

Co-production in regional academic policy engagement: developing optimal conditions



This report summarises some of the necessary ‘conditions’ to enable co-production in regional academic policy engagement.

It was produced by **CAPE** (Capabilities in Academic Policy Engagement) and the **Co-Production Collective** at UCL (University College London). It is based on a distillation of three online workshops, offline discussions and analysis from a mini survey with researchers and policy professionals from universities and regional authorities in England.

What is regional academic policy engagement?

Academic policy engagement is an umbrella term used to describe the underpinning infrastructure (e.g., people, processes, systems and structures) and activities that supports evidence-informed policy making. Workshops, placements, funding and training are just some of the ways through which universities and policy organisations can collaborate for the benefit of communities, businesses, and the wider environment. At a regional level, place-based challenges and regional policy organisations, such as local authorities and Mayoral combined authorities, are central to this agenda.¹

CAPE supports place-based academic policy engagement as a significant and emerging area of focus. The types of infrastructure that have been developed within ‘mainstream’ academic policy engagement - (e.g., with Westminster and Whitehall through the **Knowledge Exchange Unit** in UK parliament or the **Areas of Research Interest** documents) - are still taking shape at the regional level. This means that co-production – an already complex endeavour – is developing alongside and at the same time as newly formed and evolving practices, processes and governance arrangements.

¹ For explainers on:

- local government see <https://www.local.gov.uk/about/what-local-government>
- combined authorities and where they are geographically see <https://www.local.gov.uk/topics/devolution/devolution-online-hub/devolution-explained/combined-authorities>
- combined authorities with and without Mayors see <https://www.local.gov.uk/publications/devolution-deal-delivery#an-introduction-to-the-combined-authorities>

What is co-production?

Co-production in academic policy engagement is about bringing people together to collaborate and address complex policy challenges.

Co-production goes beyond collaborative design as it involves sharing power well (breaking down hierarchies), valuing the skills and knowledge of all those involved and offering value for all concerned.

Link to foundational articles and case studies:

[CAPE Collaboration Fund projects](#)

[Lessons from the CAPE Collaboration Fund](#)

[Co-Production Collective Pilot Projects Learning Report](#)

[Case study 1](#)

[Case study 2](#)

Co-production and regional academic policy engagement

There is no single model for co-production: it is shaped and determined by the partners and context in which it is taking place. In regional academic policy engagement, spatial and place-based characteristics, contextual challenges (e.g., trust, knowledge systems) and institutional factors (e.g., roles, incentives) may all be significant. Associated practices should follow an agile way of working that is based on a set of **principles**, underpinned by the **values** of co-production.

Purpose of this report

This report aims to provide a starting point for those interested in creating the conditions to apply the values and principles of co-production within **regional academic policy engagement**.

This report could be used to:

1. Support the development of funding applications that include elements of co-production in regional academic policy engagement.
2. Support more proactive engagement and strengthen relationships between universities and regional tiers of government.
3. Support individuals in research and policy organisations to consider how they can best progress co-production in their work.

What are the principles and values of co-production?

Values -

an ethos or standard of behaviour central to co-production

The **values central to co-production** are:



Being human

- Valuing diversity of knowledge, experience and perspective
- Building mutually beneficial relationships based on honesty and trust



Being inclusive

- Removing barriers to participation
- Recognising people's strengths and supporting their development



Being transparent

- Addressing power imbalances and hierarchies
- Sharing roles and responsibilities



Being challenging

- Continuous reflection, learning and improvement
- Embracing new ideas and ways of working

Principles -

a way of doing things derived from our learning, designed to help guide you when co-producing

The **key principles that underpin co-production** are:



- Build and maintain trust and equitable relationships



- Work towards sharing power and decision making equally



- Ensure all types of knowledge, skills, experience and voices are included, listened to and valued



- Maintain an ethos of reciprocal benefit and shared goals



- Embed reflective and reflexive practice² in the work

² **Reflective Practice** is where a person reflects on what they have learned and how they can apply it or learn from it. **Reflexive Practice** is where a person reflects on what they have learned and considers how the implications of their learnings can impact the broader context they work in.

As well as the key principles and values (mentioned above), it's important to bear in mind that co-production is:

- **Not a linear process** – you may hit hurdles, but working together, keeping values in mind and continuing to establish shared goals should help with finding a resolution.
- **Not defined in stages** – it is an ethos of working together that is woven through the make-up of any project or pieces of work, it permeates through all elements/stages, applying in different ways at different points.
- **Sometimes messy and not clear cut** – it is likely to involve cycles of engagement to identify needs as people move, conditions change, and politics comes in to play.
- **A complex methodology** – it is contingent on many different principles. It's okay to feel confused, this is part of the process to work through together.

Useful resources

The importance of this way of working is evidenced in the '[What is the Value of Co-Production?](#)' research project (2022)

[Co-Production Collective Resource Library](#) – a large collection of resources for co-production from journal articles to practical 'how to' guides

What was this project about?

"[T]here are difficulties with a model of academics supplying ready-formed answers and knowledge and 'transferring' them to government (regional, devolved or national) fully formed [...]. An ongoing process of co-production can help get into the space between the neat academic answer and the messy policy reality and lead to better responses."
Anonymous Survey Respondent, March 2023

CAPE and the Co-Production Collective convened three workshops over six months in 2022. The workshops included a range of university and policy actors all working at, or with an interest in, the intersection between regional and academic policy engagement. Participants had differing amounts of experience with co-production, which ranged from being part of one off workshops to co-produced networks to undertaking co-production projects as part of their academic policy engagement work. Workshops were supplemented by an online survey, working group discussions and desk-based research.

The questions under discussion were:

- Is co-production in academic policy engagement well understood and well regarded?
- Does regional academic policy engagement have specific challenges compared to other forms of engagement?
- How does working with limited and variable infrastructures and resources available within regions affect the possibilities for co-production?

- How can universities engage with regional authorities to co-produce locally relevant policies, improve processes for relationship building and build capacity for co-production?

See Annex 1 for further information on this project and the creation of this document.

Creating optimal conditions for co-production in regional academic policy engagement

The following conditions set out the foundational elements that are important for co-production within this context:



Condition 1: Ringfencing time for initial discussions

“Convening multi-stakeholder groups to first identify policy challenges and areas of mutual interest, spending time together in an open forum to get to know each other’s ways of working, preconceptions and concepts of success and failure working together through the lifecycle of a project or challenge, sharing learnings of the process as well as outcomes with peers to cascade approach and activity across region/s.” Anonymous Survey Respondent, March 2022

Before a project starts, everyone involved needs time to prioritise the necessary conditions for collaboration which include:

- Being open and transparent about yourself and taking time to understand others’ ways of working in order to find points of alignment.
 - It is important to agree ‘ways of working’ including how you will reflect individually and as a group and how this learning will get fed back into the development of the work.
- Inclusion² mapping – spend time, check your biases and ensure you go beyond the ‘usual suspects’, outlining people relevant to your work.
- Involve people and networks – take time to understand the roles people play within networks and how regional networks link to others.
- Build in time to understand the motivations of those you are involving – and consider what actions are necessary to link individual motivation with group collaboration. As circumstances change so to might motivations. Build time in, throughout the engagement lifecycle, to update understanding and maintain co-production.

Condition 1: Questions to consider in relation to the principles of co-production:

- What conditions are essential to develop appropriate relationships and create trust to effect change, initially on an individual level and later at a macro level?
- How well do you understand the motivations of all involved – how does each person hope to benefit?
- How do you maintain these conditions over time in your regional setting?

² We prefer the use of inclusion mapping as we are actively avoiding other more ‘usual’ terms because of the associated colonial heritage. See Milbank, Q (2016) for fuller explanation: <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5020149/>

Condition 2: Developing a shared understanding, a clear purpose and mutual goals for people to work towards

“In genuine co-production, there is a recognition of the potential synergy of academic-practitioner collaboration in achieving what either party could not individually. This means that both parties understand the strengths which one another can bring to a partnership and respect one another’s limitations (e.g., academic institutions moving at a slower pace than policy).” Anonymous Survey Respondent, March 2022

At the start of a piece of work you should:

- Come to a shared understanding of what each individual (and their organisation) is trying to achieve and align the values and motivations of the group.
- Make sure a clear purpose or set of deliverables has been developed together so that everyone knows what they are working towards.
- Ensure that someone is in a coordination role, leading on enabling action. Although this doesn’t mean leadership in a traditional sense of hierarchy, it is a key part of the activity as this helps to move the work forwards and implement any decisions made.
- Check people aren’t being left behind in the language or approach adopted – make sure all voices continue to be part of the conversation. Create space to question jargon and meanings, as well as platforms that enable accessible and shared communications.

Condition 2: Questions to consider in relation to the principles of co-production:

- Have you spoken to all group members about what they would like to get out of being part of the group?
- Have you spoken to all group members about what they can offer to the engagement and how involved they would like to be and how regularly?
- Have you put processes (e.g., meetings, shared and accessible document spaces etc), in place to ensure you are regularly checking in with group members as to how they are feeling and addressing any gaps in understanding and participation?

Condition 3: Creating “relational” spaces during the project

“[A]n ongoing flow of conversations (not just one-off) [ensures] the work is truly co-produced, and not just sense-checked.” Anonymous Survey Respondent, March 2022

The spaces generated when working in a co-produced way are shaped by relationships. Care should be taken to ensure these spaces:

- Are inclusive, where people feel valued and comfortable to contribute.
- Have established ways of working so that an open and honest conversation can be achieved, and everyone respects each other’s experience and perspective.
- Include ongoing processes of re/creating and maintaining these spaces (e.g., through regular check-ins).

Condition 3: Questions to consider in relation to the principles of co-production:

- How will you bring people together as a group, ensuring all members feel comfortable to contribute?
- How will you demonstrate that you value everyone’s contribution equally?
- How might you build in a variable approach to how you gather contributions and how will you reflect them back into the group?

Condition 4: Establishing ethics of care in co-production

“[T]his is about sharing insight that takes into account potential sensitivities for those involved, rather than about ‘informing people about polarised political situations.’ Anonymous Survey Respondent, March 2022

Empathy and care for the wellbeing of all involved - e.g., an ethics of care – are essential to co-production. These ethics aim to facilitate the engagement between academic and policy partners by breaking down complex relationships and power dynamics.

To establish an ethics of care, it’s important to:

- Establish a governance structure to help maintain ethics. It might be a good idea to write things down so that you can get agreement between all parties.
 - The structure of the project governance needs to respect and foreground the value of relationships and shared decision making.
- Value living or lived experience as an equal form of knowledge to learnt experience.
- Emphasise knowledge mobilisation, making information useable and accessible for all through working collaboratively, thus allowing all perspectives to come to the fore.

Don’t forget to consider – if there are Intellectual Property (IP) rights involved or there are concerns about academic independence you may need an agreement in place between all parties. It is best to seek legal advice.

Condition 4: Questions to consider in relation to the principles of co-production:

- How will you go about making space and time to discuss the power you all hold as group members in different situations?
- How will you work towards a governance structure that breaks down power differentials in the group rather than further reinforces them?
- In what ways will you share information so that it is accessible to all?

Condition 5: Embedding and sustaining co-production as a way of working

“Co-production works when expectations match reality. Co-production works when it’s appropriately resourced by all partners. Example from successful ‘innovation’ organisations (e.g., OECD’s OPSI), suggest enabling champions could be critical, but they don’t do the same thing:

Sponsors – provide legitimacy for the approach through active championing of the principles and values of co-production in regional academic policy engagement activities.

Implementors – who want to innovate in how they solve their policy challenge.

Methodology experts – colleagues who are experienced in co-production and understand how to stay true to genuine co-production principles.

In a policy environment, elected members can be champions, but should rightly take decisions on the ‘why’ and ‘what’ and it’s our job to ensure they’re confident in our advice on the ‘how’.”
Anonymous Workshop participant, March 2022

Achieving co-production as a way of working requires structural support and long-term investment (e.g., time and money to build capacity and capabilities).

To achieve this condition:

- Identify people who are willing to be champions of co-production in regional academic policy engagement. Draw on their support to assist in lowering the barriers and making a case for this approach to engagement.
- Recognise that sustaining co-production may require dedicated or ringfenced budget each year. Consider what resourcing is possible to go towards this way of working in your projects/your programme.
- Embed a culture of constant learning in the way you work (and where relevant, people you manage) - reflective and reflexive practice is vital when it comes to co-production.
 - Ensure learning is fed in as you go along and that you develop your approach iteratively, informed by what you are learning.

Condition 5: Questions to consider in relation to the principles of co-production:

- What sponsors do you have to help you establish and embed co-production at different levels in your organisation/project team?
- Have you put ongoing evaluation processes in place to help understand how the work is going? This is so that you can feed in learning and make improvements as you go rather at the end only.
- What is the impact of these relationships and conditions on your co-production and outcomes: how can you monitor and demonstrate this value?

Next steps

CAPE will continue to share its learnings on a range of academic policy engagement activities. Please sign up to the [CAPE newsletter](#) to stay up to date. CAPE would also like to hear of your experiences in developing co-production in regional academic policy engagement and your reflections on this report, the conditions it proposes, and associated questions. If you would like to share your experiences, please contact CAPE (cape@ucl.ac.uk).

About CAPE

Capabilities in Academic Policy Engagement (CAPE) is a knowledge exchange and research project that explores how to support effective and sustained engagement between academics and policy professionals across the higher education sector from 2020–2024, funded by Research England.

We are a partnership between UCL and the Universities of Cambridge, Manchester, Northumbria and Nottingham in collaboration with the Government Office for Science, the Parliamentary Office for Science and Technology, Nesta and the Transforming Evidence Hub.

We believe that policy which is informed by evidence is stronger, more effective, and provides better value for public spending. By using research expertise, we can make a positive difference to the UK economy, our wellbeing and the world around us.

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ANNEX

ANNEX 1 - Further information about the project

In this project, we looked specifically at co-production of academic policy engagement at a regional level and between researchers, people working in policy development related roles and other actors/networks.

Over the course of nine months, we engaged with people in policy, higher education and third sector roles, from a variety of career stages and with variable knowledge of undertaking co-production across England. Based on a distillation of the knowledge created during the three workshops, a short survey, supplementary conversations and desk work outside of the sessions we have created this working document together. It summarises some of the 'conditions' central to the practical application of co-production as a way of working in regional academic policy engagement.

We started the first workshop by trying to establish what meaningful co-production is in the context of academic policy engagement. At the second we spent time drilling down into what co-production in regional academic policy is and identifying central conditions to supporting it and at the third workshop we shared learning across different places and organisations at different stages of their co-production practice.

We learnt that regional academic policy engagement requires overcoming challenges in complex and varied landscapes, involving different tiers of government, and working with limited and variable infrastructures and resources available to the regions. In addition, academic hierarchies can narrow engagement, polarising perspectives and policies.

We also learnt that co-production – bringing together knowledge and experience from these different 'positionalities', actors and networks within, and across, regions – could improve the ways that universities can engage with regional authorities to develop policies that are relevant and most pressing to these local and complex contexts.

All this led us to conclude that **co-production is a flexible approach that cannot be restricted to a single definition**. Given this knowledge, we decided together the best way forward was to develop a set of 'agile' conditions required for co-production that could be adapted to different contexts or situations in regional academic policy engagement.