

A Learning History of the Community Research Grant Programme



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Executive Summary

This report presents a year-long learning history of the Community Research Grant (CRG) programme led by the Institute for Social Justice (ISJ). These grants fund research between academics in York St John University (YSJU) and voluntary, community and social enterprise (VCSE) partners. The report is timely given the commitment of YSJU in developing its social impact mission, while also contributing to a decade long movement across the HEI sector to support of a more democratic research culture in the United Kingdom.

Between 2022 and 2025, the ISJ invested a total of £245,000 in 30 CRG projects. This is equivalent to an average of six projects per year, each receiving £10,000, with a smaller number receiving up to an average £6,000 in 'follow-on' funding. These projects have involved 25 different groups or organisations in the VCSE sector across Yorkshire and the Humber. Most of these organisations are small or medium sized, with a third generating an annual income less than £50,000; the other two thirds generated income between £50,999 and £1 million.

The outcomes achieved by CRG projects, especially those which receive follow-on funding for a second year, show they can secure external funding and generate benefits to VCSE partner organisations and their beneficiaries. Examples include: expanding operations into new areas; improved services; organisational change; greater sector impact. For academic researchers benefits include: new and ongoing collaborative partnerships; development of research outputs; new external funding opportunities and development of impact case studies. We anticipate that in the York St John University 2029 REF submission at least five impact case studies will feature work developed through CRGs. CRG projects also have achieved University-level outputs, such as: new partnerships and connections with VCSE partners; reputational benefits; and post-graduate student research placements.

The first phase of the learning history consisted of a total of 18 interviews conducted with academics and VCSE partners. The interview findings underlined that emotions and ethos are important to understand the incentives to collaborate through the CRG projects. Although professional and personal interests are drivers that build positive partnerships, poor project management can detriment the good relationship.

The interviews showed that after relationships between academics and VCSE partners are built, and both parties understand each other's organisational cultures, new learning and knowledge are created. Academics learn new research methods, obtain new theoretical insights, and learn new funding contexts. VCSE partners learn new methods that enrich service provision, develop evaluative insights and greater understanding of impact and help structure their organisations' operations or governance.

The interviews underline that there are tiers of power relationships with CRG projects, framed by individuals' actions or decisions as well as by their organisations' policies and levels of income. There is a general sense that YSJU holds the dominant role in the partnerships with VCSEs given that it holds the funding and establishes its administrative procedures over partners' processes. It is also worth

noting that YSJU's annual income is between 100-200 times higher than its VCSE sector partners. Despite this perception we reveal that networks of power and influence are not one directional. For example, VCSE partners have changed the way academics work in approaching community research. Their feedback has also informed changes within the ISJ practices and structures in order to be more responsive to CRG projects' needs.

Overtime, the ISJ has changed its approach to managing the CRG programme. During the initiation stage, the ISJ realised the need of having project managers to support the work that CRG projects required to develop research. In the consolidation stage follow-on grants were introduced as well as changes that gave more equal stake to VCSE partners in the research collaboration (i.e. more flexibility in the control of the budget).

We are now in a developmental stage, through which the ISJ has become an enabler in connecting the CRG programme to other parts of the University and to other external stakeholders. For instance, through the links between the programme and the Introduction to Community Research Methods module, inviting VCSE partners to the reviewing panel of new CRG applications, supporting the University's research ethics in incorporating principles of doing community research, and exploring ways to strengthen the public and policy engagement with CRG research findings.

The enabling role of the ISJ has also started to develop in its relationship with the broader VCSE sector. At this level, the ISJ is becoming an intermediary between the YSJU and VCSE partners. The learning history shows that better communications that explain differences between the higher education and third sectors is advisable. On the one hand, academics need to learn more about the organisational culture and socio-political challenges faced by (small) VCSE organisations. On the other, some VCSE partners need to understand the organisational nature of universities.

This intermediary role is requiring the ISJ to invest more in coordination to ensure that the changes that the ISJ adapts in favour VCSE partners are consistently reflected in its everyday practice and in its wider coordination with other parts of the University that set administrative procedures. Strategically, the ISJ is also shaping the narrative of collaboration towards that which emphasises co-productive research. This aims to flatten the hierarchical structure of knowledge creation while empowering research participants. However, the learning history shows that this progress risks stalling if the ISJ stops advocating for co-productive social justice research.

As opportunities develop in strengthening CRG projects' public engagement, the intermediary role of the ISJ has also begun to reach other external stakeholders. The learning history identified a few potential benefits if the ISJ were to extend this role around the mobilisation of resources. The latter has been noticed through the influence of the CRG programme on the two community research grants offered by the Institute for Health and Care Improvement (IHCI) and the Scarborough Coastal Health and Care Research Collaborative (SHARC). In the future, the ISJ could

enable the pooling of resources across other universities and local authorities to support small VCSE organisations develop co-productive research.

Co-productive research tends to be curtailed by the financial insecurity that all sectors experience in some shape or form. A way to overcome the latter may be to build upon the infrastructures created by the Yorkshire and Humber Policy Engagement and Research Network (Y-PERN), the Yorkshire and Humber Policy Innovation Partnership (YPIP) and Ideas Fund-City of Hull to champion community research with the VCSE sector in the region. Because of the social justice ethos that defines the ISJ, its particular role in this wider ecosystem will be its contribution in rebalancing power relations between universities and marginalised communities participating in research. The rebalancing of power is not only confined to the relationships built within specific CRG projects, but also depends on the broader practices and rules in which academic research is embedded.

Three main recommendations are drawn from this learning history for the YSJU community and executive board to consider.

1. The CRG programme has shown tangible outcomes than can be translated into social impact, hence YSJU is in a good position to continue investing in the work that the ISJ is doing.
2. The ISJ has shown ability and capacity to develop support for CRG projects by working as an enabler within the University's structures and processes. However, the challenges that the ISJ is facing are also a call to action for the University's administrative and financial processes to be more responsive to the type of partnerships CRG projects are building with VCSE partners.
3. The ISJ is developing an intermediary between the academic, policy and VCSE sectors in Yorkshire and Humber. However, this could be supported by better dialogue and coordination with the different academic and policy networks in the region to mobilise resources which invite (small) VCSE partners into policymaking.

Introduction

Since 2022 the Institute for Social Justice (ISJ) has been running the Community Research Grant (CRG) programme. This programme runs by inviting voluntary, charity and social enterprise (VCSE) organisations to propose research they would welcome support in undertaking. The ISJ matches these proposals with York St John University (YSJU) academics who then conduct a collaborative research project.

Between September 2022 and July 2025, the ISJ has funded a total of 30 projects, investing £245,000 in community-engaged research. Over this time there has been a lot of learning about social justice research collaborations between VCSE organisations and academics at YSJU.

This report aims to share some of these learnings with the YSJU executive board, other University members interested in understanding in more detail the YSJU's social impact and civic work, and the wider range of Yorkshire and Humber academic policy engagement networks. The report is timely given the commitment of YSJU to develop its social impact mission, while also contributing to a decade long movement in across the HEI sector in support of a more democratic research culture in the United Kingdom.

The report starts by presenting a brief context in which the CRG programme is embedded. Next, a descriptive picture of the 30 projects that have received funding is presented. This is followed by a discussion of how the ISJ's procedures and strategy have changed in the last four years and by the challenges the ISJ faces in becoming an intermediary both between VCSE organisations and YSJU and between the University and external stakeholders. Finally, initial reflections are presented that illustrate how the CRG programme is a component within a broader ecosystem of structures and relationships needed to achieve social change.

Section 1. Methodology

To gauge the learnings about the CRG programme a learning history guided the methodology behind this report. These learnings will help improve the programme's impact and effectiveness of collaborations between academics and (small) VCSE organisations. The ISJ expects the learnings to inform an agenda of *actionable change* within the CRG programme and University more widely to enhance the empowerment of the VCSE sector when researching issues on social justice.

A learning history is a research action approach that aims to develop insights of actionable change within organisations (Roth and Bradbury, 2008). Through analysing history, organisational awareness, learning and preferred action are sought.

A learning history approach uses different stakeholders' views to contribute to the reflexivity and learning of the process. The first stage of data collection consisted of 18 semi-structured interviews conducted in 2025 with 11 academics and seven VCSE partners awarded a CRG. Collectively, interviewees represented 12 different

CRG projects across three different cohorts of funding. The main findings are summarised in Section 4; for more details see full report Guarneros-Meza and Reason, 2025.

The ISJ also collected feedback from the ISJ's steering group and organised an online consultation in January 2026 asking academics and VCSE partners to comment on the findings that the interview report provided. A documentary review was carried out including the 2023 CRG evaluation, CRG end-of-project reports and blogs and podcasts of CRG projects not interviewed. Finally, ISJ staff auto-ethnographic notes were taken between February and November 2025, which included observations about reflexive discussions, decisions, concerns and challenges raised by ISJ staff and CRG awardees.

Section 2. The CRG programme within the wider university-VCSE sector nexus

The CRG programme is an initiative that combines the YSJ's civic role and social justice mission alongside the University's objective for research excellence. At present, the CRG programme has a lower connection to YSJ's teaching and learning activities. The programme aligns with and underpins the YSJ's social impact strategy, which envisages, that through the University's excellent education and research, a catalyst for change will create a fair future (<https://www.yorks.ac.uk/about/university-for-social-impact-strategy>).

The YSJ social impact strategy sits within a broader trend in higher education promoting the concept of the civic university. Universities UK (UUK) defines civic 'as the actions a university takes to support, serve and work with local communities.' (UUK, n/d:1) This work is public centred and is generally implemented through partnership working with local people and organisations.

UUK underlines that the impact of universities is multi-dimensional. Universities' impact can reach the economy, health and wellbeing, culture, environment, social and community issues and local and regional government decisions (ibid). Accordingly, the CRG programme is one of the various initiatives YSJ carries out to support regional and local VCSE organisations serving community needs.

The CRG programme also contributes to YSJ's research and knowledge exchange performance directed by the Research Excellence (REF) and Knowledge Exchange (KEF) national frameworks. Respectively, each of these frameworks, measures the quantity and quality of universities' research outputs, impact and environment; and the universities' work with businesses, community and the public to create understanding and utilisation of knowledge.

As discussed in Section 3, the research funded by the CRG programme can accelerate the impact towards VCSE organisations and the beneficiaries of their services. Especially, the projects which receive a CRG follow-on grant are developing tangible contributions that involve demonstrable benefits. YSJ anticipates that these CRG projects will form part of the narratives included in at

least five 2029 REF impact case studies submitted by YSJU. In addition, academics will develop research outputs, also submitted to REF, developed from the CRG research.

The CRG programme and community research

As a result of the 2018-19 Civic University Commission set by the UUK, further initiatives promoting and implementing the civic university concept have emerged through the Civic Universities Networks and National Civic Impact Accelerator. Through these networks a plethora of good practice has been published and exchanged: from case studies, toolkits and guides.

In particular, the development of best practice in ‘community research’ is where the CRG programme fits within this wider context. Although the YSJU has not participated actively in these specific networks, it is immersed within this national trend through the CRG programme and through sharing our approach at symposia (including at Leeds Beckett, Leeds, Surrey and Birmingham universities). The programme was inspired by the model followed by the Collaborate Fund, ran by the Centre for Cultural Value, at the University of Leeds. It has also learned from other contemporary programmes promoting community research, such as the Ideas Fund, led by British Science Association and funded by the Wellcome Trust and the Communities Innovating Yorkshire fund, led by Yorkshire and Humber Policy Innovation Partnership (YPIP). The CRG programme therefore sits within a context of innovations in research grant funding. However, it is distinct in the extent to which it is embedded within the ISJ practice, its duration and its breadth of disciplinary/contextual engagement.

In 2025, through the Co-Pro Futures Inquiry (Perry et al., 2024), efforts to bring together good practice on community research, with an emphasis on co-production, begun to be coordinated across researchers from over 100 UK universities, UKRI funders, policy partners and infrastructure organisations. The discussions covered by this inquiry have been helpful in developing a more critical approach to the power inequalities between universities and communities. This is relevant for the CRG programme, which aims to empower communities through a social justice lens, giving them greater control over the design and delivery of research and knowledge creation.

Through the everyday practice of community research in higher education, both community and academic researchers have acknowledged power inequalities that seem to be recurrent in community research collaborations between universities and VCSE organisations and groups. These inequalities have been identified around organisational resources, research ethics and outputs-metrics (Perry et al., 2024; Ideas Fund Hull, 2023).

In rebalancing power between academics and communities, The Ideas Fund developed an impact framework (2024) that delineates four dimensions of outcomes at four different levels. The levels are: community, practitioners, organisations and wider socio-political context. The outcome dimensions are: motivations and behaviours, relationships, capabilities and practices, and infrastructures (resources

and networks). These outcomes across the four levels form an ecosystem that comprises the different responsibilities necessary to rebalance power between universities and communities.

The learning history of the CRG programme has found the Ideas Fund framework useful, because as Section 7 shows, in doing community research, there is a need to target a network of people, processes and resources beyond a university level in order to rebalance the power relations between communities and academics. Transforming social realities with a sense of social justice does not depend on a single individual or research partnership, but on the different parts of a broader organisational ecosystem.

Section 3. A closer picture of the CRG programme and its projects

Between September 2022 and July 2025, a total of £245,000 was invested in 30 CRG projects (Table 3.1); on average six projects per year, granting up to £10,000 to cover research costs. Between 2024 and 2025, five of these 30 projects applied for a second year of funding, capped at an average of £6,000. The follow-on grants aim to consolidate research impact, understood as a positive change for the VCSE organisation or its beneficiaries. These figures do not represent the full value of the CRG programme as it does not include the time of ISJ researchers directly working on projects or in project management support. Neither does it include the in-kind contribution of time and resources from VCSE partners.

In addition to the number of funded projects, it is worth noting the increase in number of expressions of interest from VCSE organisations over the years. This can be partly a result of the increasing reputation of the CRG programme and partly a growing interest from the VCSE sector to collaborate with academia. It also reflects the growing recognition of the need for cross-sector collaboration to address urgent and systemic social challenges.

Table 3.1. CRG projects by year

	No of VCSE applications	CRG projects	Follow-on CRGs	Total
2022-2023	12	6	NA	6
2023-2024	29	8	NA	8
2024-2025	25	6	3	9
2025-2026	37	5	2	7
Subtotal	103	25	5	30
2026-2027	58	4	1	5
Total	161	29	6	35

The themes that the CRG projects have focused on over the years are listed in Table 3.2.

Table 3.2: Themes of CRG projects¹

Addiction recovery	Local sustainability	Community tourism
Heritage engagement	Asylum seeker & refugee services	Lived experience advocacy
Anti-racism advocacy	Youth music & ethnic diversity	Older people support
Disability access	Youth participation in education & environment	Arts & creativity in schools
Health inequalities	Neurodiversity & institutions	Decolonisation of British theatre
Prevention of sexual harm & domestic abuse	Men suicide prevention	African identity & young people

Up until September 2025, these projects have involved 25 different VCSE organisations, the majority registered as charities, but also including community incorporated companies and grassroots groups. In the year 2023-24, 84% of these 25 organisations received an annual income between £3,000 and £900,000; 28% had an income of less than £50,000. This latter level of income is considered in the VCSE literature as a very small (micro) organisation (Dayson et al., 2018), generally more vulnerable to high turnover of staff and facing funding/financial insecurity.

As Figure 3.1 shows this level of annual income contrasts strikingly with YSJU annual income, which in 2023-24 was over 200 times more (£110 million)² against the 28% of VCSEs mentioned above.

Figure 3.2 shows almost half of these organisations (12 out of 25) reach users or beneficiaries outside the City of York, including market towns in North Yorkshire as well as cities such as Leeds, Bradford and Sheffield. Three of these organisations (National Association for Able Children in Education, Neurodiversity Connect and Healthwatch Yorkshire) have a national presence but have had a particular focus on Yorkshire during the research developed by the grant. Given YSJU London campus, one of these grants has been given to True Cadence, located in Barking and Dagenham borough.

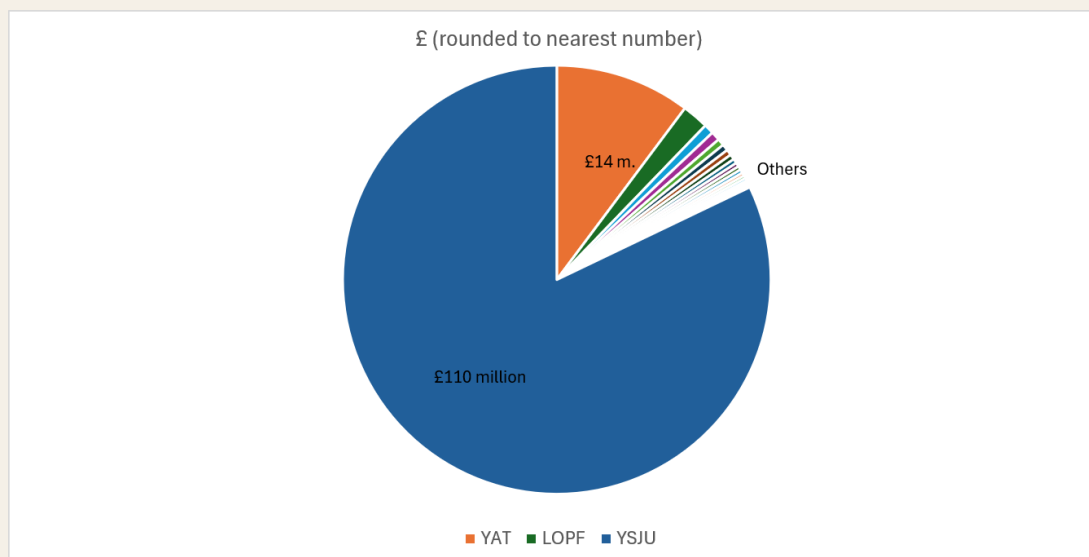
¹ The following link provides past and current lists of CRG projects:

<https://www.yorks.ac.uk/research/institute-for-social-justice/community-research-grants/>

² See YSJU Annual Report and Financial Statements 2023-24 -

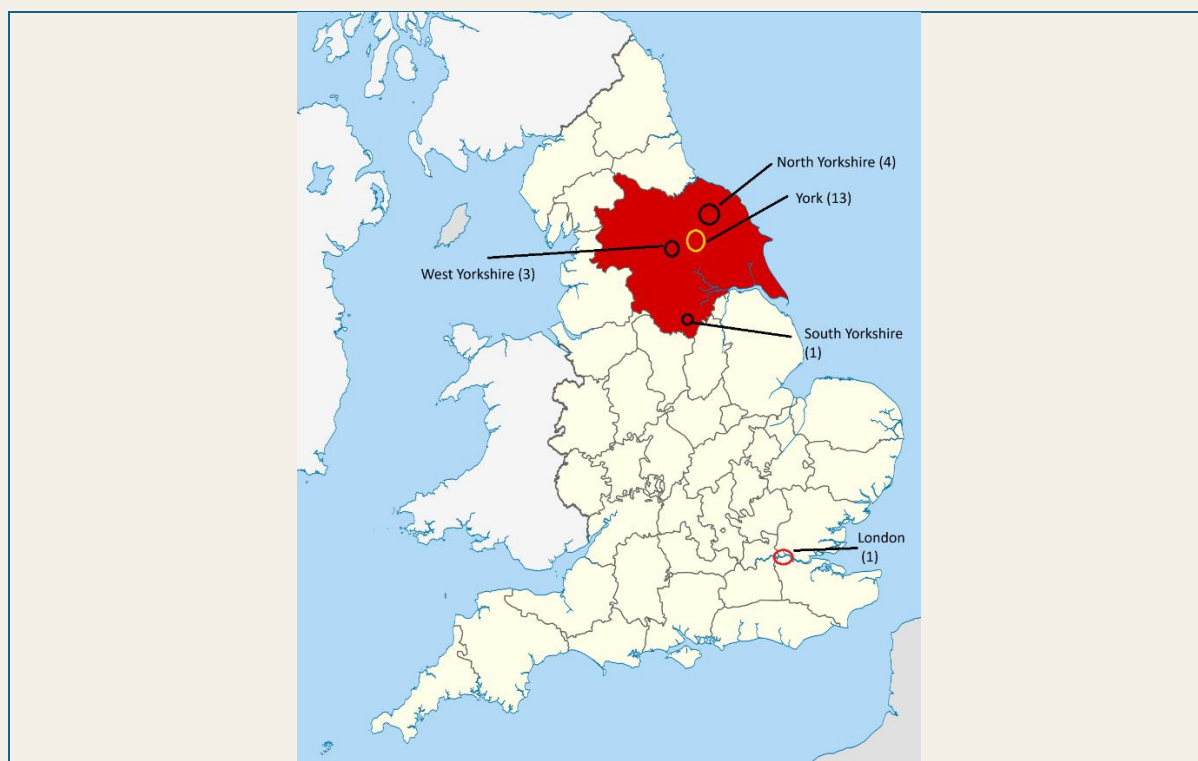
https://www.yorks.ac.uk/media/content-assets/about/documents/annual_report_and_financial_statements_2023-24.pdf

Figure 3.1. Proportional annual income differences: VCSEs and YSJU, 2024



Data obtained from Charity Commission and Companies House, August 2025.

Figure 3.2. Geographical reach of CRGs (2022-2025)



One of the immediate outcomes that CRG teams achieve or are quite keen to achieve is new funding to continue building on the project that the initial CRG funded. Up until August 2025 and according to the ISJ records, the total number of bids in preparation and submitted by CRG projects is as follows:

Table. 3.3. Bids developed by CRGs

Total of CRG projects seeking new funding	11
Bids submitted/under development to external funders	12
CRG projects securing external funding	3
Secured CRG follow-on funding	5

Twelve bids to external funders by seven different projects were submitted or were under development. The external funding secured corresponds to three CRG projects that amounted a total of £174,184. We recognise that this does not capture additional funding achieved by VCSE organisations not in direct partnership with VCSE but drawing on the insights developed through the research. Equally, YSJU researchers have successfully secured additional funding based upon CRG research, but not with the original VCSE partner.

Up until August 2025, four of the five projects which received CRG follow-on funding will contribute to the YSJU's REF-2029 impact case studies, covering topics such as: men's mental health; neurodiversity affirming practices; educational attainment leadership; and sustainable tourism. Two more projects, which did not receive follow-on funding, may be part of other impact case studies, covering themes such as economic fairer futures and sexual violence.

As impact takes time to develop and record, the research impact that CRG projects have upon VCSE organisations and/or their beneficiaries is not always apparent at the end of the grant. Specifically, projects that receive follow-on funding, supported because they are most likely to have or are already having impact, report positive changes, as listed in Table 3.4.

The ISJ is keen for CRG teams to maintain a relationship after the grant ends. In this same period and according to the ISJ records, at least 61% (14 out of 23) of CRG projects have maintained a relationship. This has taken different forms: from securing new grants, to building upon the research project, to creating a new activity or initiative with the same academic team or creating new relationships with other academics or professional services at university level. Developing more sustainable relationships with the University can contribute to CRG research having more impact.

Table 3.4 Benefits achieved by CRG projects receiving follow-on funding from 2024-25

CRG project	Change achieved
Men's suicide prevention impact and evaluation project, with Menfulness	Reduced cases of attempted suicide in York group; and expansion of the service model to Scarborough
Community Led Tourism, with Good Organisation	The creation of Community Tourism UK – a network of community-led tourism resident groups and organisations
Engaging lived experience in VCSE activity, with Up for Yorkshire	Embeddedness of live experience in the provision of social services in Selby
Inclusive Neurodiverse Campuses (Project INC), with Spectrum First Education	Implementation of research findings through staff training and creation of living lab promoting awareness of neurodivergent needs on YSJU campus; and opportunity to begin a community incorporated company
In their own words: removing barriers for more able disadvantaged students in secondary schools, with National Association for Able Children in Education	Implementation of research findings through teacher training and pupil higher expected progress in learning

CRG projects are not exempted from risk. A few have reported less successful experiences due to multiple factors. At times some VCSE partners prove resistant to the innovative approaches that this type of project involves. Other projects' limits on success occur when partnerships struggle due to interpersonal or management challenges, through time constraints, or through disengagement in the research and learning process. Finally, the precarity that both the academic sector, but primordially that the VCSE sector faces, puts resource constraints that hinder the development of the partnership (see Section 4). A specific intention of the CRG programme, however, is to enable and accept a level of risk in order to develop new partnerships and innovative new practice. The ISJ has become increasingly aware of how to manage and support projects to mitigating against these risks across the project timeframe from application to delivery.

Section 4. CRG projects: The research partnership level

The first phase of the learning history comprised 18 semi-structured interviews with VCSE partners and academics awarded a CRG between 2022 and 2024. The conversations addressed the quality and learnings of the research partnerships.

This section presents the main findings, structured throughout four themes: emotions and ethos; relationships, understanding and learning; networks of power; and stages of impact. For detailed findings read the interim report (Guarneros-Meza and Reason, 2025).

Emotions and ethos

CRG projects entail emotional and affective experiences of conducting research. Emotions and ethos are considered important to understand incentives to collaboration as well as the empathies and solidarities behind CRGs.

Interviewees underlined how CRG projects elicit strong emotions, from excitement and joy at the beginning of the research, to disempowerment and sadness when expectations are not managed well, to frustration, anxiety and tiredness as everyday processes of managing research emerge.

Academics in CRGs projects are aware that their research takes place in a broader culture which places emphasis on delivery of academic outcomes and measurement within REF. These can add to the anxiety and emotional stress of academics. To help minimise this level of stress, the ISJ welcomes alternative forms of success that find value at other levels of research commitment as long as they propose an ethical basis for action promoting social justice. However, because the ISJ also operates within the wider REF culture, there are limits to the change in the narrative around power relationships in academic metrics. In great part because the paradigm change required rests within the broader ecosystem shaping community research in higher education.

Interviewees underlined that holding the same professional and personal interests are drivers that work in building a positive partnership during a CRG project. However, the ways in which a project is managed can undermine the quality of the partnership, despite holding a same ethos between VCSE partners and academics.

A point in the findings that needs further exploration is the extent to which factors such as gender, age, class or race increase the likelihood of developing successful collaborations, something that both academics and VCSE partners were less forthcoming to address during their collaborations.

Relationships, learning, understanding

The interviews showed a sequence of stages involved in the collaboration between academics and VCSE partners. First, relationships are built; as these relationships develop an understanding of individuals' and organisations' backgrounds and cultures begins. Finally, as this understanding is assimilated, new learning and knowledge are created.

CRG projects involve a continuous negotiation between partners. This has been an important lesson for academics who have learned to compromise and be humbler in their approaches, by working in less structured ways and welcoming flexibility and uncertainty in building project outputs.

Both academics and VCSE partners face time constraints, but a more nuanced understanding of the kind or quality of time required (i.e. personal or professional) was not unpacked by the data. The majority of the comments underline that (small) VCSE partners are more exposed to having constraints in time because of few different reasons. For example, other commitments with statutory agencies or regulatory responsibilities, which take priority over the CRG project; staff having higher exposure to short-term contracts; and/or VCSE partners' work being heavily dependent on volunteering. These limitations were perceived as detrimental to projects aiming to do co-productive research.³

The CRGs provide opportunities for academics to learn new methods, obtain new theoretical insights, and learn about new funding contexts. In a few instances, CRGs have been the first funded projects received by academics, helping them to consolidate their careers. In parallel, VCSE partners learn new methods/approaches that enrich service provision and help structure their organisations' operations or governance.

VCSE partners also learn to be more strategic with the benefits of research, especially in making the research more applicable to what the VCSE organisation wants to discover about itself or the services it provides. It could be said that the CRG programme helps VCSE partners to be more strategic with this research funding. However, in most cases (small) VCSE partners learned this after the CRG funding ended. More reflection is needed to maximise this learning at the outset rather than at the end of the project. The consultation that followed the interview findings report underlined the need of more relevant training or resources at the outset to alert VCSE partners on this disadvantage.

Networks of power

CRG projects involve unequal and complex power relationships between academic and VCSE partners. The interviews show that there are tiers of power, structured either by individuals' actions or decisions as well as their organisations' policies and levels of income.

There is a general sense that YSJU as an institution holds the dominant role in the partnership with VCSEs as it holds the funding and establishes other administrative procedures. As a bigger partner, YSJU and its (financial, budgetary) structures are perceived as inflexible, which contribute to the lack of responsiveness to small VCSEs' needs. However, academics can also feel disempowered against the University's own processes and policies, they can feel stretched between partners

³ Although defined differently by disciplines (Bandola-Gill et al., 2023), co-production generally involves VCSE partners and their beneficiaries in the design or development of research, alongside aspirations to empower non-academic researchers.

and YSJU. As discussed in Section 5, this tension can be minimised through the ISJ enabling role.

Despite the power differences, VCSE partners have been able to challenge the way academics work or approach in a more levelled way the research grant. Through the discretion of CRG teams, there have been ways of navigating the University's structures through open conversations and negotiations that team members hold. This is possible in great part because of the trust developed between partners and the ISJ. In contrast to academics, VCSE partners can hold power in other ways that are non-financial, for example, when, experience, age and gender differences play in favour of VCSE partners, or by withholding information about its own internal politics.

Stages of impact

The interview data shows that there are different stages in which CRGs can contribute to impact building. Academic interviewees mentioned the unrealistic goal of achieving impact within the 10-month period CRGs last. Therefore, building impact requires input from the wider CRG community or YSJU to help relationships outlast the grant period. For example, by building partnerships with multiple points of connection with YSJU beyond the remit of the CRG.

Over time, the ISJ has recognised this limited timeframe, hence it has positioned more clearly CRGs as 'seed funding' or starting points for longer term and future impact. As explained in the next section, the ISJ has begun to be more proactive in supporting CRGs teams with public engagement and in ensuring the availability of future CRG funding. Interview findings also revealed that CRG impact can also include changes adopted by ISJ practices and YSJU research ethics procedures.

Section 5. The ISJ level: Changes in promoting and managing CRGs

The CRG programme has gone through a gradual development, which the learning history synthesised in three stages: initiation, consolidation and developmental, as summarised in Figure 5.1.

Figure 5.1. CRG programme development over time

Initiation stage		Consolidation stage		Developmental stage		
First CRGs	Second CRGs	Third CRGs	First continuation grants introduced	Fourth CRGs	Community Research in Practice event	Fifth CRGs, with SHARC
Consultancy report	Annual CRG workshops introduced			VCSE partners invited to evaluation panel	Emphasis on Co-production	Approaching public stakeholders
2022	2023	2024		2025		2026

In the **initiation stage**, Carsis Consultancy evaluated the first year of the CRG scheme.⁴ The consultants' recommendations for its future development centred on four streams (2023: 11), which the ISJ has addressed and developed over time.

1. **Empowering researchers with enhanced support.** Consultants found that YSJU academics obtain new administrative and operational responsibilities in running the CRG projects. As a result, the ISJ has ensured that the responsibilities of two project managers provide support to projects through one-to-one sessions to tackle financial, procurement and marketing processes. This support has improved the signposting for academics in understanding and using the University's procedures. In this sense the ISJ has played an enabling role to maintain smoother relationships between partners in dealing with the University's financial and operational procedures, while being responsive to VCSE partners' needs to develop greater voice in the management of the research project.
2. **Recognition of the limits of the VCSE sector.** Consultants found that YSJU academics tended to over-rely on the social capital of VCSE partners, specifically of volunteers or research participants involved in the projects. This includes, although is not limited to the lack of financial recognition for their work, experience and networks. In the **consolidation stage**, the ISJ began to introduce more flexibility for CRGs to cover time costs of VCSE partners, especially as co-productive research has been pursued by different projects. Initially, CRG projects dedicated most of the staff costs to research assistants recruited by the University. Over time, through the learning of CRG projects, small lump sums of money have been transferred to VCSE organisations to streamline the daily operational costs of a project. These decisions have helped to promote the ownership and control of the project by VCSE partners as well as balancing more the power relationships between YSJU and VCSE organisations.

For people who participate as community researchers, YSJU uses vouchers (i.e. Love2shop) as a way of compensating for their time. CRG teams have found that vouchers can be problematic in either being constrained to the suppliers that the voucher includes or inadequate for some participants whose English is not their first language or depend on state benefit allowances. In the latter cases, vouchers are declined by participants when they foresee that access to state benefits will be lost or fear their tax declarations will become more difficult.

Other than providing detailed guidelines and videos on how to redeem vouchers, the ISJ and YSJU have provided limited support in countering this challenge, in great part because this is a systemic regulation set by government. However, as co-production projects become more frequent, CRG teams and the ISJ are finding ways to better navigate these procedures. For example, transferring lump sums of money to VCSE organisations at specific points in time to avoid detriment of state allowances to research participants. In exceptional cases these payments have cut across the University's financial years. However, the

⁴ The full Carsis report can be found on this [link](#).

challenge is that these cases are driven by discretion rather than becoming an established and transparent administrative practice.

3. **Ensuring equitable use of institutional resources.** Consultants explored how different partners in CRG projects were investing different kinds of resources (i.e. time, knowledge, in-kind, cash, reputation). These resources were perceived and valued differently, because some processes of the University were unclear or inaccessible to VCSE partners.

As a result, the ISJ has been interested in supporting ways of opening up and sharing institutional resources and processes. Within the **developmental stage** of the ISJ, this has happened in a threefold way. First, through the University's 'Introduction to Community Research Methods' module, which is designed to support community co-researchers in developing the skills needed to design and carry out research projects. From 2026-27, the module will be offered to VCSE partners involved in CRGs.⁵

Second, with the aim of increasing the VCSE sector's voice in the CRG awarding process, the ISJ began to invite VCSE partners -awarded previously with a grant-to become part of the two-stage reviewing process. This role is remunerated with an honorarium.

Finally, in coordination with the University's ethics committees the ISJ has supported new approaches that explore more flexibility in the ethics approval of projects which include co-productive research. The co-productive nature of several CRG projects has benefited from this degree of flexibility, required when dealing with unpredictable choices made by community co-researchers.

4. **Planning for sustainability.** Consultants advised to proactively plan for some sustainability measures beyond the initial phase of future CRG projects. In its **consolidation stage**, the ISJ begun sponsoring follow-on grants for projects which have evidenced a clear pathway to impact for beneficiaries, partner organisations or broader local policy contexts. As of August 2025, five projects have been granted an average of £6,000 each for an additional year to consolidate more sustainable relationships.

Additionally, the ISJ has enhanced its approach to supporting the relationship building between VCSE partners and academics by introducing a series of online drop-in sessions, one of them targeting VCSE partners only. This space invites reflection on collaboration and co-production. It also offers partners to familiarise more with the University's culture. It is also an opportunity to gauge any potential conflict in the partnership, and as 2029 REF approaches, invite questions on the meaning of impact. However, in the last two years a third or less of VCSE

⁵ The module is delivered in collaboration with the Converge Evaluation and Research Team (CERT), a team of researchers with lived experience of mental health challenges, and is designed to be accessible to co-researchers with all levels of experience.

partners attended these sessions, partly because it is an optional opportunity and as underlined in Section 4, partners are time-stretched.

From 2024 an annual CRG workshop is organised, in which only projects in each year's cohort are invited to hear what each other is doing and exchange learnings and views on impact, collaboration and co-production. In autumn 2025, the first 'Community Research in Practice' event invited all cohorts of CRG projects to share learnings of collaborative research accumulated over a four-year period to begin building a sense of collectiveness. The discussion led to five [practical principles](#) that seek to rebalance power differences, minimise research extraction, and enable more empowering research collaborations in community research.

As part of the **developmental stage**, the ISJ is exploring and piloting new ways to support CRG teams to find new opportunities of interaction with the public and voluntary sectors. This support can potentially take different forms: a) coaching for CRG teams to develop outputs that are meaningful to different stakeholders; b) organising policy-briefing events where a group of CRG teams present their findings to a wider stakeholder audience; and c) expanding or sharing the CRG programme with other research institutes in the University to broaden the impact of community research beyond social justice issues. This latter form began in spring 2026 in collaboration with the Institute for Health and Care Improvement (IHCI) and the Scarborough Coastal Health and Care Research Collaborative (SHARC), part of the NHS York and Scarborough Teaching Hospitals.

Section 6. New challenges and constraints

The previous section shows how the ISJ has aimed at responding better to CRG projects' needs for developing their research, supporting them in navigating the YSJU's policies and procedures and drawing out impacts. This development has also underlined the need for the ISJ to communicate the learnings it has been accumulating through the CRG programme with the VCSE sector and with other parts of the University. In other words, the ISJ is not only playing a role as facilitator or enabler between YSJ academics and their VCSE partners, but also as an intermediary among other divisions in YSJU and between the whole of the academic and VCSE sectors. In carving this role, the ISJ aims to contribute to the practice of the 'universities for social justice' aspiration (Meredith, 2024).

The literature on organisational intermediation (Slitine et al., 2024; Soberon et al., 2022; Jones et al., 2019) underlines that in partnership working or collaborative projects that encompass a network of partners across different sectors, the intermediary – which can be one or more organisations – does not play a static role. Instead, intermediaries are dynamic and seek innovation to enable a culture of collaboration. Innovation is sought through a series of tactics that combine **communications, coordination and strategy**. These tactics are important for the ISJ, which in promoting social justice, seeks to address power differences and find ways to empower societal groups and organisations that have historically been marginalised in promoting socio-economic, cultural, or political change.

Under **communication** tactics, it is common to find sharing of information and mediation activities that intermediaries generally carry out (Slitine et al., 2024). Over the years, the ISJ has been mediating relationships between academics and VCSE partners to ensure that the grants awarded reflect a fair distribution of resources or allow changes to the resource allocation after the project started. As part of communications, events and workshops have also been organised to discuss conceptual or methodological approaches to research. However, as discussed below, more needs to be done.

One of the challenges for some CRG projects is that not all academics are well aware of the precarity that the VCSE sector faces in terms of funding, which affects the number of staff, staff time and their level of commitment or accentuates the differences with the University's organisational culture. This precarity initially led some CRG projects to heavily fund what is perceived as the 'academic' side of the project. As co-productive research has become more common over time, this bias has diminished in favour of VCSE partners. The learning history consultation underlined that more targeted introductory training for academics about how VCSE organisations are often governed and funded is needed. However, more recent peer-to-peer conversations stress that the overall resource of the CRGs should be seen holistically in their addition of resource and capacity for VCSEs, regardless of whose time is bought out, while acknowledging a mutually with different benefits for partners.

Conversely, more information is needed to help VCSE partners – especially if they have not engaged with academic research before - to better understand the University's ethical, administrative and financial procedures. In many cases these procedures are perceived by VCSE partners as slow and cumbersome, and from which their academic partners cannot break free. A few VCSE partners have suggested for information about the University's culture to be offered at the same time that the CRG annual call is launched. These observations underline a broader responsibility for the ISJ in bringing two different sectors closer together through more timely, creative and adequate information on what community research involves to avoid unidirectional decisions. More work is needed to develop spaces where languages and cultures of the different sectors merge or are translated to ensure that interpretations are the same or meaning-creation is developed in tandem.

Under **coordination**, the promotion of relational processes, building connections and trust are common to find within the role of intermediaries (Slitine et al., 2024). It is unsurprising that the organisational design of the CRG programme is biased towards the culture of the University given that it was the YSJU which initiated the programme. Hence, a challenge for the ISJ is not only to create opportunities and spaces in which the relationship is more balanced, but also that the change in processes and practices 'stick' in the ISJ-YSJU's daily operations (Clarke et al., 2018).

Section 5 mentioned that in the developmental stage, the ISJ began inviting VCSE organisations into the CRG-application review panel. However, ISJ staff noticed

minor steps in the process that did not bear in mind VCSE partners. For example, when not informing VCSE reviewers about the academic shortlisting process (second stage of the application process) until a couple of weeks' later. Although this did not undermine the VCSE partners' voices or decisions, it shows how daily practices can overlook the presence of VCSE partners in activities that are strongly academically led. This example shows that this daily inclusion is a type of change that takes time to internalise and become habit. More needs to be done to ensure that the multitude of micro moments, which are made more quickly and casually in people's daily practice, align to the ethically conscious strategic decisions of the ISJ in developing more just procedural approaches.

Although the ISJ could be more consistent in coordinating its own practice, its intermediary role has shaped other areas of the University. Elements of the CRG ethos are now embedded in the YSJU's research strategy, knowledge exchange for external funding rules, and as mentioned in previous sections in some ethics processes and new funding initiatives such IHCI-SHARC.

Under **strategy**, intermediaries are key in shaping the narrative of collaboration. This is achieved through harmonising interests between partners and legitimising decisions (Jones et al., 2019; Slitine et al., 2024). It is through these processes that power differences between universities and VCSE organisations become more palpable and are more easily identifiable when the party with more resources (university) makes a positive or negative change impacting the weaker counterpart (small VCSE organisations).

A case in point has been the adoption of co-production in the narrative of the ISJ in promoting the CRG programme. According to an external stakeholder with a good understanding of the CRG programme, co-productive research is more appealing to VCSE organisations "that are more interested in delivering their mission than on research in-and-of itself" (informal chat, April 2025). This has been confirmed by VCSE grantees attending the ISJ informal drop-ins, who are interested in bringing forth the voices of under-represented people and validate them in the evidence created by the CRG project. For small VCSE partners this is important as funders tend to overlook evidence based on lived experience vis-à-vis scientific evidence. Despite this advantage, small VCSE partners may not want to engage with this research because of the time 'burden' that co-production involves.

The shift towards co-production is helping the ISJ to raise awareness about the cultural stereotype of data extraction engrained in academic hierarchy. This awareness raising can be observed in the ['community in research' principles](#) published by the ISJ in November 2025. Through this type of event the ISJ legitimises the value of co-production. Although the principles have been perceived as good practice, the example shows how easily things can be turned around if the ISJ were to change the direction of the narrative favouring only the interests of the academy.

As discussed in the next section, as long as VCSE organisations carry on struggling with funding to deliver their mission, the ISJ-YSJU in particular -and universities more generally- will hold the dominant role within collaborative relationships.

Continuous reflexion of social justice values and critical feedback from VCSE partners seem to be the main way forward to avoid a negative change in the narrative from happening. Therefore, spaces for this type of feedback need to be created and maintained in ways that build value not just for the ISJ-YSJU but also for the VCSE sector.

Section 7: Towards an intermediation with external stakeholders in promoting community research

A fourth tactic that intermediaries enact, which complements the three others mentioned in the previous section, is that of **resource mobilisation** (Slitine et al., 2024). Intermediaries are in advantageous positions to scan the different resources that multiple partners hold. The intermediary role seeks to negotiate with partners to redistribute or complement resources between each other. These resources include financial as well as human or in kind.

The learning history has revealed that engaging with external stakeholders such as VCSE infrastructure organisations and public agencies can create innovative intersectoral funding promoting community research. Operating across sectors to address systemic and structural social challenges allows projects to draw upon multiple different kinds of expertise and knowledge, held across a diversity of stakeholders. Other stakeholders such as regional networks of universities could help create additional funding opportunities, expand capacity and training for VCSE partners and help to develop small VCSE partners' voice in policymaking.

As mentioned previously, the ISJ has been effective at mobilising resources within YSJU by securing funding to maintain the CRG programme over time, engaging with the expertise, capacity and time of academics from all six schools, and liaising with different professional divisions within the University to unblock administrative processes. What has become more challenging is how to become an intermediary outside YSJU, either with other regional universities or the third and public sectors more broadly. The relationships between the University and all these types of external stakeholders exist, but coordination and communication are complex and not always regarding community research in social justice.

So, what would the benefits be if the ISJ developed this wider intermediary role with external stakeholders? The answer is centred on the creation of innovative intersectoral funding schemes to promote community research. The ISJ is well aware that CRG project teams recognise the rewards of working together; however, teams also learn during the process the limitations of the VCSE sector more broadly. In particular, the financial austerity that many organisations have encountered in the last decade has been a main disadvantage for research. Financial austerity has derived from the 2010 fiscal crisis to which English local councils have been subject. This decreased the number of commissions in the local public sector. Similarly, decreased funding from other national funders (such as Arts Council England) have accentuated the financial strain that the voluntary sector faces. Nevertheless, the demands for VCSE services have increased over this period.

The financial and capacity challenges the VCSE sector faces brings along other organisational issues. Generally, in small organisations it is common to find staff under short-term contracts, high staff turnover, high workloads and lack of work innovation as well as insufficient multi-year funding which hinders medium and long-term planning, and increased dependence on voluntary work. This combination of factors creates a climate of uncertainty that render research with academia challenging.

The structural limitations that VCSE partners face affects negatively co-productive research, because this type of research seeks partners to be heavily involved in the design, data collection, analysis, reporting and/or dissemination; all of which adds to everyday workloads. As a result, some CRG projects feel they have become commissioning projects in which the academics end up making all the decisions.

Against the grim context that VCSE partners face, some academics have asked what the role of the University is in situations like this. This question has made the ISJ more alert about the difficult financial environment of the VCSE sector. A way of partially overcoming this problem has been through the development of high levels of trust and communication between CRG team members and between academics and the ISJ. The former allows all team members to become more aware of the financial difficulties VCSE partners face in a timely manner allowing, in turn, opportunities to think of new alternative solutions. The latter allows those alternative options to become more realistic through the ISJ facilitating VCSE partners' participation in the research -for example by providing grant extensions or small pilot funding to develop full proposals. In other words, the ISJ is exploring how to become "more flexible, adaptive, supportive, [a] better institutional all[y]" with VCSE organisations (ISJ staff, September 2025).

Changing CRGs into multi-year awards may be a solution within the University, but this does not necessarily mobilise resources with external partners or sectors. More collaboration across regional universities or even across the public, private or third sectors can be a way forward. Pooling resources from multiple partners is indeed one of the primordial activities of an intermediary role. This has begun to happen albeit in a limited way within the CRG programme. For example, the match funding that Up for Yorkshire gave to the follow-on CRG project awarded by the ISJ in 2025-26. This shows a way in which the pooling of resources could be made with other local (infrastructure) organisations to fund smaller VCSE partners. Similarly, the resources mobilised and pooled through SHARC and IHCI (in Section 6) to do community research in health and wellbeing show the opportunities that can exist across sectors.

The intermediary role with external stakeholders will bring the ISJ into more scrutiny by other sectors. Hence it would be important to communicate with transparency the decisions taken. From informal conversations held with people working with or in the VCSE sector, the ISJ has learned that building a sense of collectiveness and candid communications about the limits and learnings of the CRG programme is a positive way to achieving the levels of transparency and trust required as an intermediary.

More broadly, the intermediary role of the ISJ could potentially find a niche within the efforts behind the devolution agenda in Yorkshire and the Humber. However, the work that Yorkshire and Humber Policy Engagement and Research Network (Y-PERN) has carried out to understand better the relationship between universities and strategic and local authorities around knowledge exchange focuses more on data generation and research-to-policy engagement (Bennett et al., 2026) than on pooling resources to enhance the capacities and capabilities of the VCSE sector.

In contrast, the work by YPIP and Ideas Fund-Hull have raised awareness about the difficulties that the VCSE sector faces in doing community research with academia, but by the end of 2027 both initiatives will come to an end. Therefore, a way forward for the ISJ/YSJU is either to push for this agenda via Y-PERN or create a group with those universities active in YPIP and Ideas Fund as well as regional infrastructure organisations to build upon the learnings and improve collaboration between VCSE and higher education sectors.

Such a group could address the structural barriers that VCSE organisations and their beneficiaries face when involved in community research in the region. For example, lobbying with certain government stakeholders about the difficulties that research participants face when receiving compensation while being subject to state benefits. Lobbying could also increase or create new training opportunities on research for communities and develop regional research capacities and capabilities in more coordinated ways. Addressing these types of issues have potential to slowly rebalance the structures of power between universities and VCSE partners if critical thinking on power relationships informs these broader initiatives. The ISJ, among others, could work as a champion or advocate in rebalancing power structures in the creation and operation of this higher tier network by creating new funding opportunities, by helping small VCSE partners secure funding, and by discussing with public sector partners the ways to bring marginalised voices and their research to the forth in policymaking.

Conclusions

Over the last four years, CRG projects have shown they have potential for delivering social change. In particular the projects that receive follow-on funding have shown more concrete outcomes, such as the consolidation of national community-led networks or increased wellbeing or educational attainment. The CRG programme has also worked as a vehicle for sustainable collaboration through funding that promotes public engagement of academics' work on social justice or that strengthens existing relationships among the University, academics and VCSE partners.

The CRG programme is enhancing the relationships between the YSJU and VCSE sector. This is in great part because of the personal relationships established between academics and VCSE partners, but also through the changes the ISJ has followed to be more responsive to VCSE partners' needs and feedback.

The CRG programme has worked as a vehicle to unpack the power relationships between academics and the University and between the University and VCSE partners. The main power differences have lain in the resources and size that the University holds against those held by most small VCSE partners. Financial resources have been the obvious arena in which these differences are found and which tend to be reflected against YSJU inflexible administrative procedures and, to a lesser extent, research ethics. Both latter aspects have been criticised as unresponsive to VCSE partners' organisational needs.

The role of academics in managing the partnership with VCSE partners is key to reduce some of these power differences. The ISJ's enabling role has also worked to smooth down misunderstandings and finding more flexible solutions within the University's processes. The main challenge that is yet to be addressed is how the discretion that the ISJ sometimes uses to facilitate more equal collaborations can also be translated into wider institutionalised ways of doing things within YSJU.

The enabling role that the ISJ plays between academics and the rest of the University, as well as the intermediary role it plays between the VCSE sector and other external stakeholders (other universities and public sector), are uncovering new challenges for the ISJ in tackling power differences. Some of these challenges the ISJ can solve on its own or in coordination with parts of YSJU. For example, turning new practices into daily organisational habits or communicating more systematically the learnings from the different organisational cultures between the University and VCSE sector. However, other challenges require further coordination and resource mobilisation with the wider regional ecosystem of universities and the public sector. A way forward is to begin building upon the networks built by Y-PERN and upon the learnings from YPIP and Ideas Fund on community research and its overlaps with social justice.

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