

# Bridging Academia and Community: Experiences in Implementing a ‘Service & Research Projects Hub’

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## Abstract

*In response to shifting higher education landscapes and increasing calls for civic engagement, a ‘Service & Research Projects Hub’ was scoped at the Institute of Psychiatry, Psychology & Neuroscience, a faculty of King’s College London, to evaluate the feasibility of connecting postgraduate students with local community organisations for collaborative dissertation research. Through mixed-methods evaluation involving 96 stakeholders, including students, faculty and community partners, this paper explores the opportunities and challenges of embedding community-engaged research within academic structures. Findings reveal high levels of enthusiasm across groups but also highlight barriers such as lack of research training, time constraints, ethical complexities and uneven institutional support. This study outlines key recommendations for improving collaborative research frameworks and proposes a scalable model for integrating community partnerships into academic teaching and research, with implications for wider institutional adoption.*

**Keywords:** Community-engaged research, Service-learning, Student partnership, Higher education, Civic learning, Research-practice collaboration, Experiential learning

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The role of universities continues to evolve, shaped by ongoing debates on their purpose and responsibilities. Originally focused on education, universities later expanded their remit to include research, and more recently, societal engagement, often referred to as the 'third mission' of higher education (Zomer & Benneworth, 2011). The higher education landscape is increasingly shaped by local and global ranking mechanisms that promote international competitiveness (Koekkoek, 2021). Many universities now operate as entrepreneurial, business-oriented institutions, prioritising externally funded research over their public service missions (Lynch, 2006). Considering this shift, the European Commissions' Renewed Agenda for Higher Education (2017) highlighted university community engagement as a priority, moving beyond a focus on economic contributions and towards a broader societal contribution. One way to achieve this is through service-learning, a form of educational pedagogy also known as community-based learning or community-engaged learning. Service-learning integrates meaningful community engagement into the curriculum, offering academic credit for student learning derived from addressing identified community needs. This pedagogical methodology not only aims to enhance academic and real-world learning but also instil in students a sense of civic engagement and responsibility (Aramburuzabala et al., 2019).

Service-learning practices are informed by a combination of theoretical perspectives relevant to community-engaged pedagogy. **Transformative learning theory** (Mezirow, 1997) emphasises the capacity of service-learning to shift student perspectives through critical reflection and real-world engagement. Through structured, reciprocal collaborations with community organisations, students are encouraged to question assumptions and expand their civic identities. **Reciprocity** is a central tenet, ensuring that both universities and community partners derive mutual benefit from co-produced interactions (Bringle & Clayton, 2021), which helps address historical power imbalances in university-community

relationships. Additional key elements are principles of **democratic engagement** (Bringle, Clayton & Bringle, 2015), which advocate for participatory and inclusive partnerships that elevate community voice and expertise.

Service-learning is well established in the US (Furco & Norvell, 2019) and Latin America (CLAYSS 2023), and is gaining traction across Europe (EASLHE, 2021). In the UK, at the Institute of Psychiatry, Psychology & Neuroscience (IoPPN) of King's College London, we envisioned a 'Service & Research Projects Hub' as a mechanism to connect students and staff with community-driven research, aiming to simultaneously advance student development and contribute to the public good. The hub would enable master's students and faculty teaching staff to find or co-design dissertation projects that tackle real-world needs identified by local partners, enhancing both student learning and community impact.

This paper outlines the development and initial evaluation steps carried out to assess the feasibility of such a hub, explore stakeholder expectations, and identify potential challenges. We reflect on the university's role in facilitating collaborations with community partners, share key insights, and offer recommendations for future implementation.

## Methods

### *Study Design and Participants*

This feasibility and acceptability study employed a mixed-methods design, combining survey and interview data from key stakeholder groups: community partners, academic staff, and students. The project was co-led by an academic faculty member, the university's Head of Volunteering, a Volunteering Partnerships Manager, and four paid student researchers.

Invitations to participate in surveys were sent to 160 community partners registered on the university's volunteering platform, as well as academics and student representatives from all

IoPPN programmes. A total of 53 community partners, 30 academics, and 13 students completed surveys. Of these, all 30 academics, 13 community partners, and 3 students participated in follow-up interviews. based on expressions of interest, and availability. This approach captured a range of perspectives, acknowledging that those who opted in may be positively inclined.

### Data Collection

Survey instruments were designed collaboratively, featuring Likert-scale items, closed questions, and open-ended responses. Items explored interest in participation, perceived benefits, anticipated challenges, and required support mechanisms. Interview questions were semi-structured and tailored by stakeholder group to allow for rich, qualitative insights.

### Examples of survey items included:

- For community partners: *“Would you be interested in working with students from the university?”* (5-point Likert scale: Strongly disagree – Strongly agree)
- For academic teaching staff: *“Will this collaboration be beneficial for students?”* (Yes/No)
- For students: *“How useful would you find skills training in supporting your dissertation project?”* (5-point Likert scale: Not at all useful – Extremely useful)

### Interview question sample prompts included:

- For community partners: *“How would collaborating with student researchers align with your organisation’s mission or capacity?”*
- For academics: *“What opportunities or barriers do you see in supporting student dissertations linked to community organisations?”*
- For students: *“What kind of training or support would help you feel more prepared to work with a community partner on your dissertation?”*

### Ethical Considerations

All our work was conducted following guidelines and regulations. As our feasibility evaluation was considered an educational activity, ethical approval was not needed. Given the emphasis on power-sharing and reciprocity in community-engaged research, interview protocols were designed to minimise extractive dynamics.

### Analytical Approach

Both qualitative and quantitative data was included in the final analysis. Quantitative survey data was analysed descriptively with a focus on frequency of response categories. The qualitative analysis was guided by a grounded, inductive approach informed by principles of community-engaged scholarship. Qualitative data, including open-ended survey responses and interview transcripts, were analysed thematically. Coding began with an open, line-by-line review of all transcripts and free-text responses, allowing patterns and categories to emerge organically from the data. A team of student researchers coded responses before engaging in iterative discussions to compare, refine, and consolidate emerging themes. Constant comparison across stakeholder groups helped identify recurring insights as well as divergences in experience or expectation. The process was supported by memo-writing and collaborative interpretation to ensure analytic depth. Trustworthiness was strengthened through peer debriefing, triangulation of data sources, and a strong focus on elevating participant voices while attending to institutional and contextual nuances.

The integration of community partner, student, and academic perspectives allowed for the identification of shared priorities, misalignments, and opportunities for co-designed solutions, framing a roadmap for institutionalising service-learning practices within research-focused environments.

## Findings and Insights

### *Community Partners: Challenges and Opportunities*

In our survey responses, 71% of community partners indicated they would be interested in working with students at the University. When asked about the potential benefits of collaboration, over half expressed that this would bring in new perspectives and provide research that could be used for future funding applications. They also noted that outputs could inform practice and help review areas of the organisation's work. **Co-designing research projects was rated moderately (56%) or very (27%) important by community partners, with 80% stating they would need support in designing the research.** Several community partners also commented on the importance of long-term relationships over one-off student engagements and expressed a desire for clearer communication on timelines and expectations. These insights show that while enthusiasm was strong, partners needed reassurance that contributions would be valued amid limited resources. Many organisations lack dedicated research expertise, furthering the value of university partnerships that combine academic rigour with practical insight (Compare et al., 2023). **Research hubs can therefore play a critical role in bridging these skill and capacity gaps, enabling co-produced research that increases organisational capacity, enhances mutual credibility, and fosters long-term, trust-based partnerships - all outcomes that are strongly associated with sustained community-campus engagement (Kniffin et al., 2020).**

Community partners also highlighted other potential challenges: the time commitment required to co-design and oversee student-led research projects, lack of financial resources to support the projects or apply for research funding and minimal staff capacity to provide co-supervision to students. These challenges reflect wider capacity issues experienced across the third sector (Koekkoek et al., 2021) and highlight the importance of universities actively reducing

logistical burdens for partners. Structured partnerships, when supported institutionally, have the potential to ease these constraints (Kniffin et al., 2020).

Concerns around ethics were also raised. Partners expressed caution about confidentiality, safeguarding, and student awareness of sensitive topics. Ethical safeguards are essential for maintaining trust and equity in research with marginalised groups (Bringle & Clayton, 2021). Co-authorship, shared methods, and equitable knowledge exchange can help balance power in university-community collaborations (van der Meulen, 2011).

Finally, community organisations highlighted the difficulty of aligning their operational priorities with academic research objectives. This reinforces the importance of reciprocity in service-learning activities, ensuring that both universities and community organisations benefit from the collaboration (Compare et al. 2023). Establishing shared goals and maintaining open communication channels are key to addressing these tensions and enhancing the overall effectiveness of partnerships.

### *Academic Faculty: Opportunities and Overload*

Over 50% of the academics who responded to surveys indicated they were likely to consider conducting collaborative research projects with community partners. Over 90% believed that projects would be beneficial for students by providing opportunities that develop analytical and problem-solving skills. **This reflects findings by Eyler (2002), who highlights that service-learning enables students to apply theoretical knowledge in real-world contexts, thereby deepening their understanding of complex social issues.** This enthusiasm was not without concerns, with almost all academics indicating that there would be some difficulty in implementing the hub, with mentions of time and capacity required to co-design projects due to their possible complexity, challenging ethics procedures, doubts around assessment and

marking criteria and potential disparities in student experiences between those engaging in community projects and those choosing more traditional dissertation routes. These constraints demonstrate the need for institutional support that reduces burdens and enables equitable engagement when delivering service-learning initiatives with **structural incentives, administrative help, and streamlined ethical processes essential for meaningfully embedding community engagement within academic roles (Bringle & Clayton, 2021; O'Meara, 2008).**

*Students: Collaborations, Expectations and Networking*

**All students who responded to the survey either agreed or strongly agreed that they would be interested in working in collaboration with community partners. These collaborations foster a sense of civic responsibility and personal growth, positioning students not just as learners, but as active contributors to community problem-solving (Eyler, 2002). The students' enthusiasm resonated with a growing student awareness on social issues, as seen by greater percentages of students considering a university's track record on social issues when applying (Higher Education Policy Institute, 2024).**

Students emphasised the importance of increased networking with community organisations, noting that: *"opportunities to work with real organisations would be useful for developing my skills and understanding how my research could have a real-world impact."* A need for greater mentorship was also reported, with a student commenting: *"It would be great to have someone who can help us navigate the community side of the research – it's a bit overwhelming."* Students also **indicated they would benefit from training in areas such as research methodologies, project management and communication.** A lack of clarity around project expectations and supervisor responsibilities also emerged as a significant concern. These findings reflect the need for structured support mechanisms to

ensure students are adequately prepared to engage with external partners. This aligns with the broader service-learning literature, which emphasises that formal training, clear guidance, and reflective practice are essential for student success in applied research contexts (Eyler, 2002; Bringle & Clayton, 2021; Petrov, 2025).

*Cross-cutting themes across stakeholders*

Key aspects for the implementation of a Service & Research Projects Hub model were emphasised by stakeholders. Among these is the importance of **reciprocity**, a concept highlighted by students, faculty, and community partners alike. University-community collaborations must extend beyond one-off engagements and be rooted in long-term, mutually beneficial relationships (Compare et al., 2023). Practices such as collaborative decision-making, shared authority, and transparent communication are critical to fostering this dynamic.

A second key insight relates to the challenge of **resource limitations.** Faculty and community partners both expressed concerns about time, capacity, and the administrative burden associated with co-designing and supervising applied research. These insights echo those reported in the wider literature (Koekkoek et al., 2021; Coppins et al., 2024), demonstrating the need for institutions to offer tangible support. Creating workload recognition structures, streamlining ethics processes, and providing professional coordination roles are important. Here, dynamics must be considered in the context of the institutional environment in which our hub was scoped. Highly ranked institutions with strong emphasis on academic excellence and international reputation, have a pronounced focus on research outputs, grant acquisition, and postgraduate achievement. While this environment offers robust infrastructure, expertise, and access to diverse student populations, it also presents challenges for embedding civic engagement practices. Competing demands on academic time, complex ethics processes, and institutional performance metrics often prioritise traditional research over

community-engaged approaches. For us, existing infrastructure such as a central volunteering service, departmental autonomy, and student interest in socially relevant research created enabling conditions for the Service & Research Projects Hub.

Finally, the effective implementation of initiatives such as our hub requires cultural and structural alignment. Faculty must not only understand the philosophy of service-learning but also feel supported by enabling policies and infrastructure, including recognition, incentives, and time allocation (Bringle, Hatcher, & Clayton, 2010). When people, policies, and practices are aligned, a Service & Research Projects Hub can function as a catalyst for embedded civic learning and deeper community engagement.

### **Implications and Future Research**

The development of the Service & Research Projects Hub suggests key implications for multiple stakeholder groups:

- **Institutional leaders** are encouraged to view hubs not just as educational enhancements but as strategic tools for fulfilling civic missions, with funding, recognition, and staffing essential for equity and sustainability.
- **Faculty members** have a vital role as facilitators of reciprocal engagement. The model demonstrates how service-learning can be embedded in core curriculum through supervised dissertation work. Faculty support structures and training are critical to balancing workload and supporting student learning in these contexts.
- **Community organisations** benefit from co-designed projects that align with their mission, but require clear communication, ethical safeguards, and long-term relationship building. The hub model offers a replicable way to engage in research without overburdening partners.
- **Students** gain experiential learning opportunities that enhance employability,

civic responsibility, and a sense of belonging. Structured engagement with community partners can increase students' academic self-efficacy and deepen their understanding of applied research.

**Our work had limitations.** As a feasibility and acceptability evaluation, it focused on stakeholder perceptions rather than long-term outcomes. The sample was confined to a single faculty, and while diverse voices were sought, participation was voluntary, possibly skewing responses toward those already supportive of service-learning approaches. Additionally, only a subset of survey respondents participated in interviews, and limited time and resources constrained deeper follow-up. These limitations reflect the challenges of piloting change and highlight the need for long-term, mixed-methods research.

Currently our model is in pilot implementation and additional scoping work is underway across other faculties of the university. Future research will examine both the quantitative and qualitative impacts of the hub on student outcomes, including measures of self-efficacy, civic engagement, and skill development. It will also explore how institutional infrastructure and community partner capacity influence the long-term sustainability of collaborative models. Additionally, we aim to incorporate a reflective assessment structure that connects community engagement with academic development, considering that reflection has been a key component in service-learning models (Hatcher & Bringle, 1997). One practical avenue could be the creation of a **cross-programme dissertations module**, reducing bureaucratic duplication while offering students a consistent, supported framework for applied theses work.

### **Conclusion: Embedding Community Engagement in Institutional Practice**

The **Service & Research Projects Hub** represents a promising model for integrating community engagement into academic research and teaching. While implementation challenges

remain, faculty experiences demonstrate the transformative potential of these collaborations in strengthening student learning, building reciprocal partnerships, and advancing meaningful social impact.

For partnerships to be mutually beneficial, fostering knowledge exchange and long-term collaboration is pivotal. Yet relationships must also remain equitable, requiring sustained dialogue, careful planning, and shared goals between universities and their community partners. Engaging in co-produced research with local organisations supports not only research capacity but also trust and innovation over time. These dynamics highlight the evolving nature of community-campus partnerships and the institutional responsibility to nurture them.

Cross-disciplinary initiatives that draw on diverse perspectives offer holistic, community-informed solutions (Kniffin et al., 2020). The hub’s design can facilitate such interdisciplinary engagement, enabling students to build communication, critical thinking, and project design skills, an approach that mirrors the cross-course collaborative model described by Westover & Westover (2025).

Crucially, the hub offers more than just a pedagogical innovation, it models a shift in how institutions might reconceptualise their civic role. By embedding principles of reciprocity, flexibility, and ethical co-production into its structure, the hub provides a blueprint for sustained and impactful university-community collaboration. This initiative invites broader sector-wide discussion about how academic institutions can meaningfully contribute to social change while enriching student education.

To support the sustainability and scalability of such work, we propose a six-stage implementation model (*Figure 1*) that synthesises stakeholder feedback and responds to the practical, ethical, and pedagogical challenges identified during the pilot.

Figure 1: Six-Stage Implementation Model for Community-Engaged Research Hubs



This model can be adapted to fit other faculties and institutional contexts, while maintaining a clear focus on community-aligned dissertation research:

1. **Scoping and Stakeholder Alignment** – Initial surveys and interviews **should be conducted** to assess readiness, capacity, and expectations among students, faculty, and community partners. This phase **can help** identify champions across academic and professional services who **could co-lead** the initiative. Early engagement and advocacy from both staff groups **will be essential** to secure institutional buy-in.
2. **Infrastructure and Institutional Commitment** – Dedicated support roles such as a hub coordinator and ethics advisor **are** proposed to ensure operational continuity. Additionally, custom guidance should be provided to align institutional ethics processes with the realities of community-based research. Clear workflow mapping between faculty and university-level teams **can reduce** delays and uncertainty during project setup.
3. **Community and Project Onboarding** – A structured onboarding process **could include** workshop templates, toolkits, and guidance documents to help community partners articulate research needs in alignment with academic timelines and learning outcomes. Co-designing project briefs with clear mutual expectations **will help ensure** that both community impact and academic rigour are achieved

4. **Student Preparation and Supervision** – Students **should be offered** targeted training in areas such as applied research design, community engagement, and research ethics. Academic mentors **can be assigned** to support supervision, while a professional liaison **might serve as** a continuity point between academic and partner-facing components. Training **should aim to build** student confidence in managing community-facing research.
5. **Project Delivery and Flexibility** – The model **should support** a range of project formats (e.g., literature reviews, interviews, participatory research) and allow for flexible timelines based on student and partner needs. Reflective practice **could be embedded** through structured journaling, peer-learning sessions, and mid-point reviews to facilitate adaptive learning and problem-solving during the dissertation process.
6. **Evaluation, Reflection, and Scale-Up** – Institutions should use mixed methods (e.g., pre/post surveys, interviews, case studies) to evaluate outcomes across students, faculty, and community partners. Results should be shared with internal governance bodies and external stakeholders to refine practices and inform broader institutional strategies. Building in feedback loops and iterative review processes will support sustainable scale-up and sector-wide learning.

Future work must focus on deepening faculty support, ensuring equitable access for all students, and building the research capacity of community partners. Meeting these conditions allows hubs to enhance student experience and reshape universities as collaborative forces for societal change.

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*Faiza Inamdar is an undergraduate psychology student at the Institute of Psychiatry, Psychology & Neuroscience, King's College London. Originally from India, Faiza is deeply passionate about advancing student mental health and wellbeing across all age groups. Her work is rooted in psychological research and educational policy development, focusing on shaping global social and educational systems that prioritize student welfare. Combining her academic knowledge with practical skills in project management, research, visual communication, and community engagement, Faiza has played a pivotal role as the student voice in the creation of the faculty's first service-learning module. She has also contributed to the design of various other modules, policies, and campaigns through representational roles at the university. Faiza aspires to deepen her experience in social science and educational policy research, with the ultimate goal of driving global reforms in education policies that*

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