

Facilitating Academic-Archivist Collaborations in Business

Business archives are an organisation’s institutional memory. They hold stories of decisions, people and products, of relations with competitors, governments, regulators, customers and suppliers. If companies want to avoid short-term thinking or ‘re-inventing the wheel’, then archival collections should be indispensable sources of business intelligence. But using records in this way is a resource-intensive process and can rarely be accommodated alongside the many other demands on an archivist’s time. Targeted academic collaboration may be one solution.

This document aims to facilitate the development of collaborative projects that benefit all parties: academics, archivists and parent organisations. We have written it to complement the wide-ranging advice produced by The National Archives (TNA): [Guide to Collaboration for Archives and Higher Education](#). Much of the TNA guidance applies to business archives; we note some relevant sections in square brackets. To ensure we are adding value, we focus here on areas where there may be specific concerns or constraints for this type of archival unit. An iterative process of consultation with a group of business archivists has helped us to identify pressures or challenges that could affect their development of collaborative projects and to address these issues in our advice.

Our aim is for this to be an easily digestible, user-friendly document, so we offer things to consider, pointers and ideas (identified with arrows) rather than detailed discussion and we don’t claim comprehensive coverage.

Each section has an accompanying short film, in which business archivists offer relevant experiences and advice. These films, along with an additional ‘One Piece of Advice’ video, will be available on the Business Archives Council YouTube Channel, [‘We Love Business Archives’](#).

Over time, we hope that a network of business archivists and collaboratively-minded academics will grow and be able to share experience and expertise. If you want to comment, make a suggestion for the next edition or offer a case study, please contact: alix.green@essex.ac.uk.

Thank you,

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General considerations

Before covering specific stages and issues in academic-business archivist collaboration, there are some overarching considerations that are worth flagging as they have a bearing across any project.

Business archivists will often need the active support of managers, colleagues and internal stakeholders for a collaborative project to start and to succeed. Sometimes you will also be calling on people's time, expertise or budgets. In some respects, you will be 'selling' or 'pitching' the research project to your organisation, for example to get authority to proceed or to secure the support of relevant business areas, such as legal departments, IT, HR or Corporate Communications. But academic collaborations are often about building long-term relationships and so different from commissioning a piece of consultancy.

- Think about your internal stakeholder management as more than 'selling' to get sign-off; if you can find partners and champions in different areas of your organisation it will help ensure the sustainability of that academic relationship, even if specific people move jobs. This is also important because, over longer-term projects (including Collaborative Doctoral Awards), research may shift in emphasis for a variety of legitimate reasons. With colleagues as partners, it is easier to keep them engaged with the project as an ongoing process of discovery, interpretation and discussion.
- Research in the archives is rarely linear and uncomplicated. Think about designing in stopping-off points where you can review the findings so far with the academic, share them with internal stakeholders and discuss next steps. In building partnerships within your organisation, try to explain that dead-ends, gaps in the records or 'difficult' discoveries are part of the process and can be discussed openly and constructively. A mutually-agreed change of direction isn't a failure.
- Finding the 'right' academic with whom to collaborate can seem daunting. Starting with a local university is a good option; proximity helps with collaboration, although it's not essential. Look for units with titles including 'research', 'innovation', 'impact' or 'development'. Staff will have some kind of directory of academics and their areas of expertise (sometimes this is publicly available) and universities are increasingly keen to link with external organisations. Some universities have staff members focused on business and enterprise. The discipline expertise you need will depend on your project. You may need a historian for expertise in using archives or contextual understanding of a particular period or topic, but bear in mind that an engineer, literature scholar or economist could bring essential content knowledge to interpret the documents.
- Finding the 'right' academic collaborator is not just about subject-specific expertise. Given you will often be aiming to build a long-term working relationship, it's worth doing so with someone who is committed and open to genuine collaboration and co-production. In the sections below, a recurring theme is the need for recognising each other's constraints and priorities and shaping the project accordingly, something that depends on both parties bringing a collaborative mind-set to the process.

1. Developing and securing support for research ideas and strategies

Within an organisation, it is useful to have research interests and areas outlined. This helps with internal business planning as well as providing a clear reference point for interested academics. Whether this takes the shape of a formal research policy or a simpler list of research areas your organisation would be interested in, depends on your organisation. Consider where a research strategy or policy might sit within the existing suite of archive policies and other organisational policies so that it is embedded in the company's strategic vision and part of strategic objectives for delivery across the organisation. It is useful to find out what other units within your organisation are also carrying out research, whether they call it 'research' or not. If you can find a way to show how the various research areas connect, you will have a clear and comprehensive list of relevant research areas for communication within and outside your organisation.

- Considering the topics that are currently researched in your collections will help you to identify areas of potential interest for academics. It may also be useful to consult academics who are currently using your collections either informally or using focus groups to identify other areas of interest in your collections that may currently be closed to the public or uncatalogued, but which may be accessible as part of a funded project. The opportunity to do original research on such material is attractive to academics, particularly historians. Forming a focus group or steering group or conducting some kind of consultative exercise with academics - or even a formal appraisal of the research potential of your collections - can help you identify project ideas, which can then be assessed against current business priorities (see section 2 below). Looking to other archives in your sector could also be a useful way of finding research areas that you had perhaps not considered.
- It is important to align the research areas with strategic objectives and business plans for your organisation to demonstrate the relevance and impact of the research beyond the archive itself. This is as important a concern for HEIs as for businesses; there are now considerable incentives for academics, departments and universities to adopt collaborative and co-created approaches to research, so emphasising the impact potential of any joint project will help make the case for proceeding with the proposed idea. HEIs and business/business archives are likely to have different understandings of the benefits of collaborative research as well as different terminology ('impact' has a specific meaning for academic researchers, for example, relating to the national Research Excellence Framework, and wouldn't capture broader assessment of the value of a project, see section 6 below). It is worth having early conversations to identify each party's priority beneficiaries and how any benefits will be achieved and measured.
- There is potential for collaboration with other archives on academic work. For some businesses, this may seem risky due to concerns about competitive advantage or commercial sensitivity, so both archivists and academics will need to consider how perceived risk can be mitigated when putting forward a proposal to management. If collaboration within your own sector is not acceptable, then consider looking for alternative partners. For example, collaborating with a different kind of business from the same geographical area could help you understand how local markets and consumption patterns have changed over time.

2. Allying Repositories and HEI Interests to the Business

A core aim of collaboration is to show the value of archival records to the company or organisation in achieving its goals. It isn't possible to design a project to achieve that aim unless, as an archivist, you have a clear understanding of what those goals are and can explain them to your collaborating academic. Make sure you know what your organisation claims to be striving towards, the methods by which it will get there, and what its vision for the future is (where is it looking to position itself).

- Your organisations may call these goals different things: for some it will be a mission statement, for others a purpose; some may be making a promise, others seeking to deliver on a list of priorities, and so on. Organisations may have a combination of all of the above or just one overarching goal. It is important to look not just at what your organisation's publicly-stated goals are but also what they communicate to their staff. It may become clear that, from the list of priorities communicated internally, there are actually one or two that are emphasised publicly – these will become your key areas to focus on. Tying project objectives into your manager's personal development plan or departmental KPIs can help keep the project on the organisation radar.
- Think SMART when making the case for organisational support. Most businesses will respond better to requests for money/assistance/authority to proceed if they are presented using these principles.
 - What are you asking for? What are you wanting to deliver?
 - What will be delivered and when?
 - What goal or business problem are you looking to assist or improve?
 - Who will need to be involved?
 - How long will this work remain relevant for?
- Engage with your press, comms or equivalent departments and access their experience and knowledge of senior managers' risk appetite and preferred kind of news stories. This could be hugely helpful in determining which potential areas of research are likely (or unlikely) to get backing from which senior individuals, and which could feed into or serve as a follow-on from other published work undertaken by your organisation. Press office colleagues will also be able to inform you about any campaigns being planned – you may be able to align your proposals to them to help secure support.
- Determine whether it is research itself that can contribute towards delivering an organisational goal, or whether it needs to be tailored to address specific issues. If it is research itself then it is worth considering whether you can create a strong business case for a research group or think tank consisting of representatives from the archive service and relevant internal units, such as educational or outreach departments. Areas of your organisation could then approach the research group with business problems and ideas, who would then identify any potential in the archive's collections for an academic collaboration on this topic.
- One way to be proactive is to identify areas of the collection where research (such as analysis of past trends, experiences and behaviours) could assist the achievement of an organisational goal and possibly prevent or warn against future failure. Search through the

intranet and internal directories for job roles, projects and news items involving research and analysis.

- Think about the longevity and continuing value of any research findings. An organisation is much more likely to be interested in a piece of work where the findings can be used repeatedly than a report that will have a one-time current business use. Think about how interim results could be built into the plan so that internal stakeholders will be able to see the value the collaboration will bring without having to wait for final outputs (see section 6 for more on outputs).

[TNA 3.2]

3. Defining Expectations

The three institutional parties involved (HEI, archive, parent organisation) are likely to have different requirements from the research project, so it is vital to discuss expectations at the outset.

- Expectations work in all directions and it may be helpful to define them through an agreement of some kind. The type of agreement and level of formality will depend on how your organisation works; it could be an informal working document, a Memorandum of Understanding, or the type of relationship agreement you may have with volunteers: this is what we will provide; this is what we expect in return. Whatever the format, it is important to have a shared understanding of what each party is contributing and seeking to achieve.
- Remember that academic, business, archive service, and financial years can be different. This can have an impact on reporting. To avoid any confusion, make sure that your project agreement specifies when you would like feedback or reports, and do this based on dates rather than 'end of year' (academics may also have specific reporting needs, such as testimonials or letters of support from the partner organisation).
- Define your preferred outputs (outputs are discussed in greater detail in section 5). Once you have determined which outputs the repository, and which the parent organisation, would like, be sure to list these as part of your agreement (bearing in mind that both the focus of the research and priorities of the organisation can change during a project). It may be useful to stipulate for whom and for what purpose the output is intended. Who owns any outputs (and any IPR resulting) may also be important to define, depending on the kind of work being done?
- Be clear on turnaround times for requests and time expectations once the project is underway. The repository may not be able to provide access to original material at less than 48hrs for example, or the academic may not be contactable on certain days. There may be pressure points for each party across the year; establishing these early should avoid any problems with people being unavailable for project-related matters during these times.
- 'Quick wins' may be appealing to managers, but they are not always possible with academic research. Agreeing a rough timetable for interim feedback or update notes may be more helpful and feasible than fixed milestones or deliverables.
- Projects can go 'wrong' or get diverted or disrupted for any number of reasons. In discussions about expectations, it is worth confronting this possibility openly and constructively. How might particular scenarios be handled, for example, funding being withdrawn or a missed deadline? If the academic moves institution, does the project move

with them? How is the timescale of the project or any funding they hold affected by the move? Having contingency plans will help you react effectively if a project doesn't go as anticipated.

- As with any undertaking involving multiple parties, some negotiation and flexibility will be involved. If you can separate the priorities and non-negotiables from what is desirable, of lesser importance or just usual practice then you have a good basis for discussion.

[TNA 3.3]

4. Planning and running a successful project

Projects are the means by which we introduce change or embark upon a specific piece of work over a period of time. While many of the skills required for project management are the same as those for running 'business as usual', there are some crucial differences and key points to remember. The key aspects that need to be controlled in a project are:

- Costs
- Timescales
- Quality
- Scope
- Risk
- Benefits

The extent to which you need to project plan will vary by organisation and by type and scale of project. The following guidelines are relevant to more formal project planning, but any project can benefit from considering the following principles:

- Plan prerequisites: what are the fundamental aspects that must be in place, and remain in place, for the plan to succeed? Be sure to revisit these prerequisites at every project meeting. This will prevent unnecessary project 'creep' and help keep the partners involved focused.
- Identify dependencies: there are two types of dependency - internal and external - but essentially both mean that one activity cannot start until another has been completed. The dependency could be an output, the signing of an agreement, a decision or something else. Determine your project's dependencies at the start as part of the overall plan. Plot them out on a timeline so that you can easily visualise what needs to happen in order for something else to proceed.
- Determine planning assumptions: these are things that had to be assumed at the point of original planning, or even project formulation. These may prove to be false assumptions and in turn may affect any element of the project, e.g. an assumption that the archives reading room would not need to close or relocate during the project. Make a list of all assumptions and their potential impact.
- Decide how the project will be monitored and controlled. What information do you require in order to be able to understand how the project is progressing, in what format you need this, who is responsible for supplying it, and how often you need to see it? The more regular the reporting, the more quickly you will be able to detect problems and identify risks, initiate corrective action, and authorise further work. But it is also important that the reporting does not take too much time away from the actual research or become onerous or frustrating for

those involved; after all, this should be a mutually-beneficial collaboration, not a supplier-customer transaction. The right balance may be based on the academic's judgement of how much time they can commit to the project and/or by how often your organisation wants to receive updates. For some projects, it may be important to set control measures such as clear areas of responsibility (who will deliver what), a written statement on delegated responsibilities in case of absence, an authorisation process, and a continuing log of all decisions relating to the project.

- Understand the budgets: this may be determined by external funding and ultimate budgetary responsibility may sit with the HEI. Nevertheless, it is important that all parties have a clear understanding of what the project budget is in terms of time and cost, and what the provisions are for risk and change [Funding sources: TNA 4.4]
- Track the intended outputs: having detailed the nature, purpose, function, and appearance of the outputs, sources of information needed, set up the appropriate processes to produce, review, and sign off the outputs (if necessary). It may not be appropriate for you or the business to control or approve certain academic outputs; the credibility that academic work brings rests on its independence, so your planning needs to accommodate different types of output with different levels of engagement and scrutiny.
- Set the schedule: graphical or written representations of timelines, workflow, resource requirements at all stages of the project, dependencies and output delivery.

Your project plan can be in any format that works for you, the HEI and your organisation – it could be a standalone document or a suite of documents and may involve specialist project management applications or not. The important thing is that you have a plan.

[TNA 3.1]

5. Shaping outputs of benefit and value

Any partnership between an academic/HEI and an archive/parent organisation can be challenging in terms of outputs. It is not always possible or desirable to have outputs identified at the outset of a collaborative project. Defined outputs allow for accurate planning and budgeting during the project and can give both parties confidence that they will end up with an output to suit them. With more open outputs, however, you allow the academic to come to terms with the collections first and for the serendipity of archive work to take over. The resulting outputs may have shorter preparation periods but perhaps focus on materials and ideas that, as an archivist, you had not imagined possible.

- The outputs of a collaborative project must serve the needs of the academic/HEI and the archive/parent organisation. It's important that each party is satisfied that it will come out of the project with outputs that meet its requirements (and that no output is in conflict with or damaging to a party). It is useful to remember that there doesn't need to be one large output at the end of the project such as a 'big book thesis', which would have little use to the business. There may be a number of smaller, intermediate projects, involving and benefiting different areas of your organisation. Bear in mind that different audiences may need different forms of output or a different tone and language. Consider producing different versions of the research findings to meet audience needs.

- Communication with the HEI and the academic throughout the project is key so you keep in touch with the development of the output. Work with the academic to determine which outputs would need to build in branding and tone guidelines, or be cleared for publication through a relevant department. But there may also be an internal communication role to be done, for example, explaining to part of your organisation that an academic collaboration isn't the same as an internal project or piece of commercial consultancy. The collaboration won't work unless it is recognised that different outputs have different purposes, audiences and owners. Discuss which outputs need to be branded and presented by the business and which are better coming from the academic or the archive service - and make that case back to managers within your organisation.
- It is important that you are open with your own organisation about any collaborative project you are working on. You will need to introduce the academic to all relevant parties and ensure that staff around your organisation know to contact you if they have any questions or concerns. It is sensible to keep a record of how much in-kind support staff from across the organisation are providing for the project, useful information for reporting within your organisation and to the HEI. Put a figure on the in-kind support provided if you can; if you apply subsequently for funding, you have the data to demonstrate a track record of institutional support, vital for collaborative projects.

6. Evaluating success

Archives services and HEIs will need to evaluate projects in different ways (we use 'evaluation' here to avoid confusion with the term 'impact', which has a specific meaning for academic partners, see below). For the archives service, evaluation will usually revolve around awareness of the project, interaction with the project findings, and use of the collections used in the project after the project end. The desired demonstration of success will come from:

- Number of reads and shares of blog posts, social media posts, etc
- Number of external media pieces and their potential audience numbers
- Number of times project findings have been accessed and/or referenced (possibly harder to measure)
- Increased use of the collections concerned upon completion of the project
- Desire of HEIs to work on more collaborations with you

For the HEI, the evaluation of collaborative projects revolves around accountability for public spending, quality and impact of research, and student satisfaction and employability. These measures relate to different agendas within the HE landscape; projects will not necessarily speak to all these concerns or weight them equally, so it is worth discussing upfront what the priorities are for the HEI and the academic. The desired demonstration of success will come from:

- Number and quality of research outputs (i.e. published and non-published elements of research findings that have been produced)
- The 'impact' of research, defined as 'an effect on, change or benefit to the economy, society, culture, public policy or services, health, the environment or quality of life, beyond academia' (for collaborative projects with archives, this could be impact on archives, archive users, parent organisations, customers, suppliers etc). Both research outputs and impact are measured on a 6-7-year cycle in the Research Excellence Framework, which determines core research funding for academic research
- Other knowledge exchange, policy influence, innovation in products and services and so on

- Inclusion of findings in academic courses (research-led teaching)
- Placements, work-based learning, research studentships (such as CDAs) and other collaborations with archives that enhance the student experience and/or employability

[TNA 5.2]

The ability of the project management, work, and delivery to contribute towards both an archivist's continuing professional development programme and their job objectives should also not be forgotten:

- Get the project work included in your yearly performance measures for your job. Successes can build your profile within your organisation and professional networks
- Keep a record of new skills learned and existing skills enhanced during the project
- If you are undertaking the Archives and Records Association's Professional Development Programme, liaise with your mentor to determine which elements of the project can be submitted as part of this scheme

Evaluation may also point to the need for further research or initiatives within your organisation. This is an additional benefit of establishing strong working relationships with academics as then you have a proven route for taking these ideas forward.

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