

An introduction to...

How to work with universities



This course is a 5min read
with additional time required
for exercises

What relationship do you want to build?

Universities do not have a front door. Instead, there are lots of different ways from the outside to engage with a university. The best route will be dependent on the goal you have in mind.

Universities are large, and often complex, organisations. Most are set up with a mix of teaching, research, and public good at their core and are supported by a range of professional and facilities services such as press teams, human resources, finance and estates management.

Understanding what it is you want from a university first is key to establishing meaningful connections. Once you know what you want to gain, it's a lot easier to work out the best person, team or departments to connect with. It also helps those in the university to identify others to involve.

Key concepts:

Academic year

Across the UK, this is a year period starting with core teaching activities September-April, reducing over May-August. Teaching-focused institutions close over the summer, whereas research-intensive institutions switch to a research focus. AYxx/xx is a common shorthand used to reference an academic year, e.g. AY19/20 refers to the year starting September 2019.

Sabbatical

No teaching duties, typically for a 6-12 month period, predominately to focus on research activities. It often means they are contactable but not student-facing.

Getting started

Develop a knowledge of the uni

Universities typically play a large role in their local ecosystem. However, they don't all function identically, nor have the same local connections.

When you identify a university you wish to engage with, take some time to explore their main website homepage. This will provide some insight into what that university is currently prioritising and how it wants to be viewed.

It is important to frame any engagement in terms of what the university deems important. Teaching and research are fairly universal but there will be specific focuses, such as medical education or areas with newly awarded research grants. Take a look at the topics discussed in recent news items for some initial insights.

Understand priorities

It is not guaranteed that your organisation's priorities will align completely with the university or identified individual's priorities. Framing the 'ask' in a way that it is clear why you are connecting, and how it aligns to their specific interests, will make it easier for them to engage with you.

At the moment, there are not always direct incentives for institutions to work with community organisations. In most cases, promotions are not aligned to this type of engagement. However, research and teaching are incentivised. If you can offer something that helps with either of these directly, there is a higher likelihood of engagement with you. Take some time to understand how you might frame your ask in those terms.

Types of relationship

Relationships with universities can vary massively in their scope and nature. You may be engaging with the university on a long term strategic project such as a [partnership between researchers and sports authorities to improve safety for players](#), or you may be involved in a one off event such as inviting an academic to speak at a community event.

The type of relationship can also vary. You could be hiring university facilities or paying for consultation or you might be involved in a more collaborative project such as a joint research project e.g. [Community Matters](#). These relationships may evolve or change over time, but it's a good idea to think about what kind of relationship you want to have with the university before getting in touch.

Making contact

Most university contact details are publicly listed, so you do not need permission to make first contact with any representative. However, as said before, any connection does need to be framed explicitly, else you might not get a response.

Whilst a university typically operates all year round, there are times in the year when things are a little less busy and you might receive a quicker response. Due to the structure of the academic year, June – August tend to have far fewer scheduled teaching

commitments and fewer students on campus.

During this period, academic staff may be slightly more available and more receptive than during mid-semester teaching. However, it is not an exact science, for example not all staff are student facing and academics may take sabbatical for research.

Do not be disheartened if the university's response is not immediate – it may be that the timing is not quite right or framing of the 'ask' needs to be reconsidered. You can always try contacting them again!



This activity takes 15min

Activity: Google it

Universities have multiple entry points for any given topic. Think about what it is you might wish to engage with a university about and explore different options for engagement:

- Type into google "University of Bath" followed by a term or phrase you are interested in engaging with the University on
- Try and find a person associated with this topic
- Next, look for their profile – this might be on a second or third page, it may be linked via an article or only accessible through a separate search via the staff directory

This activity is to help you understand the complexity of universities and illustrate the point that there is no single point of access

Further resources

National Co-ordinating Centre for Public Engagement:

[Community-University Partnership Initiative](#)

[Working with Local Communities](#)