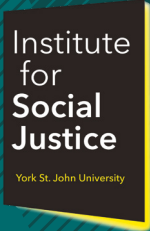




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Summary Report:

Learning and Impact Study of the Community Research Grants Programme 2022-2023



The Institute for Social Justice (ISJ) was established in 2020 to reinforce York St John University's (YSJ) commitment to advocating social justice. By harnessing the diverse academic expertise across the university, the Institute fosters collaborative research and practice to identify, expose, and address the various inequalities, injustices, and challenges prevailing in society today.



Community Research Grants Programme

One of the primary objectives of the ISJ is to facilitate research partnerships between YSJ researchers and community-led organisations within the voluntary, charity, and social enterprise (VCSE) sector. These collaborations support research projects and alliances aimed at advancing and advocating for greater social equity. The ISJ primarily achieves this objective through its Community Research Grants (CRG) programme.

The CRG programme establishes connections between YSJ and the VCSE sector by inviting VCSE organisations to propose themes or issues pertinent to their communities.

Through co-created research and support from YSJ academics, these initiatives enhance the impact and efficacy of their work.

The CRG grants are guided by two central objectives. Firstly, they provide vital support for community-initiated research, fostering positive changes within VCSE organisations and their communities. Secondly, these grants are strategically designed to cultivate enduring research partnerships between academics and VCSE organisations, instigating transformative changes that enhance the capabilities of VCSE organisations to deliver impactful outcomes.

CRG programme Learning and Impact Study

Conducted by Carsis Consulting, this independent Learning and Impact Study aimed to review the role of the CRG programme in supporting collaborative research partnerships with VCSE organisations. This study specifically focused on identifying insights and early-stage outcomes resulting from these partnerships. It also placed a particular emphasis on examining how these partnerships affect the operational practices of VCSE activities and their engagement with academic knowledge. Furthermore, the study aimed to pinpoint common characteristics of these partnerships that contribute to fostering lasting change.

To achieve these objectives, the study employed a mixed-methods inductive research approach, combining interviews and a partnership assessment survey. The study centered on three primary goals:

1. Identify early-stage outcomes and benefits of the current CRG projects.
2. Showcase valuable lessons from the collaborations that can inform future CRG projects.
3. Identify partnership criteria that promote strong and effective collaborations between academics, academic institutions and VCSE organisations.

This report provides a summary of the key learnings and reflections of this research.



Benefits for VCSE Organisations

The CRG partnerships offered a wide range of benefits to VCSE organisations. A summary of the reported benefits include:

1. Acquired Material and Socio-economic Assets: Collaborations have generated practical assets and intangible advantages for VCSE organisations. These included physical resources, such as evidence-based research reports, advocacy materials, and influential content that have equipped VCSE organisations with essential resources to support their development and growth. They have also gained intangible benefits including strengthened networks, enhanced reputation, access to new expertise, opportunities for shared research and development, and elevated their professionalism. Through the CRGs, these physical resources offer valuable insights into the societal issues that these organisations address, thus enhancing their impact strategies and operational efficiency in areas like advocacy, decision-making, funding acquisition, and strategic planning. Meanwhile, the intangible benefits serve as foundational tools for expanding their influence and establishing future partnerships.

2. Influencing Policy and Decision-Making: Certain CRGs had a noteworthy impact on VCSE organisations' ability to influence strategic decisions locally and on a broader scale. Among many of the VCSE partners, the evidence and insights generated from the CRG project now support efforts to inform policy changes and advocacy initiatives.

“ The partnership with York St. John and their qualitative academic work provided the missing puzzle piece for our anti-racist strategy providing both expert research and institutional backing for our work with the City of York.

– Inclusive Equal Rights UK

3. Learning and Skill Development: The CRG projects acted as valuable 'learning accelerators' for VCSE organisations engaging with academic knowledge and partnering with academic institutions. The key areas where VCSE organisations reported enhanced understanding included: the use of effective data collection techniques, building appropriate research design and data collection systems; developing better cross-sector collaborative practices, and boosting operational, financial, and research-related capabilities.

4. Networking and Future Collaborations: CRG partnerships created and strengthened connections with stakeholders, academics, and local authorities. VCSE organisations reported that the connections made through the CRG programme have opened doors for potential future collaborations, have elevated their organisational visibility and reputation, and extended engagement with stakeholders beyond the initial projects.

5. Co-creation as a Catalyst for Meaningful VCSE Research and Innovation: The deliberate emphasis on co-creation in the CRGs has empowered both VCSEs and academics to harness their expertise and networks, resulting in projects that exceeded expectations in terms of both reach and research quality. The focus on collaborative principles prompted innovation in research practices which included the integration of different and diverse stakeholder perspectives, the active involvement of community members in research design, and the exploration of novel research questions. The impact of collaborative principles within the CRG partnerships has led to the development of research agendas that might have otherwise gone unexplored.

Benefits for Researchers

The CRG partnerships offered a wide range of benefits to YSJ researchers. A summary of the reported benefits include:

- 1. Professional Growth, Learning, and Innovation:** Engaging with VCSE organisations expanded researchers' skill set, exposing them to the practical dynamics of community-based research and the challenges faced by grassroots organisations. This experience enriched their understanding of data collection methodologies and collaborative approaches. Researchers were afforded creative freedom, exploring innovative methods such as incorporating poetry and film into their projects. Collaborations contributed to the advancement of both academic knowledge and practical strategies for addressing social issues, serving as a mutually beneficial exchange.
- 2. Empowering Researchers through Community Engagement and Mission-Driven Collaboration:** Collaborations between researchers and VCSE organisations have not only aligned academic pursuits with mission-driven causes but have also played a vital role in effecting positive change. The CRGs have enabled researchers to contribute to important issues like diversity, equity, inclusion, and the support of marginalised communities, bridging the gap between academia and practical interventions. Engaging with VCSEs encouraged researchers to adopt interdisciplinary thinking. The CRG approach to research partnerships was new to many YSJ academics, and collaborating with VCSEs prompted them to positively question the traditional academic research processes and evolve praxis to align with the context and needs of the VCSE sector. The use of methods like co-creation and participatory research further amplified this collaborative nature, enhancing the depth of research inquiry. Connecting with VCSEs introduced researchers to new communities and individuals not usually part of academic work, broadening research horizons. This approach also allowed researchers to unearth unique insights and explore research topics from new and diverse perspectives.

“ The CRG project allowed us to showcase the expertise of our department and helped us to build connections and strengthen a reputation in the field of heritage, culture, and tourism

– Researcher

- 3. Real-World Impact and Visibility:** Researchers witnessed the tangible impact of their work on local communities, extending beyond traditional academic circles. The collaborations showcased their expertise - and the capabilities of their respective academic departments - in real-world contexts, enhancing the visibility and influence of their work. Similarly, successful CRG projects have laid the groundwork for data to be published in academic journals, enhancing researchers' professional profiles.
- 4. Networking, Collaboration Opportunities, and Future Research:** Partnering with VCSEs facilitated networking with VCSE sector stakeholders and local authorities, paving the way for future collaborations and research initiatives. For example, academics working with Inclusive Equal Rights UK and Health Watch North Yorkshire have each already reported opportunities for further and follow-on research collaborations with local authorities.

Partnership and Strategies for Good Collaboration

- **Improved knowledge and expertise:** Approximately 77% of all survey responses from CRG partners reported they felt they gained access to new expertise and shared research and knowledge, enhancing their research capabilities and allowing for more in-depth data analysis and insights.
- **Networking:** All survey responses from CRG partners reported they felt they gained new or strengthened networks through the collaboration, allowing them to establish connections with individuals, organisations, and public institutions and authorities.
- **Improved Reputation:** Around 85% of survey responses from CRG partners reported they improved their reputation as a result from the CRG collaboration. Most VCSEs reported that the association with academic institutions elevated their visibility and professionalism, reinforcing their credibility.

The CRG experiences have played a crucial role in assisting VCSEs in making positive changes within their organisations and providing support to their communities. The collaborations have facilitated the cultivation of stronger evidence-based cultures within VCSEs, encouraged a commitment to continuous learning, influenced impact growth strategies, and broadened their perspectives through ethical and well-informed approaches.

Common advances made include:

- 1. Emphasis on Evidence-Based Practices:** VCSE organisations have been able to place a stronger emphasis on evidence-based practices within their organisations by teaming up with academics. The partnerships have enabled VCSEs to incorporate research-driven approaches into their operations, allowing them to make informed decisions and actions based on credible data and insights.
- 2. Exposure to New Knowledge, Methodologies, and Standards:** The partnerships with YSJ have exposed VCSE organisations to academic methodologies and research ethics, while academics have gained experience and knowledge in conducting research with the VCSE sector.
- 3. Building New Networks and Sustainability:** Partnerships with YSJ have facilitated the expansion of networks for both academics and VCSE organisations. These collaborations have informed scaling strategies for some VCSEs, addressed knowledge gaps in growth, and facilitated the emergence of new strategies for partnerships and funding.



Open Country's collaboration with researchers helped them recognise the vital importance of focusing on work in blue spaces. Participating in the CRG prompted strategic reflection on how to manage their expansion into this space. Following the partnership, they have incorporated blue spaces into their business plan, but importantly, they have also reflected on key organisational challenges such as securing funding, managing day-to-day commitments of their existing work, and cultivating collaborations with new and existing stakeholders through the project that will help drive this impact.

Lessons for Future Collaborations:

Enhancing CRG Success Through Equitable Resource Allocation and Relationship Building:

It's essential to consider resource allocation within the CRG projects carefully. While projects may have limited resources, it's crucial not to allocate them solely based on what's considered the most efficient for the project. This approach could miss valuable opportunities to establish equitable, trusting, and high-quality relationships between academic and VCSE partners, which are pivotal for successful collaborations.

It's important to recognise that VCSEs and academic partners often operate within very different working cultures. For instance, academics frequently function within hierarchical university structures, which may be unfamiliar or less compatible with the decentralised or flat organisational models often used by VCSEs. Building strong relationships between academic and VCSE partners serves as a bridge between these diverse cultures, facilitating collaboration and helping to overcome potential organisational challenges that may arise from these differing approaches.

Allocating resources to accommodate certain redundancies within a project, such as attending additional events or opting for in-person meetings over online ones, significantly contributes to trust-building. This allocation not only demonstrates a commitment to treating VCSE stakeholders as peers but also underscores the importance of taking their contributions seriously. These actions are just as vital for nurturing the social capital of VCSE-academic relationships as the research outputs themselves.

- **Recognise the Limits to VCSE Social Capital:** CRG projects can sometimes over-rely on the social capital of VCSE members for community research activities. Depending solely on volunteer goodwill and VCSE networks can carry risks and create an excessive dependence on VCSE social capital. To ensure the sustainability of relationships with volunteers and stakeholders for similar projects in the long term, future projects should consider introducing appropriate compensation or rewards, which can help to establish a fairer power dynamic.
- **Empowering Researchers with Enhanced Support:** Researchers frequently took on roles beyond their usual research duties, such as recruitment, project administration, and marketing and communications, demanding additional time and effort. To address this challenge, researchers should receive added resources, training, and guidance for effectively managing these expanded responsibilities. Equipping researchers with the necessary support and knowledge will enable them to confidently support the wider roles of a CRG project.
- **Ensuring Equitable Use of Institutional Resources:** CRG projects should strive for an even distribution of institutional resources, including personnel, expertise, and physical space, between VCSEs and the university to promote fair partnerships. Addressing perceptions of resource imbalance is crucial, as some VCSE partners may feel their contributions outweigh the university's, affecting the partnership's fairness and power dynamics. To manage expectations and prevent resource disparities, CRG projects should establish a resource mobilisation strategy from the project's outset. The university should also consider investing in CRG programme support, particularly in areas to support recruitment, marketing, communications of the projects.
- **Plan for Sustainability:** Future CRG projects should prioritise planning for continuity and long-term sustainability of their activities. Interviews with VCSEs highlighted the risk of losing momentum due to funding constraints and operational commitments. To ensure lasting impact, it's advisable to proactively plan for some sustainability measures beyond the initial phase of future CRG projects. By integrating sustainability into the CRG programme, projects can make a meaningful and enduring contribution to positive change that extends well beyond the initial project.

Partnership Criteria for Collaborative Success

Both academics and VCSE staff identified a set of criteria that played a pivotal role in the success of most CRG collaborations, emphasising the importance of fostering cooperative and transparent partnerships. These criteria encompass:

- 1. Equity and Flexibility:** Partners should treat each other as equals, valuing the ideas and contributions of both parties, regardless of their size or resources. This approach requires open sharing of information and resources, a willingness to embrace change, and accommodation of different, often flexible, working styles.
 - 2. Balancing Rigor and Practicality:** Striking a balance between rigorous research and addressing the practical needs of VCSEs is crucial. This involves ensuring that research remains relevant and useful to the community while maintaining academic standards.
 - 3. Communication:** Partners should maintain clear and regular dialogue, manage expectations, and genuinely listen to each other's ideas and concerns.
 - 4. Shared Vision and Goals:** Partners should define a clear shared vision and goals for the project from the outset to prevent misunderstandings and ensure alignment among all stakeholders.
 - 5. Understanding Partner 'User Journeys':** Establishing a structured process for onboarding new partners, covering both VCSE and Academic CRG journeys, is vital for managing expectations and identifying and addressing potential operational bottlenecks before they arise.
 - 6. Mutual Respect, Equal Decision-Making, and Accountability:** These values underpin trust and cooperation among partners. It is imperative to ensure that everyone feels respected, and decisions are made transparently and fairly.
 - 7. Acknowledgment of Expertise:** Partners should recognise and value the valuable expertise contributed by both VCSEs and academic partners, including the voices of individuals with lived experience.
- By adhering to these criteria, VCSE organisations and universities can forge strong and mutually beneficial partnerships that contribute to positive social change.

Case Studies

York in Recovery

Peer support in Recovery from Drug and Alcohol Misuse

York in Recovery and researchers from ISJ collaborated to evaluate the impact of York in Recovery's peer support model on the recovery community in York. The partnership was beneficial for both parties: York in Recovery gained evidence-based research that could demonstrate the effectiveness of their peer support services and enhanced their credibility and visibility. The researchers gained valuable insights into the challenges and opportunities faced by grassroots organisations like York in Recovery.

Some specific achievements of this CRG partnership were:

- York in Recovery's peer support model was evaluated and its effectiveness in supporting addiction recovery was demonstrated.
- The research findings and report can serve as a solid foundation for York in Recovery's advocacy and funding efforts.
- The co-created research process empowered York in Recovery's members and gave them a central voice in designing the research.

Overall, the partnership between York in Recovery and the researchers was a success. It has led to a number of positive outcomes for both parties and will help to support the recovery community in York.

“ The lived experiences of members of York in Recovery helped to shape a questionnaire we would not have come up with alone. The questions really were from them. And I think they felt quite proud of what they'd achieved.”

- Researcher

York Archaeological Trust (YAT)

Diversification of Visitors and Organisation

York Archaeological Trust (YAT) and researchers from the ISJ joined forces for a collaborative project aimed at uncovering obstacles that hinder diverse communities from engaging with YAT's attractions. Additionally, the project sought to explore strategies to enhance audience engagement.

The partnership was beneficial for both parties. YAT gained access to additional resources, identified barriers to audience engagement, and gained data to develop a more comprehensive plan for strengthening their engagement with underrepresented groups. The researchers gained valuable experience and insights into the challenges and opportunities faced by heritage organisations in promoting diversity, equity, and inclusion.

Some specific achievements of this CRG partnership were:

- YAT were able to identify barriers to audience engagement, such as a lack of awareness of their services and inaccessible physical spaces. YAT will use this research to develop a more inclusive plan for strengthening audience engagement, including targeted outreach to underrepresented groups.
- Researchers identified fundamental gaps in YAT's attractions data collection system and were able to help YAT identify ways to close these gaps in future.

The researchers were adaptable and able to effectively navigate challenging and changing research contexts. They adjusted their approach to align with YAT's evolving research priorities, ensuring that the work they delivered was of significant value.

Overall, the partnership between YAT and the ISJ was a success. It has led to a number of positive outcomes for both parties and has helped to make heritage and cultural engagement more inclusive and accessible to all.

“ We appreciate the value of the open and flexible approach taken by the YSJ Researcher, allowing us to adapt, support, and ensure that the CRG partnership worked in a way that was genuinely useful to our organisation”

– York Archaeological Trust





Open Country Disability Access to Blue Spaces

Open Country and YSJ researchers collaborated to address the unmet needs of disabled people seeking access to blue spaces. The project used a mix of academic and creative research methodologies to explore the barriers faced by disabled individuals and develop strategies to make these spaces more inclusive.

The partnership was beneficial for both parties. Open Country gained an enhanced understanding of the benefits of blue spaces for disabled individuals and developed advocacy and campaigning resources to address the challenges they face. The researchers gained personal fulfilment and creative freedom from the project. Some specific achievements of this CRG partnership were:

- Boosted advocacy for blue spaces: Researchers aided Open Country in crafting advocacy resources for promoting access to blue spaces for disabled groups, including a stakeholder database, video, and strengthening relationships with partners in the blue spaces sector.
- Use of creative research: The project employed creative research methods, including film and poetry, enriching Open Country's own understanding of the types of

research and tools they can use to engage audiences about creating inclusive blue spaces.

- Inclusive blue spaces growth: The project's data emphasised the importance of investing in blue spaces for disabled groups. This insight led to Open Country committing blue spaces into their business plan and using the project findings to inform a strategy for this work.

Overall, the partnership between Open Country and the ISJ was a success. It has led to a number of positive outcomes for both parties and has helped to make blue spaces more inclusive and accessible.

“ I have realised how helpful and resourceful universities can be, especially in terms of research. This opens up possibilities for more collaborations and community-minded initiatives moving forward. It has shown me that partnering with universities can enhance and expand our initiatives.”

– Open Country

Healthwatch, North Yorkshire Health Inequalities and Rurality

Healthwatch North Yorkshire and ISJ collaborated to explore the impact of rurality on access to healthcare. Alongside HWNY staff and volunteers, researchers helped to design the research with questions and a survey and helped to conduct interviews with key stakeholders.

The partnership was beneficial for both organisations. HWNY gained access to academic expertise and research methodologies, which enhanced the rigor and impact of their work. The researchers gained a real-world context to apply their knowledge and skills, and they were able to connect with a community that might not typically participate in academic research.

Some specific achievements of this CRG partnership were:

- More focused research design: The researchers helped HWNY to refine their research interest and focus to make it more strategic and credible.
- Increased reach and data quality: The collaboration from both ISJ and HWNY helped to increase the number of survey respondents and improve the quality of the data

collected. The partnership helped to amplify the voices of participants and the community and made the project more credible. This would not have been achievable without the cooperation of both parties.

- Cross-pollination of ideas and learning: The partnership helped to foster the exchange ideas between both partners, including empowering HWNY staff with new ways of strengthening the academic and ethical rigour of their work.

Overall, the partnership between HWNY and the ISJ was a success. It has led to a number of positive outcomes for both parties and has helped to inform and evidence the impact of rurality on access to healthcare across North Yorkshire.

“As a small team, taking on such projects for us would require a significant investment of time and resources. The researchers’ involvement allowed for the sharing of workload and expertise.”

– Health Watch North Yorkshire

Inclusive Equal Rights UK (IERUK) Researching Anti-racism Practices in York

IERUK partnered with YSJ researchers to collect qualitative data on racism experiences in York, shaping an anti-racist strategy. The partnership was beneficial for both parties. IERUK gained access to researchers’ expertise in qualitative research, which helped them to develop a more comprehensive anti-racist strategy.

The project resulted in a comprehensive research report that provides in-depth insights into individuals’ experiences of racism in York. The report has been used to inform the development of the city’s anti-racist strategy, and it has also been used to support decision-making related to policing, health services, and education.

Some specific achievements of this CRG partnership were:

- Enhanced anti-racist strategy: The partnership helped IERUK to develop a more comprehensive and effective anti-racist strategy by providing them with qualitative data on individuals’ experiences of racism.

- Cost savings and institutional credibility: The partnership saved IERUK from having to hire external experts to conduct the research, and the association of YSJ to the strategy added extra credibility to their work.
- Opportunities for future collaboration: The successful partnership has opened up opportunities for future collaboration between IERUK and YSJ.

The partnership between IERUK and YSJ is a valuable example of how research can be used to address social problems. It has led to a number of positive outcomes for both parties and has helped to make the city’s anti-racist more inclusive and evidenced.

“Through our engagement in the CRG, we’ve learned to how to collaborate better with academics not just as individual researchers but as an organisation.”

– Inclusive Equal Rights UK

Bolshee CIC

The Dancefloor Project

Bolshee CIC and the ISJ collaborated on a research project to understand and address sexual harm in public spaces through the use of creative methods, such as dancefloor installations, to engage community members and collect data. The partnership benefited both parties. Bolshee CIC gained research expertise for data-driven analysis of sexual harm in public spaces, elevating their work's visibility. The collaboration enabled researchers to gather insights on sexual harm in York's public spaces, informing both university-wide endeavours and their academic pursuits.

Some specific achievements of this CRG partnership were:

- The project empowered individuals affected by sexual harm to have agency in shaping the research and its outcomes.
- The project engaged local community members, including those with real or perceived risks of sexual harm to gain a deeper understanding of the experiences of sexual harm in public spaces, especially nightlife venues. This helped identify existing prevention strategies people use to stay safe and the data is being used to develop more effective safety strategies in the city.
- The project has the potential to impact policy and advocacy efforts to improve safety measures and support for victims of sexual harm in public spaces.

Overall, the collaboration has yielded good outcomes and insights for both entities, contributing to the understanding and substantiation of approaches aimed at preventing sexual harm in public spaces within and beyond the city of York.

“ The Dancefloor project gave members of the public a safe place to share their ideas and experiences regarding sexual harm in public spaces... people thanked us for providing a safe experience for letting them have a voice on this topic. We have seen men have become part of the conversation and gone on to talk to their sons and daughters about being safe people.”

– Bolshee CIC



Conclusion

The Community Research Grants programme serves as a vital platform for nurturing collaborative partnerships between YSJ and VCSE organisations. Reviewing the outcomes and lessons from six CRG collaborations, this report emphasises the CRG programme's significance and offers insights into effective community-academic collaborations. For VCSE organisations, CRG partnerships have yielded tangible benefits such as expanded networks, enhanced reputation, and strengthened operational capabilities, while also enriching intangible assets like evidence-based research, advocacy resources, and learning and development. These collaborations, rooted in co-creative methodologies, have generated valuable insights, amplified community voices, and strengthened the impact of VCSE organisations work. Researchers, in turn, have experienced professional growth, innovation, and mission-driven research, benefiting from interdisciplinary collaboration and increased visibility. Successful CRG partnerships were characterised by mutual respect, open communication, equal decision-making, and the integration of 'lived experiences' into the research process. These principles expand the potential for transformative research and learning. The diverse case studies demonstrate the breadth of CRG partnership applications and outcomes, addressing issues such as addiction recovery, heritage engagement, anti-racism advocacy, disability access, health inequalities, and prevention of sexual harm.

To find out more about the Community Research Grants and other aspects of the Institute for Social Justice, visit www.yorks.ac.uk/ISJ

About Carsis Consulting

Carsis Consulting is an award-winning social innovation and impact consultancy specialising in the provision of knowledge services that support systemic social and economic change. Carsis offer monitoring, evaluation, research, and learning services for social change spanning the entire innovation cycle. Our team have experience delivering projects covering four continents, collaborating with a diverse spectrum of stakeholders that include small and medium-sized enterprises, large corporates, universities, international non-governmental organisations, private foundations, governmental entities, and faith-based organisations.

Carsis are committed to Shared-Wealth principles to working and are a Social Enterprise International Shared-Wealth Social Licence holder. For more information visit us at: <https://carsis.consulting/>.

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