HAVE THE TIME. IT IS HARD ENOUGH TO DO THE STUFF WE NEED TO DO ON A DAY TO DAY BASIS. TO DO A CONCISE PIECE OF WORK, GO OUT AND INTERVIEW PEOPLE, IT WOULD BE NIGH IMPOSSIBLE.” (LINK WORKER, WELFARE RIGHTS CHARITY)*

We found that the challenging policy environment had encouraged VCOs to partner with a student to generate knowledge to evidence the value and effectiveness of their work to funders and commissions. They had also sought evaluations to support organisational development or to find ways to remain sustainable. One Interchange project had evaluated the impact of a VCO’s contact services for children from separated families. The project directly led to them securing a number of small

grants to build on the service. Another VCO credited Interchange with contributing to their successful application to the Big Lottery fund, for example.

### Shared experiences and the potential for cross-cutting projects

The focus groups revealed that many of the organisations represented were facing similar issues and challenges. In particular, there was evident shared experience in terms of policy impacts and funding reductions. However only one Interchange project – a regional policy review affecting BAME communities and organisations across the region – focused on cross-cutting issues for the sector.

Participants acknowledged there was a need for work that addressed issues shared by voluntary organisations and one suggested that a consortium of VCOs could bring organisations together to meet identified research needs. A link worker from an asylum charity pointed to the need for research situated in the broader context of the government’s hostile policies towards asylum seekers that could address wider, systemic social problems experienced this particular community:

*“WHETHER IT IS AN INTERCHANGE STUDENT OR SOMEONE ELSE... THAT CAN ACTUALLY JUST SIT AND SAY THIS ISN’T JUST HAPPENING SPORADICALLY, THIS IS AN INJUSTICE THAT A LOT OF PEOPLE ARE FACING BECAUSE THERE IS A FLAW IN THE SYSTEM. AND, ACTUALLY, BEGIN TO DO SOMETHING WITH THAT.”*

### Conclusions and further information

In summary, Interchange projects have proven useful to VCOs in managing and adjusting to the challenges of austerity, welfare reform and funding cuts. On one level, VCOs are driven to seek out projects that help them cope with the immediate pressures of an intense and competitive market environment, evident in projects to address their financial sustainability and service evaluations. On another level, however, our research suggests there is the potential for a ‘larger vision’ in which

collaborative research through Interchange style projects could unlock shared, sector-wide issues and work towards transformative structural change.

#### References

Jones, G., Meegan, R., Kennett, P. and Croft, J. (2017) The uneven impacts of austerity on the voluntary and community sector: A tale of two cities. *Urban Studies*, 53, 10, 2064-2080.

Kirton, A., Campbell, P. and Hardwick, L. (2014) *Developing Applied Research Skills through Collaboration in Extra-Academic Contexts*. York: Higher Education Academy. Available at: <http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/>

Liverpool City Council (2017) *Welfare Reform Cumulative Impact Analysis 2016, Interim Report*. Available at: <http://liverpool.gov.uk/mayor/mayoral-commissions/liverpool-fairness-commission/>

#### Further information

A more detailed discussion of the findings of this research study can be found in the following publication:

Hardwick, L. and Metcalf, L. (2020) Using a situated knowledge lens to reveal knowledge gain for community partners engaged with a university-community partnership, *People Place & Policy*, 14 (1) pp.65-78.

Available online at: <https://extra.shu.ac.uk/ppp-online/using-a-situated-knowledge-lens-to-reveal-knowledge-gains-for-community-partners-engaged-with-a-university-community-partnership/>

### Want to know more about Interchange?

More information for voluntary organisations and students can be found on the Interchange website

<https://www.liverpool.ac.uk/interchange/>