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## Enhancing research collaboration within a large university department

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### ABSTRACT

As academic research evolves into distinct identities of specialised knowledge, institutional and paradigmatic barriers are formed between research teams, which demand enhanced research collaboration and cross-fertilisation of ideas. Drawing on the concept of cross-fertilisation, this paper adds original contributions to literature on research collaboration in three ways. First, it underlines key barriers facing academics in undertaking research. Second, it demonstrates why research collaboration helps to drive research output and enrich research cultures. Third, it offers valuable insights into technological and social initiatives supporting research collaboration. This paper reports on a study within the University of Portsmouth's School of Criminology and Criminal Justice – the UK's largest criminology department. It reveals universities must address four key issues to enhance research collaboration. These involve managing researchers' workload pressures, fostering positive research cultures, improving knowledge of and access to research and funding processes, and exploring collaborative technologies.

### KEYWORDS

Collaboration; research culture; cross-fertilisation; funding; focus group interviews

## Introduction

Universities have often advocated for innovative ways for academic staff and students to collaborate in research, and to expand horizons of knowledge beyond their subject or profession (Ansell & Marshall, 2016; Maybee et al., 2022; Woolhouse et al., 2020). Collaborating in research supports a research-informed curriculum that '... enhances the student experience, improves student employability and enriches the research culture ... and enables universities to address skills and knowledge gaps in the local and national economy' (Ansell & Marshall, 2016, p. 2). Within the UK, the research climate of universities has been typified by the competitive Research Excellence Framework (REF) which has increasingly scrutinised academic performance and output (Woolhouse et al., 2020; see also Arthur, 2016, p. 230). Moreover, research contributes as a key measure in evaluating the quality of universities through QS World University Rankings (Liu et al., 2022). Research collaboration is especially important post COVID-19 pandemic as

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universities explore ways to overcome new and emerging challenges (Abramo et al., 2022). Enhancing research collaboration is, therefore, vital to maintaining a research-informed curriculum and ensuring that universities remain relevant to civil society (Coonan & Pratt-Adams, 2018).

Research collaboration is particularly important in the field of criminal justice, in which staff and graduates are expected to adapt to rapid changes in workplace skills and the evolving legal and societal challenges facing the modern criminal justice system (Coonan & Pratt-Adams, 2018). For Kim (2014, p. 6) collaboration empowers staff and students to engage in research and allows them to better examine the recurring issues that impact the police, criminal justice system, and society more widely (see also Wagers et al., 2018). Enhancing the collaborative research regime helps to strengthen the criminology curriculum, improve student experiences, and encourage more problem-based learning approaches, central to improving evidence-based practice (Kim, 2014).

Researching criminal justice also lends itself to a broad multi- and trans-disciplinary approach (Diphhoorn et al., 2021; Payne, 2016; Yeomans, 2014). Although Payne (2016, pp. 4–5) argues that universities' role in criminal justice research has traditionally been inconsistent, many modern universities are still recognising the significance of teaching and research within the broad sphere of criminal justice studies (Quality Assurance Agency, 2019). For example, the University of Portsmouth's School of Criminology and Criminal Justice (SCCJ) – the largest criminology department in the UK – now incorporates eight broad areas of expertise, ranging from policing, forensic science, and the study of missing persons to economic crime, cybercrime, and penology (University of Portsmouth, 2022). It also works closely with the neighbouring School of Education & Sociology and Portsmouth Law School in delivering courses. These networks across differing disciplines help to foster important collaborations and strengthens the university's reputation within the higher education sector.

This paper reports on a study that has sought the views of academic staff on ways to enhance research collaboration within the University of Portsmouth. Many universities encourage staff to collaborate and central to this agenda is exchanging knowledge on existing and future ideas. As such, this paper draws on the concept of cross fertilisation, and in doing so, seeks to understand: (1) how academic staff can better collaborate in research; (2) how collaborative practices might enrich research cultures and support higher education curricula (as envisaged through principles of 'action research'; see Lewin, 1946; Norton, 2009) and; (3) the potential barriers facing researchers in collaborating and interventions to overcome such barriers. It identifies several key factors that seem to hinder research collaboration and research productivity. This paper demonstrates the benefits of academic staff collaborating in research and the impact that doing so has for supporting the success of research-active staff and universities.

## **Framing collaborative research**

Scholars agree that collaborating in research is essential to higher education, student experiences and institutional processes and performance (Al-Maadeed et al., 2021; Bukvova, 2010; Golooba & Ahlan, 2013; Lewis et al., 2012). For the criminal justice arena, partnerships formed through collaborative research is important as it helps to improve crime-fighting capability and solve community problems through the creation of

research-informed initiatives (Rudes et al., 2014). Rudes et al. (2014) found that collaborating in new research projects is effective to achieving civic goals. Thus, researchers and criminal justice organisations should collaborate and combine resources through creating new and building upon existing research projects.

However, despite consensus on the value of collaborative research, many universities differ in their outlook towards what works, how researchers should collaborate, and the operational processes involved in doing so (Bukvova, 2010, p. 2; Hillerbrand & Werker, 2019). Huang and Brown (2019) highlighted the deep assimilation of knowledge resulting from multiple participants across disciplines working towards a collective goal. For Lewis et al. (2012) two distinct strands of collaboration often manifest within higher education: one involving researchers designing and undertaking a project together; another merely discussing ideas and offering feedback to peers. Wimpenny et al. (2022) highlight the emerging pedagogy on 'Collaborative Online International Learning' (COIL) being used to support collaborative teaching and learning between peers. As O'Dowd (2021) notes, COIL as a form of 'virtual exchange' is useful for enhancing collaboration despite the debate over its terminology. Collaborative research processes should be transformative towards improving research and teaching practice, but also must be implemented effectively to ensure research remains useful for informing curriculum and assessing outcomes. Academic literature on research collaboration is abundant; nonetheless, prior to addressing this study further, it is important to first outline the theoretical perspectives used to approach the study.

### *Theory of cross-fertilisation*

Cross fertilisation refers to the process in which research disciplines can share ideas, integrate new knowledge, and learn from each other to address complex real-world societal problems (Davies et al., 2018; Manjula & Rengalakshmi, 2021). For González-Piñero et al. (2021, p. 36) it means different disciplines combining knowledge and technologies to improve performance and functions. Cross fertilisation can encourage creativity, idea diversity and stimulate novel insights through assimilation of knowledge (González-Piñero et al., 2021; Huang, 2014). Cross fertilisation is seen as a strategic need to ensure that institutions innovate to remain competitive in the market (González-Piñero et al., 2021). It is, therefore, a vital component to fostering research collaboration within large university departments that have multiple research teams each with their own distinct identities.

Research disciplines typically evolve with specialised and fragmented groups with strictly defined disciplinary boundaries focusing on narrow outcomes (Davies et al., 2016; Manjula & Rengalakshmi, 2021). As teams evolve, they co-exist among other disciplines to drive specialised knowledge, but can be vulnerable to a form of institutional and paradigmatic resistance, failing to integrate knowledge with other teams because of self-referent ideologies that 'excludes other relevant perspectives and interpretations' (Davies et al., 2016, p. 99). Although many research teams share common interests, neighbouring disciplines often fail to recognise the contributions that others make (Davies et al., 2016). Nonetheless, scholars are increasingly acknowledging benefits of the 'team science' approach. Dhand et al. (2016) explain how teams of scientists have greater impact across all scientific fields and disciplines than individual scientists (see also

Nagarajan et al., 2013). Furthermore, through cross fertilisation, researchers can access innovative approaches to problem solving and acquire expertise beyond their own scientific or cultural backgrounds to enrich international collaborations; thus, supporting global community-building efforts (Davies et al., 2016; de Grijjs & Markel, 2015).

### *Collaborative frameworks*

Research collaboration is also driven through 'action research'. Norton (2009) advanced the 'action research' framework for implementing research originally devised by Lewin (1946). Action research aims to transform research processes by taking action and undertaking research through reflective inquiry. Norton (2009, p. 70) introduced five stages of the action research process: (1) identifying the research problem; (2) thinking about how to counter the problem; (3) doing the research; (4) evaluating the research findings; and (5) modifying practice. It is crucial to note that problem solving is often at the core of criminal justice studies (Kim, 2014; Norton, 2009, p. 71; Rudes et al., 2014). As such, action research supports Problem-Based Learning (PBL) processes that allows scholars to learn independently, think critically, and solve problems (Hsu & Hsu, 2020, p. 495). It is through Norton's (2009) simple and effective framework that collaborative research can be operationalised in a systematic and effective manner for solving problems relating to criminal justice.

Another useful model is the 'connected curriculum' framework offered by Fung (2017). Fung's (2017) framework provides further insight into the wider benefits of collaboration to curricula and student engagement as it provides a means for sharing best practices and encouraging innovation. Fung (2017, p. 25) argued that training students to research together, engage in peer review, and present innovative findings to various audiences are valuable for learning. Wagers et al. (2018) found that students' expectations about learning and future career prospects were exceeded through a pilot course for criminal justice that incorporated three high-impact practices: undergraduate research, collaborative assignments, and service/community-based learning. They concluded that these practices motivated students to engage in their studies better than traditional lecture-based curricula. Collaborative research enables student assessment to be more authentic to real-life problems and opens opportunities for new possibilities for assessing students by creating assessment activities reflecting those undertaken by researchers and practitioners (Fung, 2017, pp. 102–103).

Furthermore, empowering students and staff to collaborate in research also enables research to better contribute to universal goals (Fung, 2017; Rossouw, 2020). Hammond (2019) argued that collaborative research helps to integrate society and develop a network of young researchers. Through an investigation of cross-border collaboration among universities in Northeast Asia, Hammond (2019) showed that staff and students could contribute to shared norms to enhance societal integration, despite the cultural and technical challenges facing the region. Likewise, Rossouw's (2020) insight into research cultures in South African universities demonstrated that a supportive research culture is achievable through progressive processes that value innovation from initial sourcing to final dissemination of ideas. According to Huang and Brown (2019) a research environment conducive to sharing ideas enriches current thinking, and contributes to institutional management, knowledge, and research streams. However, before considering

these aspects further, it is important to appreciate the modern challenges that aspiring researchers face in collaborating. Without overcoming the cultural and technical challenges impacting research collaborations, universities will likely restrict their capacity to innovate and achieve strategic goals.

### Challenges to research collaboration

Research collaboration has wide-reaching benefits beyond merely strengthening the curriculum and driving departmental output. It requires a positive research culture to succeed. Yet, Rossouw (2020, p. 249) emphasised that fostering a positive research culture requires costly critical infrastructure and a carefully planned research strategy, which can be difficult to implement. Huang and Brown (2019, p. 64) argued that it is vital to ensure researchers maintain autonomy to choose their collaborations, rather than simply being persuaded to collaborate without the necessary complementary interests in research. The importance of matching the research interests of collaborators is further underscored by Qitoras and Abuso's (2021, p. 3) study, which found that effective collaborations occur when divergent disciplinary interests intersect to allow discovery and innovation. Qitoras and Abuso (2021) recognised the many challenges facing those engaged in research, like having little time, training, funds, or even institutional support to undertake research. Therefore, research managers must properly plan and implement measures to foster a strong research culture to support collaborative research within their departments.

Furthermore, Olvido (2021) argued that fostering a research culture is an investment towards driving outputs and improving performance. Olvido (2021) investigated developing research cultures within higher education to reveal several predominant themes characterising output assessments. Olvido (2021, p. 17) claimed that research culture evolves in terms of human capital and resources; from its early gestation (achieved by conducting research and writing papers); through expansion (as papers are shared and published); to later maturation (where scholarly works impact policy decisions). Such literature underscores the significance of a strong research culture and investing in the emerging research ideas of academic staff.

### Technological solutions

Nonetheless, without the proper critical infrastructure, often technological, strategies to promote positive research cultures and enhance research collaborations may be limited in value. Al-Maadeed et al. (2021) presented the services and infrastructure needed to manage research projects within universities. They proposed a service-based framework that manages the quantity and quality of research projects and streamlines the screening and assessing of research grants. Such a system helped to assess pre-award services provided within a higher education context. Although it provided the technology to automate processes and grow collaborative research grants, the authors recognised that the framework depends on the context in which different universities operate and their strategy (Al-Maadeed et al., 2021, p. 13). Such a system may need to adapt to fully address future strategic needs.

Golooba and Ahlan's (2013) framework recognises automation, intelligence, and resource integration as key drivers that co-create value within universities. They effectively critiqued previous scholarship that fails to explain how successful collaborative processes should work (Golooba & Ahlan, 2013, p. 354). Value co-creation distinguishes how products and services can be formed jointly between stakeholders and provides a valuable framework to enhance how organisations collaborate (Golooba & Ahlan, 2013; Grönroos et al., 2015).

Alexandre and Santos (2018) proposed a collaborative toolkit based on PBL that helps students to solve problems and academics to plan their teaching. The toolkit aided collaboration and communication of ideas, enabling participants to concentrate on key aspects of the related course or research activity. Mora et al. (2019) offered an innovative cloud platform for implementing a student collaborative assessment process. They concluded that with collaborative technologies, students and researchers could better operate within teams to create superior quality assignments and research output. Students' learning also flourished compared with conventional technologies (Mora et al., 2019; see also Bukvova, 2010, pp. 9–10).

There is great potential for technology to help implement collaborative research projects whether through COIL, PBL or other online learning approaches (Alexandre & Santos, 2018; O'Dowd, 2021; Wimpenny et al., 2022). Yet, as Baptista et al. (2020) contend, there are cultural and practical difficulties in integrating research ideas, including diverse interpretations of interdisciplinary research coexisting within higher education. Therefore, appreciating the issues facing researchers is key in overcoming such difficulties and should help towards conducting successful collaborative research in higher education. The next section outlines the design and the methods used in undertaking this study.

## Methods

The author sought the views of academic staff within the University of Portsmouth's School of Criminology and Criminal Justice towards answering three key research questions: (1) In what way can academic staff better collaborate in research? (2) How might collaborative practices enrich the research culture and support higher education curricula? and (3) What are the potential barriers facing researchers in collaborating and what interventions might overcome such barriers. Although academic staff from this department was a convenient sample of the population, the study used voluntary response sampling to limit potential bias and explore the small, albeit important under-researched population. Approval for the study was gained from the author's faculty ethics committee.

Staff were invited to participate in three focus groups to contribute their views and allow the researcher to probe for explanations and gain a richer insight into relevant issues (Semmens, 2011). The focus groups were designed to encourage contributions from a broad remit of academic staff, incorporating research-active staff; early-career academics; potential aspiring researchers, including those in principally teaching roles; and experienced researchers. In doing so, the research targeted audiences of various ages, genders, ethnicities, and roles across the department, being as inclusive as possible.

The researcher recognises that the ethical concerns of criminological research are diverse (Noaks & Wincup, 2004). Academics were recruited through emails, personal communications, and staff newsletters. All participants were informed that their

involvement in the research was voluntary and that their responses would be anonymised. The focus groups ensured participants were able to freely discuss issues pertaining to research culture, barriers to research collaboration or productivity, and to discuss current projects and future research aspirations. The focus groups meetings were held under the Chatham House Rule, not to merely regulate discussion of what was said, but to provide for open, free, and transparent discussions. The author used a semi-structured approach to questioning to enable consistency between focus groups and flexibility to follow up on staff responses (Siperstein et al., 2022, p. 2). Interview questions were open and designed to ensure that participants were able to express their true opinion.

All focus groups were video recorded through the Zoom conferencing platform and later transcribed. The decision to undertake the focus groups online and remotely, rather than in person was influenced by several factors: (1) to reduce the burdens of time and cost of participating in research; (2) to reassure an inclusive and supportive environment for staff to contribute ideas with their peers; and (3) to encourage academics across various roles to contribute to the wider debate, whom might not otherwise do so due to teaching demands or other commitments (Carter et al., 2021). Staff were also invited to comment on an anonymous online Padlet forum board. All data were then coded and thematically analysed through NVivo software to distinguish key themes by detecting, examining, and reporting patterns within the data and ensure an impartial and a consistent method of qualitative analysis (Vaismoradi et al., 2013). Thematic analysis was used because it supports a range of epistemologies and research questions and enables a pragmatic approach to qualitative research. Moreover, it helps researchers with differing methods to communicate their research and generates reliable and insightful results (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Nowell et al., 2017).

## Findings

Throughout each focus group (G), participants (P) reflected upon their experiences of undertaking research. A total of fourteen academics of varying genders, seniority, and ethnicity contributed to the focus groups. Most ( $n = 10$ ) contributions were from early-career academics including teaching fellows and lecturers with less than 5 years' experience. Three commented on the Padlet board. The key responses are grouped into the four identified themes and presented in Table 1.

Participants reported facing several barriers to collaborating, restricting their overall research productivity. Participants stated they face high teaching workloads, incompatible with their research developments. They reported receiving inadequate time to undertake scholarly activities, frustrating their efforts to collaborate in research. As Table 1 details, staff experience demanding and often competing pressures with little time to dedicate for research. Such feelings also connected to broader issues of research culture that discourages cross fertilisation. Staff explained how the ability to collaborate in research is often linked to larger funding success (see Bansal et al., 2019), while reporting unfamiliarity in funding processes, and communication barriers with those responsible for research funding and administration. Participants said they were frustrated with applications for research funding that involved funding calls during inappropriate times of the year and unrealistic deadlines. Similar frustrations around application processes and support structures were expressed by other participants. Such were key issues to have emerged from the



**Table 1.** Participant responses grouped into themes.

Theme 1: High teaching workloads with limited time to dedicate to research	<p>'... there are just so many competing pressures. You've got marking to do, ... this meeting to attend ... this deadline to make, they always take priority over long term goals'. (P1, G 2)</p> <p>'there's no incentive when my workload is 100% and it's all teaching. I don't have time to be chasing up members of staff within the department to pursue a project that I potentially won't even get the funding for'. (P5, G3)</p> <p>'ensure research time for lecturers is protected, because it isn't'. (Padlet)</p>
Theme 2: A research culture that discourages cross fertilisation	<p>'it just seems that collaboration only works if you really want them to work'. (P6, G2)</p> <p>'when you're on a teaching fellow contract ... it feels ... there's an expectation that you are doing [research]'. (P2, G2)</p> <p>'we're encouraged to collaborate not just ... within the department [research] isn't really valued that highly'. (P4, G3)</p> <p>'I don't know if it's a structural thing ... the teaching is what brings in the money'. (P3, G2)</p> <p>'It feels like in order to go down the research route you almost have to be ... ruthless ... guard your time, refuse to do things and maybe not be as collegiate with some of the teaching'. (P4, G3)</p> <p>'I don't think we are particularly collegial. We are all in our silos, we don't have enough social events'. (P1, G3)</p>
Theme 3: Unfamiliarity in research and funding processes	<p>'I think the more ... we can get in related areas, the better opportunities we have for these larger research grants'. (P1, G2)</p> <p>'So my issue ... is with admin who do mysterious stuff that I don't understand ... they speak their own language ... I've found it quite frustrating'. (P4, G3)</p> <p>'... it seems to be always a really tight turnaround, it's always at the wrong time when we're in the middle of teaching or marking or something'. (P4, G3)</p> <p>'I think there should be a little bit more flexibility in some respects'. (P6, G3)</p> <p>'so we have deadlines which are self-imposed, but we also have ... [those] imposed by external parties, funders or collaborators, partners, and very often they're driven by their end of year [processes], which induces additional cost and unrealistic expectations'. (P2, G3)</p>
Theme 4: The value of technology in enhancing research collaboration	<p>'Facebook stream kind of thing ... something live and is probably constantly updating'. (P4, G3)</p> <p>'there's a noticeboard area, I've never seen that used ... maybe you could have something that would enable you to post a musing'. (P2, G3)</p> <p>'I think we need to find ways of bringing the staff together, not via another bit of technology'. (P1, G3)</p> <p>'... having something like the newsletter or a database ... only caveat to this would be we need to make sure that Pure [Research Information Management System] is used properly...'. (P1, G2)</p> <p>'these are brilliant for bringing ideas together to target a specific funding call ...'. (Padlet).</p>

Note: P = Participants, G = Focus group.

study. Yet, staff did contribute suggestions to overcome such barriers. Participants discussed the value of technology in enhancing research collaboration with one suggesting using a live social-media-like platform. However, staff did express some concern over implementing technological solutions to enhancing research collaboration. Notably, one academic highlighted the benefit of sandpits – multidisciplinary workshops that are held to stimulate new research ideas (see Lodge, 2020; UK Research and Innovation, 2021). Such contributions underline important matters to consider when enhancing collaboration.

## Discussion

Appreciating the views of academics on the issues concerning their research environment helps to understand how to enhance collaborative practices. Strong research partnerships help to support curricula, educational outcomes, and research-informed decisions (Tseng, 2012, cited in Coburn & Penuel, 2016, p. 48). It also helps to realise universities' civic ambitions and strengthen the research outputs of their academic staff (Rudes et al., 2014). Collectively, the findings of this study confirm the critical role that creating supportive partnerships plays in many researchers' endeavours. In doing so, the study identified four key themes surrounding research collaboration: (1) high teaching workloads with limited time to dedicate to research; (2) a research culture that discourages cross fertilisation; (3) unfamiliarity in research and funding processes; and (4) the value of technology in enhancing research collaboration.

This study has shown the hurdles that academic staff face in undertaking research. High teaching and administrative workloads experienced by staff limit the research time available and disincentivises staff in undertaking research. There also seems to be an unrealistic expectation by management for staff to do research considering their high workload and limited time to dedicate to research. To resolve this, management should prioritise research more to support aspiring researchers and protect their research time better. Like Quitaras and Abuso's (2021) study found, managerial support and planning is key in fostering a strong research culture within large university departments.

A damaging research culture can also discourage cross fertilisation. This study demonstrates how important it is for researchers to be recognised and valued for the innovation that they provide: the findings suggest that research is not valued that highly. Progressive research processes that strengthen supportive research cultures and knowledge exchanges can help. As such, the findings of this research complement those of prior scholars (see Huang & Brown, 2019; Rossouw, 2020). Notably, creating a strong research culture represents an investment towards enhancing the research output and performance of staff (Olvido, 2021). This study suggests a need to nurture aspiring researchers, especially those early in their career who are likely to be less familiar with research processes than experienced staff.

Further barriers to research collaboration are evidenced. The study found a lack of knowledge and communication around research funding and processes, which frustrates staff wishing to develop their research. Staff seem to welcome better training and value transparency and flexibility around research processes and funding deadlines. This study indicates that to promote global and local partnerships and strengthen research innovation, universities should adopt a clearer approach that better aligns research processes to expectations of external funders and needs of industry partners (Golooba & Ahlan, 2013).

This study also highlights the potential role of technology in enhancing research collaboration (Al-Maadeed et al., 2021; Golooba & Ahlan, 2013; Rossouw, 2020). However, staff raised concern around the value of technology in research collaboration, indicating some caution in how technology is implemented. Although technology may help to streamline research processes and exchange research ideas, technology must not act as a substitute for social networking opportunities that foster personal and professional relationships.

## Conclusion

This paper demonstrates the importance of enhancing research collaboration within a large university department. Despite its challenges, building academic partnerships help to enrich research cultures, while strengthening research-informed curricula and enabling universities to remain relevant to civil society (Ansell & Marshall, 2016; Coonan & Pratt-Adams, 2018). Research collaboration is also tied to large funding successes (Bansal et al., 2019). This study sought academics' views on how to enhance research collaboration within the University of Portsmouth's School of Criminology and Criminal Justice. It allowed participants to contribute their viewpoints on enhancing research collaboration via focus groups and a Padlet board. The study questioned how collaborative practices might enrich the research culture and support higher education curricula. It also explored the potential barriers facing researchers in collaborating and the interventions that might overcome such barriers. This paper identifies several key issues that seem to hinder research collaboration, and overcoming these challenges is key to maintaining a vibrant research culture.

It makes several important recommendations. Staff value the time dedicated to undertaking research and build partnerships with colleagues. Yet, the competing pressures of teaching, marking and other administrative burdens often hinder research opportunities (Quitoras & Abuso, 2021). Therefore, this paper recommends that a strong research regime, supported by ongoing staff research training, should be integral to any large university departmental structure to enhance staff awareness in research and funding processes. Training around research processes will, not only, enhance transparency in the department's research strategy, but also, make academic staff feel engaged and valued as researchers. Protecting staff members' research time would also support staff and foster a stronger research culture (Huang & Brown, 2019; Olvido, 2021; Rossouw, 2020).

Further, implementing technology may help staff to share ideas, access information on research processes, and collaborate with others. However, this paper recommends that embracing technology should be done in a way that still encourages social interactions and allows opportunities for staff to build partnerships across multiple disciplines and interests. While online initiatives help to enable knowledge exchange and streamline processes, social events, and networks, such as sandpits, may be as effective in fostering partnerships.

The author recognises potential limitations of the study, notably, the small participant sample size and confines of the research scope; however, the study should be easily replicated in other university departments. Nonetheless, several questions remain unanswered. Future research is needed to explore how research collaborations develop and evolve between researchers within university departments, and to what extent their research cultures might inform research collaborations. Such research will help to better understand links between cross fertilisation and research collaboration. This study provides some useful insights into the ways in which academic staff within a large university department can better collaborate in research. This paper confirms that research collaboration remains an important component to progressing institutional research agendas and ensuring universities' ongoing success.

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## Data availability statement

Data will be available on request.

## Disclosure statement

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## Ethics approval

As this study involved human participants, the researchers obtained an ethical approval from the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences (FHSS) Ethics Committee of The University of Portsmouth (Ethics Reference Number: 2021–081).

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