

# Research Protocol

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## **Protocol on research collaboration between community/activist groups and university staff and students on housing and planning issues (JustSpace.org.uk) 2018**

### **Context**

This draft document grows out of experiences of interactions between researchers and local action groups in London, and out of the strongly-felt need that these collaborations should be more extensive, but also that they should be more productive for both parties than they often are. While such collaborations can be very positive, there are pitfalls to be avoided. We offer some hints here for ensuring that there are good outcomes.

This document aims to encourage and assist in the formulation of research and fieldwork projects which answer to the needs of the whole society and in particular of economically weaker groups, whose experiences often have little impact on research agendas. In addition, as research and teaching are under increasing pressure to align with business interests, we felt it important to set out some alternative criteria for good research partnerships.

Relevant projects can range from major university research programmes through dissertations by individual students to field visits as well as class exercises which form part of the education and training of students in social sciences, engineering and built environment professions.

These suggestions are work in progress, initiated by some academics working with the Just Space Network on London Plans and with comments by some activist groups. It is aimed at researchers, students and community groups and tries to use language which will mean the same to all these users. Further comments can be read online and more contributions are welcome at the bottom (go to <https://justspace.org.uk/history/research-protocol/> if you are reading off-line)

### **The need for change**

Urban policy is increasingly driven by market forces, by the power of real estate and financial interests to influence governments and local authorities. This trend extends market forces into fields previously sheltered from them— social housing, recreational provision, elder care etc— and increases inequalities of income and wealth, undermines rights of local communities and underplays the importance of environmental protection and sustainability. These same forces which have so influenced urban policy increasingly also influence the content of research and of education. However universities and their students can often be (and should be) essential sources of critical and

challenging analysis and creative thinking and thus help widen public debate and develop alternatives.

Community and action groups are normally under-resourced in their engagements with local authority planning departments and developers and, while much expertise is to be found amongst activists and community members, there is often scope and need for input and support from researchers. This is especially the case with large scale and metropolitan-wide planning issues, where local knowledge is not always what is valued, but where a community perspective is still essential. The experience of the Just Space network with the London Plan Examination in Public process exemplifies this, where the need to develop wider-ranging and often technical responses to planning issues and to present more synthetic evidence offers an opening for supportive research interventions.

### **How to get the most from collaboration**

Citizen groups, campaign groups etc are almost always under-resourced. They normally depend on the unpaid labour of committed enthusiasts. Only in exceptional cases are they large enough and well enough resourced to have paid staff, and even then the staff tend to be over-stretched. Researchers should approach them bearing this very much in mind.

Researchers – staff or students: you need to prepare carefully before making approaches to community groups: read their web sites and publications to avoid wasting their time when you meet.

Consult carefully at the early stages in the formulation of research or dissertation topics – to minimise the risk that you are duplicating work that has already been done and to avoid projects which could inadvertently be damaging or unproductive for the groups you are working with.

When academics apply for research funding, there should be efforts to integrate community/action groups as research partners rather than merely viewing them as subjects of study. Non-academic research partners are something research councils and the EU are increasingly encouraging (eg. ESRC-DFID schemes) and this is a direction that needs to be explored and developed.

Many universities have funds set aside for 'community engagement', not just for external outreach but also for challenging new directions in policy and action-oriented research. Applying for this funding is still seen by many as something that you (university researchers) could indulge in only if you have time to spare in addition to your 'main research agenda' or if you want to make your research proposal more 'community friendly'. This shouldn't be the case. Instead, public engagement should be more integral to our research, and the Universities Funding Council for England monitors this as part of assessing staff research.

Community groups are usually extremely well informed on the issues they are engaging with, but not often familiar with the latest academic jargon. It is important to strike a good balance in the language and tone you adopt. In addition, it could be that research aims formulated in theoretical terms might need to be adjusted to the practical aims and concerns of collaborating groups. It is very good to be open to this: it will mean that your results are likely to challenge and extend knowledge, rather than just reproduce well-known academic debates. And it is certainly more likely that they will be more immediately useful to the groups you are working with. From the community perspective, it is also possible that new ideas and fresh perspectives will be most welcome. Working collaboratively, then, can be a space for innovative thinking and creative tension as well as practical support and impact.

Be sure to consult with groups and get their explicit consent before passing on information to other organisations you might be engaging with in the research project i.e. do be mindful of the politics of the situation and respect what you hear in confidence.

Also, be prepared to contribute time and effort to the group which might not directly feed into your own research process, but which reciprocates the contribution which the group are making to your personal research. Do the washing up & put the chairs away.

**Always make sure that the group(s) you cooperate with get copies of your findings / results. They should get them promptly and without having to pester you. They should at least have an electronic copy of what you produce and ideally paper copies as well because not everyone can cope with printing costs.**

If you are a university teacher seeking community group assistance or collaboration as part of student field trips or study projects, do budget for some money to support their input. You are diverting their resources and should compensate them in cash or in kind or both. (You may at least be able to make payments as room hire or lecturer fees.) And of course if there is a research or design product from the student work you should agree in advance with the students and the community group that the results will be made available to the group.

...and of course try and ensure that any project has valuable outcomes for the community group as well as for the students.

Community groups can make invaluable contributions to the education and training of the next generation by cooperating in these various ways. Some points to bear in mind when doing so are

Try and formulate what your group might be able to get from the relationship, for example useful survey or research results, technical support with software or mapping, knowledge of parallel campaigns or policy initiatives elsewhere in

the world, help in preparing plans, strategies and evidence, indirect access to research literature. [Note that most research publications are now available online but still often under the control of commercial publishers who charge high access fees, while university staff and students typically have free access.]

If you are asked to cooperate in student study projects or dissertations, do find out, and bear in mind, the timescale to which the student(s) are working: they may have to complete their work in just a few months. Alternatively, researchers working on a long term project over a few years might need to be alerted to forthcoming events or any urgent activities that you might need their assistance with, as other commitments might mean they are not always present.

Don't be shy about asking for something back —in money or in practical help— in exchange for your time and effort.

Do make sure that there is agreement in advance that you will receive at least electronic copies of the dissertation or reports or designs which the student(s) produce and will be free to make reasonable use of them in your own work. Other considerations

Most universities operate 'Ethics Policies' designed to protect the human subjects of research from breaches of confidentiality, hurt or embarrassment or other risks. Formal approvals may have to be obtained by university staff and students for their projects, especially if they involve any work with young people, vulnerable adults or very sensitive topics. An example can be seen at <http://ethics.grad.ucl.ac.uk/index.php>

Surveys of residents or businesses done on behalf of community groups are often designed partly to make contacts which can be further developed. The normal survey convention of promising confidentiality may thus have to be replaced by seeking explicit consent for names and contact details to be passed on, and to whom.

In some cases it might be desirable for a relationship to be formalised as "volunteering". Most universities have procedures and protocols to regulate volunteering arrangements, though they tend to presuppose that the volunteer student will be working in an organisation which is formalised with staff, policies, etc and where the 'task' can be precisely formulated and supervised. While these arrangements are not likely to be very relevant in the cases envisaged here, it may be helpful to bear them in mind. An example is <http://studentsunionucl.org/content/volunteering>

Visa issues may arise for students "volunteering" to work in/for other organisations since the British government's border control policies treat voluntary work rather like paid work – as incompatible with some visa conditions. Since, in our cases, students are not being lent, or lending

themselves, to other organisations as a kind of labour force, it may be better to describe their activity as 'extracurricular' study, which it is.

Sometimes universities arrange for a student to spend some time (typically weeks or months) working in a voluntary organisation as part of their education in a particular course..... These "internships" (a.k.a. placements — and the French terms *stage / stagiaire* are widely used elsewhere in Europe) can be very valuable for both parties. Some internships are paid, others unpaid.

The web site of the Just Space Network is <http://justspace.org.uk>  
This protocol is a working draft: please help improve it. Comment and debate below if you are reading online, Earlier discussions can be read on a now-mothballed web site at <http://wp.me/PL68t-g7>

This comes out of a project funded by UCL [Public Engagement Unit](#) supporting university cooperation with the [Just Space Network](#) of community/activist groups on London Planning, 2009-11 and subsequent revisions up to 2018.