Good Practice Guidelines for Managing and Monitoring Collaborative Studentships

The ESRC is keen to encourage opportunities that are developed in collaboration with partner organisations and involve substantial user engagement. ESRC has developed good practice guidance (www.esrc.ac.uk/funding-and-guidance/postgraduates/dtc/student-collaboration/developing/index.aspx) in setting up collaborative studentships, including studentships that are collaborative or co-funded.

The following information is intended to offer some useful advice to Doctoral Training Centres (DTCs) on managing these types of collaborative projects. It is essential that a collaboration agreement is put in place from the outset to ensure that all parties are aware of their role and responsibility in relation to the PhD project. As with all ESRC funded studentships, we expect the provision of training to reflect our core values of quality, impact and independence.

Before the student is identified

Ensure there is the necessary supervision at the DTC

It should be remembered that like any other PhD student, a collaborative student will have regular contact with their academic supervisor, particularly in the early stages, when research methodologies, research design and literature reviews are being finalised. Regular academic supervision can tend to lapse when students are away for extended periods of time doing fieldwork, but this challenge can be overcome by use of online communication methods such as Skype and regular email correspondence. If the non-academic supervisor leaves the partner organisation it is the academic supervisor’s responsibility to ensure that alternative supervision is identified and put in place as soon as possible.

Ensure all parties are engaged in the project
Research organisations seeking collaborative research contracts are not just competing with other ROs, but also with other organisations or consultancies. The implication of this for collaborative studentships is that a non-academic supervisor should be fully involved in setting objectives, the research focus, methodologies for the project, the management process, and in monitoring and reviewing the progress of students. Such active involvement and interest by the non-academic organisation is beneficial and should be encouraged. The non-academic supervisor is the partner's representative in the project and has responsibility to ensure that their organisation is kept informed of the progress of the project.

Ensure there is a clear management structure
There is a need for a clear management structure to be set in place at the beginning of the studentship. This is particularly relevant when academics may be working closely with the non-academic partners for the first time. The academic and non-academic supervisors need to spend time defining and refining the project proposal before recruiting the student and should have shared understanding. It is very important that both have a keen interest in the project and share its academic and non-academic objectives. Different projects will require different management arrangements which could range from a relatively simple formal three way interaction between the student, academic and non-academic supervisors, to a steering group for the project, composed of academics and non-academics, who can advise the student and supervisors.

Ensure the non-academic supervisor has the authority to make decisions
It is particularly important to have a named non-academic supervisor at a level able to command access to non-academic organisation resources, and (s)he should be available for meetings with the student on a regular basis. This will vary according to the nature of the project and at different times during the studentship. Though the non-academic supervisor may not have social science expertise in the area of the thesis work, they can be crucial in providing access to data; to consumer panels and associated techniques; to specialised library services; and to knowledge and training about the specific organisation, its systems, users, policies and practices.

Consider the location
The proximity of the collaborating organisation to the university can be important. Great geographical distances can militate against vital interactions, particularly if supervisory arrangements and communication are not maintained. Spending time in each other's environments can be beneficial for the project and can provide opportunities for further engagement. However, while distance presents particular challenges, it need not be a problem if the management of the project is carefully considered.

Student transfers for collaborative studentships to different DTCs can present real difficulties in maintaining the same levels of contact and supervision, particularly if the distances are great. The movement of a student from one DTC to another should only be considered with full consultation and agreement of all parties, including the non-academic organisation, and clear mechanisms for regular contact and supervision must be put in place.

Consider the nature of the non-academic partner organisation
Particular sensitivity needs to be employed in collaborations with small and medium enterprises (SMEs). In comparison with larger companies these often have had little prior

contact with academia, have less capacity to provide reliable and committed industrial supervision, and have less experience of recruiting and training young graduates. SMEs are also often less financially secure with a higher dependence on short term economic changes and consequently frequently have a preference for projects of less than two years duration.

Following the recruitment of the student

Build a work plan

A work plan, based on that outlined in the project proposal, should be agreed between the student and the academic and non-academic supervisors from the outset. The plan should include a schedule of key activities and dates, significant milestones or outputs, and a reporting or meeting structure and timetable, all of which are reviewed on a regular basis. Focus on the vision of the project, then the direction of the project can be flexible as long as communication levels are maintained. It is important that plans should not be dependent upon the availability of one person or piece of equipment and should consider how cover can be provided if necessary. The work plan should include provision for regular contact and progress reporting in the second year of the studentship when the student is fully tuned into the project and research data and outputs should be gaining momentum. Try to specify the deliverables of the project: what will the outputs look like? What format will they be in?

Ensure the student has access to the appropriate training

The fact that research topics are related to the interests of the collaborative partners and may therefore have an "applied" element, means that the research may need to draw effectively on research training that is either interdisciplinary, multi-disciplinary or both. While time is well spent building relationships and an understanding of the non-academic organisation, it is also crucial that the student has sufficient time for interaction with their academic supervisors, fellow doctoral students, the DTC, and to receive research training.

The student should determine, through discussion with their supervisor early in the programme, what, if any, training, additional to their standard research training, is necessary. Training Needs Assessments (TNAs) need to pay particular attention to any additional requirements that arise due to the collaborative nature of the research. This could consider access to training and education at both the DTC and the collaborating organisation, and include the transferable skills training required by the student. The student's induction should include both the DTC, and the non-academic organisation. They should also be given access to appropriate facilities in both organisations, such as access to a desk and appropriate computer equipment.

Ensure there is a balance between academic and non-academic demands

There is a potential tension in the relationship between the student and the academic and non-academic supervisors, particularly the possibility of students facing conflicting demands. The perennial problem is one of combining the high technical level of PhD research with the non-academic collaborating organisation's reality of fixed project budgets and timescales. The balance of independence and control over a student's project needs to be carefully considered and all parties should be mindful of possible conflicting demands.

Going forward with the project

Encourage progress reporting
Progress reporting is important to keep all partners aware of the progress made against targets and to identify potential problems before they arise. Presentations to key organisational staff can fulfil this purpose whilst simultaneously affording the student the opportunity to test ideas in front of a variety of audiences. It is essential that the non-academic supervisor is kept informed of progress and is involved in agreeing future work, as it should not be forgotten that it is often important for the collaborating organisation to be able to demonstrate a return on investment to justify its liaison with academia. Where appropriate, it can be beneficial for the student to set agendas for progress meetings, to minute them and to circulate the minutes to those involved. This ensures the student acquires important transferable skills, and is fully aware of the work to be undertaken in the next phase of the project.

Nevertheless, any arrangement for regular reports and or meetings with the non-academic supervisor should be flexible enough to accommodate unexpected problems with the PhD project. Should the student be facing significant challenges, their confidence can be protected by not exposing problems at formal meetings, which can be rescheduled for when the student has resolved, or adapted to, the difficulties.

Ensure the relationships are maintained
The relationship between the student and both supervisors is critical. This is principally a matter of ensuring good communication and a realistic understanding by all parties in the studentship of the inter-relationship between student, academic and non-academic organisation concerns. Indeed, academic and non-academic organisation supervisors need to recognise their differing aspirations and must ensure that these are not placing undue strain on the student. Students also need to be mindful of the working hours of the collaborating organisation in order to interact effectively with them.

Be realistic and ensure that you can deliver on your commitments
Each of the three parties to a collaborative studentship needs to be clear what they expect to get out of the project and the anticipated timescales. The different agendas of academic and non-academic organisations can adversely affect a project. Studentships can encounter problems from changes in policies and personnel in the non-academic organisation resulting in loss of access to the resources and data which had originally been promised. Although rare, this underlines the necessity of a clear written agreement to maintain continuity and commitment, particularly to cover the eventuality of changes in personnel in the non-academic organisation. It is crucial for the academic supervisor and student to be prepared to work to bring new key personnel from the non-academic organisation on board if the collaborative studentship is to overcome such challenges.

Further information
See the ESRC website for a range of knowledge exchange resources and further information on collaboration: www.esrc.ac.uk/collaboration