

Scottish Third Sector Research Forum event report: “Bringing third sector & academic research together”

9 October 2014, Edinburgh

About the Scottish Third Sector Research Forum

The Scottish Third Sector Research Forum (TSRF, ‘the Forum’) brings together Scottish Government and third sector strategic partners to obtain holistic oversight of third sector evidence and data needs; to work collaboratively to identify research questions and meet evidence gaps; to share and critique data, evidence and knowledge and to maximise the impact of third sector evidence through knowledge transfer and dissemination.

About the event

The Forum sees value in bringing together third sector organisations and academic researchers to explore how they can go about setting up positive and effective collaborations. To this purpose the Forum hosted a full day event on the 9 October 2014 in Edinburgh to start brokering those relationships.

The event was aimed at people who are interested in building better relationships and forming research collaborations with the third sector and academia. The event aimed to support those attending to:

- Get a better understanding of the benefits of research collaboration between academics and third sector
- Have opportunities to learn from/ share examples of positive collaborations already taking place
- Get a better understanding of the process of setting up academics/ third sector research collaborations
- Have opportunities to network.

Collaboration in theory

The event kicked-off with a welcome from the host, **Gareth Allen (Scottish Government, SG)**, who highlighted the SG’s commitment to improving outcomes for people in Scotland through the public service reform agenda. Gareth also recognised the key role that third sector organisations and academics play in that arena generating evidence about the needs of vulnerable groups, as well as evidence about the types of interventions that are and are not effective for these groups.

“The Third Sector and academic community through the generation and use of evidence have a key role to play.” Gareth Allen

Once the context was set, the Forum’s Chair, **Steven Marwick (Evaluation Support Scotland, ESS)**, introduced the Forum and made reference to the Knowledge Translation Network (KTN). Steven explained that the KTN, also convened by ESS, runs parallel to the Forum. He then highlighted its recently published [“Evidence for Success” step-to-](#)

[step guide](#), to help third sector organisations generate and use evidence to influence policy and practice.

“We are interested in models of collaboration. There is no one model alone that works but a variety.” Steven Marwick



After quickly going through the programme for the day and an icebreaker to get delegates in a ‘chatty’ mood, Steven introduced the three keynote speakers:

Dr Sarah Morton (Centre for Research on Families and Relationships, CRFR) shared her experience and learning around different types of collaborations, illustrating different issues with examples, such as [Childline](#).

“We are moving into a world in which people have to think more of what they are doing in a more evaluative way [...]. Rather than thinking of types of research, why not think of uses of research? [...] Research has to be translated and third sector partners can help with translation.” Sarah Morton



Dr Alasdair Rutherford (University of Stirling) presented learning from a collaborative data analysis project on “Modelling Volunteering Participation in Scotland”, which he led in partnership with OSCR, AQMeN, Volunteer Scotland and Ipsos MORI, among others.

“I knew partners already through previous work for different reasons. Having existing links made it easier and critical. Academics aren’t always good at that. Attending conferences and workshops can be helpful! [...] Get out and meet people, network! New connections and ideas could lead to future collaborations!” Alasdair Rutherford



Bosco Santimano (You Can Cook) provided a different perspective on collaboration, sharing the learning he gathered since embarking on a journey to raise awareness of food and health issues through his social enterprise, [You Can Cook](http://www.youcancook.org.uk).

“We sit with organisations to find out what they need and then we devise a cooking programme with them. It’s not a cooking school, it’s a lifestyle. [...] Valuable research is not being taken into account to shape policy. [...] Our partners understood where we were coming from and we understood where they were coming from.” Bosco Santimano



The morning session ended with roundtable discussions, facilitated by Forum members, on ‘what makes for a good academic collaboration’, at which delegates shared their experience of what works, what doesn’t work, barriers and enablers to partnership working and shared ideas about what the Forum could do to help develop and nurture third sector/ academia relationships. The following quotes highlight some of the issues raised during discussions:

- Money can be an issue: *“It is difficult to get funding to do collaborative working. There are not enough sources for this.”; “Financial sustainability, how do you do it?”*
- Time adds constraints: *“It takes time to develop relationships; how do we find time to do this?”*
- Language acts as a barrier: *“We need to get career researchers to understand the need to make their language accessible.”; “More networking opportunities are needed for a two-way dialogue!”*
- Lack of flexibility to make changes: *“Sometimes projects have been decided and there is not opportunity to do something outside the scope.”*
- There seems to be a mismatch between theory and practice: *“Research questions based on formal research don’t always match with what happens in real life.”; “Literature doesn’t always touch on real issues.”*



Some issues raised as actual or potential barriers to effective collaboration included:

- ❌ Different working cultures
- ❌ Lack connectivity
- ❌ Limited resources on both sides
- ❌ Weakness in partnership arrangements – *“We only hear from them at application stage.”; “Academics would benefit from engaging with third sector when developing their curriculum.”*
- ❌ Priorities changing as collaboration develops
- ❌ Ownership of the research
- ❌ Lack of confidence
- ❌ Different operational models and pressures
- ❌ Research demands can be timely
- ❌ Issues around information accessibility.

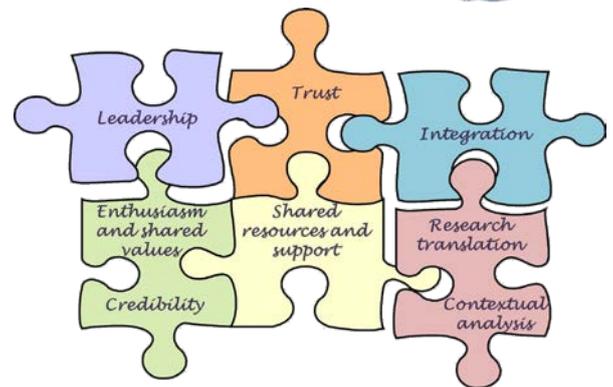
Delegates stressed that: *“We have to share resources between sectors.”; “We shouldn’t wait for things to happen, the third sector especially!”; “Serendipity versus planned opportunities”.*



In terms of what seems to help, the following were seen as positive:

- ✓ Flexibility of the third sector
- ✓ Methodical approach of academia

- ✓ Practitioner-based research
- ✓ Evidence-based practice in third sector
- ✓ Third sector partners bring in networks
- ✓ Informing and constructively challenging values
- ✓ Partners' commitment and enthusiasm
- ✓ Shared values and acknowledging that *"There's no such thing as complete objectivity"*
- ✓ Costing self-evaluation in funding applications
- ✓ Confidence in confronting funders (nicely).



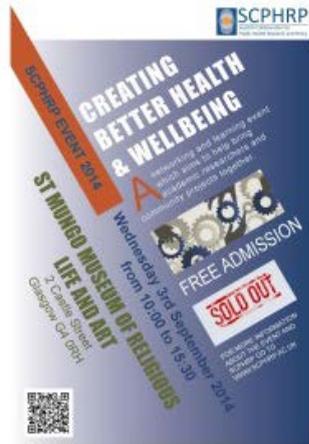
In terms of practical steps, collaborative case studies Also, the recently announced change in policy around the Research Excellence Framework (REF) to which Universities and Higher Education Institutions must report on favours third sector/ academia collaborations, moving from 70% citations and 20% knowledge exchange (KE) activities, to a higher % of KE. This change might encourage academics in particular to seek partnership with third sector organisations.

"The new agenda is positive, but we need to educate and inform academics about how the research can be applied." A delegate

Delegates had lots of good ideas on how the Forum could make things better. Some of these are:

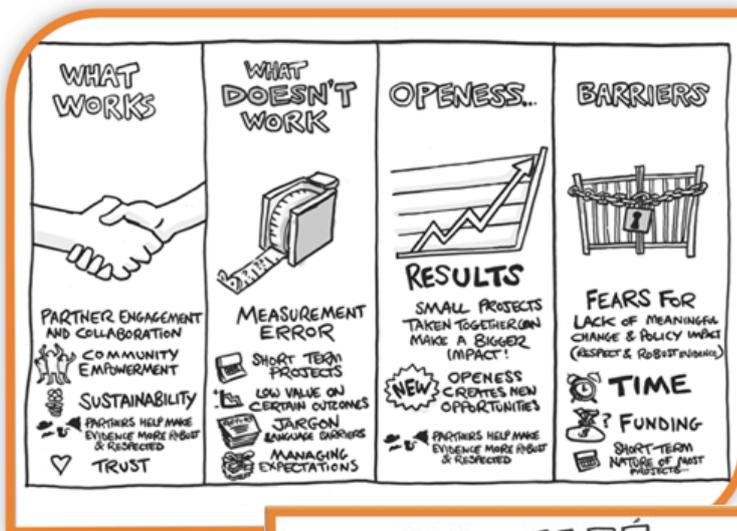
- 💡 Provide events and other networking opportunities to bring academics and third sector together; for example, 'speed-dating' events: *"Academics, including students, need to be encouraged and supported to go to practitioners' conferences, not just academic ones."*
- 💡 Consider creating a marketplace where people can: a) post questions to academics and vice versa, and b) stay abreast of policy/ research developments. Delegates suggested that perhaps this could be something that SCVO could take on.
- 💡 Act as a critical friend when collaborations define their project or when things go wrong
- 💡 Work with funders to showcase research collaborations
- 💡 Raise awareness across the third sector of changes in REF policy – at present knowledge exchange activities count for 20% but this might increase in the future
- 💡 Translate research to jargon-free and plain English – a common language!
- 💡 Provide a noticeboard or library webpage for collaborations to showcase existing/upcoming programmes
- 💡 Help build awareness of where third sector organisations can go for support
- 💡 Help build collaboration skills (e.g. master classes and podcasts).

Collaboration in practice



After a “refreshingly healthy and varied lunch”, **Andrew James Williams (Scottish Collaboration for Public Health Research & Policy, SCPHRP)** presented the [video from SCPHRP’s recent event, “Creating Better Health & Wellbeing: Community organisations and researchers learning together”](#); a one-day networking and learning event organised by members of the Adult Life/Working Age Working Group. The video gave a glimpse of how this event brought academic researchers and community projects together to discuss methods and experiences of improving health and wellbeing and reducing health inequalities in Scotland.

The video made use of graphic recordings to illustrate some of the discussions and outcomes of the event:



A [full report](#) of the event and more information about SCPHRP can be found at www.scphrp.ac.uk.



At this point of the event Steven Marwick thanked delegates for their contribution to the event so far and invited them to join **Forum members to discuss their work** around three areas: Effective positive partnership working; benefits of volunteering for people with complex needs, and the health of the third sector.

So, how did the day go?

Breaking into groups at the end of the day made the task of collating feedback forms difficult, which is why an editable feedback form was circulated to delegates few days after the event. Some of the feedback we received from the day included:

“I just wanted to say again that it was an absolutely fantastic event yesterday! The Forum did such an amazing job and every single person I talked to was singing the Forum’s praises. Really - just great!!!” **Sophie Flemig, University of Edinburgh**

I just wanted to thank and congratulate you and your colleagues for putting on a good event yesterday. It was well organised, with good supporting materials, about the right length and good food to boot! **Rob-Craig, CUSP at University of Aberdeen**

“Well done on a good event.” **Prof Stephen Osborne, University of Edinburgh**

“Really enjoyed the event and it felt the beginning of a very valuable dialogue and collaboration. Well done to members of the TSRF.” **Gareth Allen, Scottish Government**

“Excellent event and well organised.” **Sandy Watson, Scottish Enterprise**

“Good mix of participants - good to have an opportunity to meet academics working in a range of areas & to hear about their experiences of collaborating with the third sector.” **Laura Mulcahy, Criminal Justice Voluntary Sector Forum (CJVSF)**

“Very much enjoyed the session. There was a good level of debate. Feels that more could be done to facilitate concrete linkages between the sector and academics, although I understand there is an organisation set up to do just that. Certainly feels that it is an area of work that could be very positive both for the sector and for the academics who get involved in such collaborations.” **Judith Turbyne, Office of the Scottish Charity Regulator (OSCR)**



What next?

The Forum will meet a few weeks after the event to consider how to continue to support those in the third sector and academia who value cross-sector collaboration and are looking to engage in dialogue and explore opportunities for collaboration. The Forum will take into account the points raised throughout the day and will give careful consideration to suggestions made on what support the Forum could offer in this area.

The three Forum subgroups will have an opportunity to continue to work on their respective pieces of research and feed learning and suggestions provided on the day by delegates. The note of the meeting should be available on the Forum's webpage soon after the meeting: <http://www.evaluationsupportscotland.org.uk/our-work-partners/scottish-third-sector-research-forum/>.

A short case study report of third sector/ academia collaborations involving some of the delegates will be published on the webpage shortly.

The Forum will continue to disseminate learning and networking opportunities through its [newsletter](#) (e-mail Patty Lozano-Casal, Patricia@evaluationsupportscotland.org.uk, to sign up).

For enquiries about this report, please contact:

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The [Scottish Third Sector Research Forum](#) would like to thank all the organisations and people that attended the event.

