

Building community engagement into place-based research agendas: Constructing the co(laboratory)



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Since 2022, Nottingham's universities and civic institutions have collaborated to reimagine PhD research through the Co(l)aboratory Research Hub. From working with community groups to co-create research projects to reviewing the PhD recruitment process in order to address disparities faced by Black, Asian, and minority ethnicity PhD candidates, the Hub is reinventing how community engagement is done in Nottingham and championing the community equivalent of a traditional PhD research supervisor.

Meeting local needs with radical new approaches

The [Co\(l\)aboratory Research Hub \(Co-Lab\)](#) was created to tackle prevailing assumptions about how research is developed, who gets to do PhD research and the role of local communities in the research process. This [place-based research programme](#) funded by the [Research England Development \(RED\) Fund](#) and led by Nottingham Trent University in collaboration with the University of Nottingham aims to challenge the “business as usual” approach in the Higher Education (HE) sector by empowering local people from more diverse backgrounds to succeed in research in order to drive evidence-based change in and behalf of the community.

Co-Lab was established to address a specific set of challenges as follows:

- **Community perspectives in research:** Academic research often overlooks the lived experience and knowledge of local communities, even when intending to benefit them.

- **Researcher diversity:** The backgrounds of researchers seldom reflect the diversity of the populations they serve.
- **Narrow definitions of excellence in research leading to exclusion:** Current metrics for PhD candidate selection often exclude diverse applicants from entering research roles
- **Locally specific challenges:** While Nottingham as a city and county experiences challenges that are applicable to many other towns, cities and regions in the country, these challenges have contextually specific nuances that are uniquely defined by people and places.

Addressing these challenges and ensuring that community knowledge and needs remain central is not a simple task. Many of the barriers that make good engagement with research difficult or even actively unappealing to those beyond the university walls are structural and intersectional. Breaking down these systemic barriers requires more than one simple, singular action or initiative. With this understanding, Co-Lab partnered with the [National Coordinating Centre for Public Engagement](#) to critically examine each step of the PhD research process and identify where “business as usual” attitudes and processes need to be challenged or even changed entirely.

Communities setting research agendas

All good research projects start with a strong basis and justification upon which to build new ideas. In Co-Lab, local communities take the lead in defining research priorities. Through the [“Notts’ Voice in Research”](#) initiative, in-person workshops held in neutral, community-based venues bring together local citizens, civic leaders, and community representatives, who receive remuneration for their contributions. This collaborative approach allows community members to [define priorities](#) based on their personal and professional experiences, ensuring that proposed research projects resonate with Nottingham’s unique needs.

“ “I think the value of having researchers who are part of the local community is brilliant. That sort of community link brings a motivation and authenticity to research that’s hard to achieve otherwise.” Prema Nirgude, Community Supervisor, NHS Nottingham and Nottinghamshire Integrated Care Board. ”

Supporting collaborations and co-creating new research

With community priorities established, Co-Lab initiates a project co-creation phase. Unlike standard research project funding calls, we don’t simply ask for a straightforward submission of proposals - instead, over a five month ‘incubation period’, academic and community stakeholders work together in a series of dedicated co-creation workshops, meeting participants from various sectors to share ideas and discuss challenges.

These workshops serve three main purposes:

- To provide an essential opportunity for people from typically separate worlds to meet and connect for the common purpose of working to support positive change for local communities
- To allow Co-Lab, working in our capacity as intermediaries, to lay the groundwork for strong and equitable partnerships by ‘calling out’ and confronting common misconceptions and challenges
- To introduce the community research priorities and enable the growth of ideas and seeding of potential partnerships and projects.

Accountability to the community

As a programme and collection of people, Co-Lab still represents Nottingham’s universities, and by extension, the HE sector more broadly. This means that we need to account actively for the fact that universities have, in the past, taken advantage of communities’ trust whether intentionally or unintentionally. Less developed approaches to community-engaged research have historically led to communities viewing research as something that is done to them, without their meaningful involvement, and that it is not ultimately for them. It’s necessary to address the fundamental and valid concerns which come with this historical legacy – to do this Co-Lab is developing multiple ways in which the programme can remain accountable to its [growing list of community partners](#).

Project selection panels

After the project co-creation phase, a panel reviews proposals to choose ten PhD projects for Co-Lab funding – research projects can be based in any subject discipline and take any necessary approach, but they must seek to address one or more challenges defined by Nottinghamshire communities. Each project must be assessed for academic rigour, community priority, and potential for impact. In a departure from typical ‘closed’ academic review processes, Co-Lab’s model includes participants from our Notts’ Voice in Research workshops. These community representatives are paid and trained to assess the project’s community relevance, potential impact and alignment with local priorities. This ensures that selected projects genuinely address community-defined needs whilst meeting academic standards.

To date, Co-Lab has recruited 20 community engaged PhD projects. The programme is collaborating with 35 civic partners– from NHS organisations to small theatres, housing associations to mental health charities, and from local government to the local wildlife trust – to create a [growing footprint of collaboration](#) across the city and county.

Inclusive recruitment practices – reflecting diversity in the local community

Once projects are defined, recruitment of PhD students gets underway.

Co-Lab's values of inclusion and social justice are reflected in our approach to PhD candidate recruitment. Traditional recruitment approaches have tried varying initiatives in attempts to recruit candidates from a more diverse range of backgrounds, but without changing the narrow entry criteria. By leaving this barrier unchallenged, inclusive measures risk not working, or worse, leading to what can be seen as performative, "tick-box" style outcomes. To tackle this problem head-on, Co-Lab partnered with the [Equity in Doctoral Education through Partnership and Innovation \(EDEPI\)](#) programme, which seeks to address disparities faced by Black, Asian, and minority ethnicity PhD candidates, to design and implement a competency-based assessment framework for recruiting PhD candidates.

The framework emphasises a candidate's *future potential* over a more conventional focus on past academic qualifications, creating a pathway for those with diverse backgrounds to access research opportunities. In order to recruit to a PhD position, Co-Lab instead uses competencies from the framework which are included in the project advert, much like a typical job advert. This allows prospective applicants to easily see if they have the necessary skills and experience. Relevant experience is valued as an alternative or addition to traditional qualifications. This method enables Co-Lab to recruit candidates whose varied life experiences and skills align with local research priorities, fostering greater inclusivity and relevance within research.

The Co-Lab approach, which is already showing success, essentially allows individuals to showcase their own contextually relevant strengths, rather than forcing them to conform to a much more restrictive and exclusionary set of measures that potentially reinforces disadvantage.

By adopting a broader and more comprehensive definition of what a "strong PhD researcher" looks like, it becomes genuinely possible to offer PhD research opportunities to people from different backgrounds with alternative forms of knowledge and experience.

“Co-Lab made the impossible feel possible. I'm now part of a really driven and diverse bunch of people -the Co-Lab initiative has introduced some amazing researchers into the world of academia!” Julia Cons, PhD Student, Co(l)laboratory

Community Supervisors

To ensure each project maintains a consistent connection to the community and that the community voice has an ongoing presence in the research, community partners take on the role of community supervisors. Whilst academic supervisors take on all standard PhD supervision responsibilities, community supervisors provide guidance to the candidate based on their real-world, professional expertise and experience of working directly with relevant communities. Community supervisors receive payment in recognition of the valuable role that

they play in supervisory teams and to support their participation in professional development activities, like team inductions and an annual development event.

For more detailed insight into what the relationship between a community supervisor and PhD candidate looks like in practice, current Co-Lab PhD candidate Julia Cons and her Community Supervisor Prema Nirgude have written a [complementary article to the essay](#) to share their personal experiences.

Supporting and strengthening the role of Community Supervisors

Based on our experiences of the first two years of Co-Lab, we've identified some key challenges relating to community supervisor roles, including:

- **Navigating power dynamics in the research team:** Both academic and community supervisors benefit from support and discussions that directly address the potential impacts of perceived and actual power imbalances within the supervision team - for example ensuring community supervisor knowledge is valued on an equal footing to academic supervisor knowledge and challenging the unwritten notion that ideas from those with a "Dr" or "Prof" before their name should not be questioned.
- **Unfamiliarity with the PhD process:** Academic research is a relatively slow process including steps such as literature review and ethical approval – these may be unfamiliar concepts to community supervisors and building a better understanding is essential in order to allow integration of the research process into day-to-day personal and professional obligations.
- **Maximising community partner benefit:** There is potential for community partners from smaller organisations, to benefit from participation in research conferences and contribute to research publications, however we're mindful of overburdening community partners who also have full-time jobs to do – we're seeking new ways to involve community supervisors in these dissemination efforts in sustainable ways.

These observations and questions guide the ongoing development of our approach and are fed back into the cycle of delivery in order to work towards enabling fully equitable participation by our community partners.

Meaningful impact and dissemination - closing the loop

As our PhD candidates begin to generate results, outcomes, and new research questions, it becomes increasingly important for Co-Lab to close the engagement loop with local communities by enabling them to explore results, and crucially, to feed their insights back into the research process.

Community supervisors play a key role in disseminating research findings and ensuring they reach the intended audience. Their professional networks and community insights allow for

tailored communication strategies, increasing the visibility and relevance of research outcomes, but we want to go further... Over the next six years as more Co-Lab PhD candidates progress through and complete their research, we will refine and develop our dissemination activity to make it easier for local, nonacademic audiences to meaningfully engage with and respond to our Co(l)laboratory candidates' research. In addition to academic outputs, Co-Lab will host public events in community venues, prioritising interactive, dialogue-focused formats over traditional, more passive, one-way academic formats in order to make complex research findings accessible and invite community feedback to shape further research.

Empowering communities to advance evidence-based change

The next priority for Co-Lab is to explore how our universities can encourage research autonomy within our communities. We'll do this by offering free, accessible, entry-level research skills courses for professionals in civic and community roles in Nottinghamshire. This initiative will enable local community members to develop the skills needed to lead evidence-based projects. By building research capabilities across Nottinghamshire, Co-Lab hopes to inspire a new wave of community-led projects, empowering individuals to become drivers of evidence-based change themselves.

Conclusion

By prioritising inclusivity, accountability, and local knowledge, Co-Lab is creating a framework that empowers communities to engage in research that addresses their specific needs. Through Co-Lab, Nottingham's communities are gaining the tools they need to become active participants in shaping their future. By the end of the programme we will have developed, trialled, and evaluated a new model for inclusive, community-engaged PhD-level research. Through our commitment to dismantling structural barriers and fostering a supportive environment for diverse voices, it's our ambition to be able to demonstrate to universities and civic and community organisations how local people can tackle local problems through PhD research in their local universities.

The Co-Lab initiative continues to evolve, reflecting a growing understanding of how universities and communities can work together to drive meaningful change.

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