

Developing effective partnerships with research institutions

This guidance focuses on the initial stages of developing a partnership with a research institution, such as a university. It draws on interviews with key informants for this project, plus the [Elrha Guide to Constructing Effective Partnerships](#) and the [Elrha-R2HC Partnerships Review Summary \(2019\)](#). The [Elrha Guide to Constructing Effective Partnerships](#) includes much more detailed information about how to establish and maintain partnerships between humanitarian organisations and research institutions, and how to ensure that such partnerships are effective. It also includes several case studies and tools to assist in this process; we recommend you use this resource if you hope to establish a partnership with a research institute.

Benefits of collaboration are enormous, both for humanitarian practice and for academic work, to help tackle major humanitarian challenges. Humanitarian organisations gain from the input of academic expertise to ensure robust methodology for research, technical expertise for operational issues and a long-term perspective to build understanding and evidence of effectiveness and change. Universities benefit from direct access to the field, the ability to test theories and opportunity to engage in the application of research.

Challenges: Collaboration is not easy in practice. Obstacles include:

- Humanitarian and academic communities operate along different timelines; the academic drive for robust methodologies and rigour in gathering and analysing evidence can be slow, which can frustrate humanitarian organisations wanting clear operational recommendations to implement in their current humanitarian programmes.
- Humanitarian and academic communities have different ethical codes.
- Humanitarian and academic communities are assessed against different criteria.

Key to success is a dialogue process to make explicit each partner's expectations of the collaboration sustained through the process; transparency throughout the process; flexibility and, maybe most importantly, a commitment to improving humanitarian operations.

(Elrha Guide to Constructing Effective Partnerships p6)

The benefits of partnerships with research institutes identified by Movement key informants include:

- Access to technical research expertise.
- Able to tap into their network of other researchers
- Access to human resources, such as Masters students who need to do a dissertation, PhD students who can assist with certain tasks.
- Access to ethical review boards.
- Neutrality – it can be difficult for NS staff to evaluate their own work and may be easier for non-NS staff to do data collection in contexts where trust in the NS is low.
- Gives credibility to the evidence, which facilitates further funding and scale-up of an intervention
- Ability to tap into research funds through partnerships, and involvement in research consortia

How are partnerships established?

In many cases, a partnership between a NS and a research institute begins because of a personal connection between individuals working in each organisation. In some cases, a NS staff member had an academic background and had stayed in contact with staff at the university where they had studied. In other cases, a NS staff or volunteer was studying for a Masters or PhD, so acted as a 'bridge' between the NS and a university. In one case, there was no pre-existing relationship but the NS staff member responsible for an intervention knew from her reading of a particular academic who was knowledgeable in the relevant area, and contacted him to assess his interest.

My supervisor had read a paper written by [the academic] at the University of X and she suggested we contact him, although we didn't know him. We did, and it happened that he'd been on the look-

out for a while for a research project that included implementation, so he was very keen. (Key informant)

The Elrha Guide to Constructing Effective Partnerships also notes that many people who have had successful collaborative experiences stated that these collaborations often began almost by chance through individual connections, for example with former colleagues from humanitarian organisations who have now moved to university-based jobs and vice versa, friends and even relatives in relevant counterpart institutions. Also chance meetings and relations developed at events such as summer schools and conferences were important. Getting to know the sector is helpful; conferences, reading papers and publications, participating in forums and communities of practice are useful ways in.

What to look for in an academic partner

Not all academic individuals, departments or institutions will make good partners for a humanitarian organisation. Key questions may be around the extent of an academic's operational experience and commitment to the application of research and knowledge. The most successful partnerships from humanitarian organisations perspectives tend to be with academics with substantial experience in humanitarian operations. Within the Movement, partnerships with research institutions were found to be particularly positive where university researchers had prior (or current) field experience, and/ or NS staff had research. In some NSs staff members were employed on a part-time basis, with their other employment being in a research institute. Such bridge-builders, referred to by some as 'pracademics', played a key role in embedding evidence-based approaches into the organisation. They can also play an important role in building bridges and mediating relationships within partnerships and beyond.

Good partnerships with universities are a lot to do with having the right people who know our work, and having people within the [NS] who understand universities. We have people who know research, understand how universities work and can communicate with university partners in ways that are helpful. Without that, if it was just [NS] people, it would be more difficult because they speak a different language to university people. The universities have Red Cross people in them or people who worked with Red Cross for decades before joining the university, so understand our work. Otherwise it would be difficult due to different languages and approaches. (NS MHPSS focal point)

Also key to collaboration are individuals' interpersonal skills, their ability to work as part of a team, tact, flexibility, creativity, openness and pragmatism.

First steps in establishing a partnership

At the beginning of a humanitarian-academic partnership, practical points to consider include:

- What do you hope to achieve with your partner?
- What do you bring to the collaboration?
- Are there other people in the organisation who need to be on board? What are their priorities?

Strong partnerships take dedicated time and effort to build, manage, maintain and nurture. It is important to:

- establish ways of working that encourage trust, empathy, honesty, openness and flexibility among partners, with each partner being clear on 'non-negotiables'.
- Discuss roles and responsibilities openly; explicitly recognising and acknowledging different strengths, skills and opportunities each partner brings to the table.
- Focus on the quality of interpersonal relationships and communication

When working with a research institute on an evaluation project:

- Make sure the timeframes for the research/ evaluation and the intervention align
- Be aware that academics may not have been trained in project management, and take steps to address any skills gaps in these areas.
- Be aware of and address underlying power dynamics inherent in project decisions.