

Engaging with Industry: A personal perspective by Dr Kate Woodthorpe (Department of Social & Policy Sciences).

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I have worked with the insurance industry since 2011, first through consultancy and then through funded research projects. From my experience, one of the key differences between acting as a consultant and being an academic researcher is the level of autonomy over the research design and strategy, and your level of responsibility. As a consultant I have advised on research design and findings; as a researcher I designed, conducted and analysed the research. Running alongside this difference in role is managing how you are perceived by the industry partner, and for me negotiating this has been challenging and satisfying in equal measure owing to the varying organisational cultures and understandings of research.



MY ENGAGEMENT STORY

I was initially approached by a member of staff at insurance company [Sunlife](#), who was looking to find synergies with non-commercial organisations. Finding that my research interests complemented their annual survey on *The Cost of Dying*, I acted as a consultant for them in 2011, contributing to the research analysis and final report. My motives at this stage were to network and develop my reputation as an expert in this area, beyond conventional academic publications.

Building on this successful consultancy period, I was invited to bid for research funding to contribute to Sunlife's annual research on the cost of dying work in 2012. Following the award of funds and supported by the [Centre for Death & Society](#) (CDAS) team, I set about negotiating the contract and expectations regarding the remit of the research and outputs. One of the biggest sticking points at this early stage was the handling of Intellectual Property Rights (IPR) of any research analysis and determining what Sunlife would own, and what I would be permitted to use to publish. With several constructive phonecalls and emails we were able to ascertain that while Sunlife would own the data, I would be permitted to use it autonomously to write for academic publication, and that these publications would be owned by the University and Sunlife credited as the funder of the research. This was not a swift process of negotiation however, taking around 4-6 weeks to finalise in the contract and resulting in a delayed start to the project.

Intellectual Property Rights (IPR) can prove a sticking point. Ensure that you factor into your research plans time to negotiate contracts.

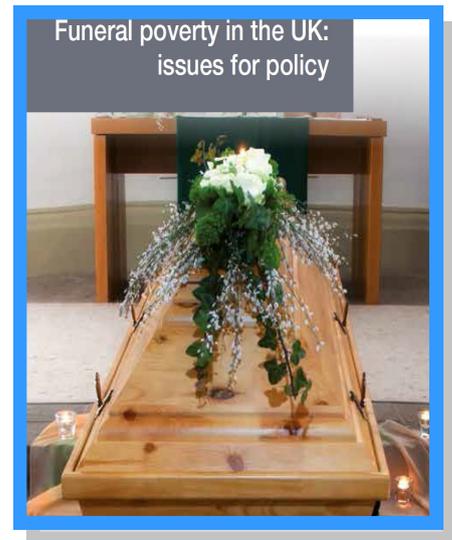
This situation was exacerbated by the fact that in this first year of conducting research with Sunlife, we had a very tight turnaround to produce high quality qualitative data and analysis - six months from start to finish. This schedule required a highly organised approach to recruitment of participants, interviews, and analysis given that we were already a month behind at the outset! The responsive nature of the project meant that the researchers were also under considerable pressure to negotiate access and attend interviews – often a 5+ hour train journey away – at very short notice. This, combined with regular and ad hoc meetings with our colleagues in Sunlife, created a hectic environment that on an odd occasion felt unwieldy.

If you would like to discuss how you might engage publics in or with your research, please contact the University's Public Engagement Unit at: public-engagement@bath.ac.uk

Despite this, we were able to recruit sufficient participants, and conducted [a study that to this day I am proud to have completed](#). As an added bonus, and having produced a detailed report for the funders, we were able to secure additional Higher Education Innovation Fund resource from the University to employ the researchers for an extra 1-2 months, during which time we wrote two publications. These were accepted and published in high-ranking social policy journals in subsequent years.

One of the most interesting aspects of this first project was at the dissemination stage when – as agreed at the outset of the study – I presented the findings from the study to the media, and with Sunlife’s employ of a London-based PR agency, we were able to leverage considerable media coverage. At this stage it also helped that I was very willing to be flexible with media arrangements, sometimes coming onto campus at 6am to be prepared to do breakfast show interviews from 6.30am with the ISDN line. At times I found managing my identity as an independent academic and employee of the University of Bath, alongside the media (sometimes) regarding me as a ‘spokesperson’ for Sunlife, a challenging experience. With support from the [University Press Office](#), I had to be very clear with journalists that I was not endorsing products or the Sunlife brand itself, and instead was only commenting on the research findings.

The experience of 2012 meant that when invited to bid for further research funding in 2013 I was more experienced in determining the [expectations of the project at the outset](#). The IPR was negotiated much quicker owing to the previous year’s contract, and with the support of Sunlife we scheduled fortnightly meetings which provided a framework for discussing the project’s progress. By doing so, we created a less frantic approach to providing feedback and updates, which (I felt) calmed the whole project down and enabled us to focus on producing high quality data. This time round we also had a very clear idea of what the ‘products’ of the research would be and when it came to publicising the findings to the media I was able to use my experience from the previous year to emphasise and highlight the research findings with greater ease. This meant focusing on particular ‘soundbites’ that were easily digestible for journalists, and being prepared to reiterate/repeat the same research message time and time again. 18 months on, and I am still doing that today.



Kate’s work with industry has resulted in a number of high impact reports alongside articles in high-ranking social policy journals

TOP TIPS

I would recommend the following to any researcher embarking on working with industry:

1. Establish and agree clear boundaries and expectations regarding the remit, conduct and outputs of the project at the outset
2. Establish an appropriate pattern of reporting progress to the funder
3. Set a schedule of work that provides flexibility and responsive according to the needs of the project
4. Focus on the research when it comes to media dissemination

In sum, I found working with industry to be a hugely enjoyable experience both in terms of conducting the research and navigating the challenges that arose. I feel very privileged to have been exposed to another working culture, which has no doubt enabled me to empathise with the demands placed on those who do not work in an academic environment, and this can in turn only help with my own approach to conducting research.

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