

Kat and Alice's top tips for PhD students using co-production as a way of working

Alice and Kat are both ARC KSS PhD researchers. Alice has recently completed her PhD at Brighton and Sussex Medical School focusing on increasing access to support for perinatal obsessive-compulsive disorder. Kat is a second year PhD researcher at the University of Kent focusing on improving health literacy around menopause in disadvantaged populations. Both have used co-production approaches during their PhD and wanted to share the lessons they've learnt.



Kat Frere-Smith

Alice Tunks

▶ Watch the *Incorporating co-production in the PhD process* video [here](#).



Time

- Using co-production takes up a lot of extra time within a project, both yours and the people with lived experience (PLEs) you are working with.
- It's important at the start of the project to set expectations of how long the process will take.
- Typically, PLEs are excited to start the project and then it can be frustrating for everyone when things take time – it can take ages just to get ethical approval. Make it clear to them this can take two or more years and things can be slow.

Partnership



- Partnership and exchange for mutual benefit are important. Ideally, you should aim to pay your PLEs for their time and expertise, but this will depend on whether you have the funds for this.
- If you do have funds available, it is worth looking into how to pay PLEs, as it can be difficult to do depending on your university.
- But, partnership isn't just about payment; talk to your PLEs at the start. See what they want to get out of the process. You can also offer training on relevant skills, run the training yourself, or asking the Public & Community Involvement & Engagement (PCIE) team for advice on further training opportunities.



Communication

- This is a key element of co-production.
- Firstly, check PLEs are comfortable with sharing personal information such as mobile numbers and emails within the co-production group.
- Work out a way of having group communication e.g. WhatsApp.
- Once this is set up, make sure you provide your group with regular updates on the project; both positive information and developments that have occurred and setting up the next group activity.
- Don't worry about 'bothering them', they will want to know the project progression.

Flexibility



- Be conscious of the fact you probably won't end the PhD with the same PLE group as you started; it's normal for people to leave the project due to different reasons.
- Those who are involved may cancel meeting attendance last minute due to different responsibilities, but it's important when this happens to catch them up on the progress and offer different ways to communicate and contribute for example texting, emailing or phone calls.
- It's important to consider your PLEs as part of the research team, while managing your expectations and being aware that they may have specific/different needs to others in the team.

Engagement



- If you recruit your PLEs appropriately, then they are likely to be passionate and engaged.
- However, linked to the above challenges of time, communication and flexibility, it's not always easy to sustain high levels of engagement. It's important to set your expectations appropriately and reflect on what amount of engagement is acceptable for you, and how you can make that happen.
- Co-producing research can be at odds with a PhD; co-production means making decisions as a group, whereas a PhD is required to be your own work (you are the one being awarded a doctorate at the end, not your PLEs). This can make it difficult to do 'gold standard' co-production.
- So, consider this when planning your co-production; it may be PhDs use more of a co-produced approach, rather than co-production, but this will still be so valuable to the research.

How to incorporate co-production into a PhD

- Consider whether your PLEs would like to contribute to your literature review process, help write the ethics applications or be involved in co-designing the research documentation?
- They might be interested in recruitment or co-facilitating focus groups in the data collection stage. Similarly, they could be involved in the analysis and/or write-up of papers as co-authors. To find this out, communication is key.

Some things to think about:

- Do they know what the possibilities are?
- Do they know what different aspects involve so they know whether they have the capacity/resources?
- How can you encourage them to get involved?
- Can you incorporate greater flexibility and/or can you offer them training so they feel more able/comfortable/willing?

If you decide to give it a go, there are plenty of resources freely available on the [ARC KSS website](#) for both Co-production and Public & Community Involvement.