

Title: A Grounded Theory on Collaborative Interactions in a Community-University Partnership: The Case of Youth in the Public Space

Author name(s) and affiliation(s):

ALEXIS DEWAELE

Ghent University, Belgium

LINDSEY ANDERSON

University of Exeter, United Kingdom

NOEL KLIMA

Ghent University, Belgium

EMELIEN LAUWERIER

Ghent University, Belgium

Abstract:

Background: Research impact is at least partly generated through collaborative interactions, yet the associations between knowledge production and impact are far more complex than relatively simple linear models generally describe.

Aims and objectives: In this case study, we focus on a community-university partnership and try to answer the question, “What are the conditions that facilitate or hinder successful collaborative interactions aimed towards solving a shared challenge between partners from different organisations?”

Methods: A set of four co-creation sessions with diverse stakeholders was organised with the aim of tackling the nuisance caused by youth in a specific deprived neighbourhood in Belgium. The sessions were video recorded, transcribed verbatim, and analysed following a grounded theory (GT) approach to develop theoretical understandings of the process of knowledge production and research impact.

Findings: Roles and mandates of individual stakeholder representatives determine (and hinder) their access to (confidential) information, but also their visibility and accessibility towards youth as end users. Achieving positive outcomes through collaboration was perceived by stakeholders as slowly evolving towards small successes, and was facilitated by being able to accept failure, working in a climate of trust, developing a shared identity, managing expectations, informally sharing information, and being able to connect with youth.

Discussion and conclusions: We reflect on the importance of overcoming organisational asymmetries in collaborative interactions through installing feedback loops, and through the

particular roles of boundary organisations, boundary objects, and practical tools that can help steer iterative collaborative interactions towards positive impact.

Key messages:

1. Stakeholders involved with tackling nuisance and antisocial behaviour by youth in the public space experienced barriers to collaboration due to the different roles associated with their position in a specific organisation.
2. Professional roles and mandates seem to determine the extent to which stakeholders have access to (confidential) information and (the lack of) crucial feedback loops that support trustful relationships between collaborative partners.
3. Professional roles and mandates are associated with visibility on the ground, as well as connectedness between stakeholders and end users (youth), which is seen as a necessary condition for achieving positive outcomes.
4. Overcoming organisational asymmetries in collaborative interactions could be achieved through installing feedback loops between stakeholders, and through the particular roles of boundary organisations, boundary objects, and practical tools that can help to steer iterative collaborative interactions towards positive impact.

Key words/short phrases:

Collaborative interactions; societal impact; case study; youth.

JEL codes:

I10, I23, I31

Word count:

7,994

Background

The societal relevance and impact of research is an increasingly important goal for science policymakers and funding bodies. Research agendas and programmes are driven by the expectation – also voiced in the public debate – of a societal return on investment in science (Muhonen, Benneworth and Olmos-Peñuela, 2020). However, what actually generates positive research impact remains poorly understood (Pedersen, Grønvad and Hvidtfeldt, 2020). Those models that describe ‘pathways to impact’ (see, e.g., Mayne, 2015) remain rather generic in the sense that they offer little insight into what actually drives positive outcomes in collaborative processes.

In this study, we specifically focus on identifying key characteristics related to the process of collaboration within a community-university partnership on adolescents and young adults (i.e., youth) in the public space. We explore how partners involved in such a process experience the conditions and outcomes related to achieving a pre-determined shared goal to tackle the challenge of nuisance and antisocial behaviour by youth in a specific deprived Belgian neighbourhood. We identified key characteristics related to (un)successful collaborative interactions through an in-depth analysis of four co-creation sessions with diverse stakeholders who were professionally involved in tackling ongoing issues in a particular city park. A Grounded Theory approach eventually led to new theoretical understandings and a reflection on how collaborative processes (could) contribute to achieving research impact. In this introduction we first elaborate on models that describe ‘pathways to impact’, then refer to the role of co-creation in achieving societal impact to finally introduce the case of youth in the public space.

Pathways to impact through co-creation

Increasingly, academic research is expected to interact responsibly with society and meet societal challenges (Klima et al., 2021). A shift can be observed from purely scientific criteria towards a complementary perspective that emphasises the ‘third mission of universities’ (Molas-Gallart et al., 2002), referring to societal contributions in addition to education and research. In that light, pathways to impact also include the efforts of individual researchers to demonstrate how their projects contribute to beneficial outcomes or impact in society. Several iterative theoretical models explain how this impact arises through sustained engagement between researchers and societal stakeholders (Nutley, Walter, and Davies, 2007; Gronvad, Hvidtfeldt, and Pedersen, 2017). To quote Aiello et al. (2021, p.12), “research with social impact is collaborative; collaboration at different stages of the project and among different agents – within and outside academia – appears to be a necessary component of success in achieving social impact”. Several iterative theoretical models explain how research impact arises through sustained engagement between researchers and societal stakeholders (Nutley et al., 2007; Gronvad et al., 2017). Processes that underlie the so-called ‘pathways to impact’ have put a strong emphasis on collaborative interactions. For example, Spaapen and van Drooge (2011) refer to exchanges between researchers and stakeholders in which knowledge is produced and valued that is both scientifically robust and socially relevant. Societal impact is then seen as the result of active, productive, and responsible interactions between (units of) research institutions and other organisations according to their purposes and aims in society (Sivertsen and Meijer, 2020).

However, collaborative interactions can take diverse forms. For example, in a recent systematic evaluation of 60 European impact case studies, Muhonen and colleagues (2020) identified co-creation (i.e., repeated points of contact between scientific and societal partners mediating wider societal changes) as one of the important drivers of research impact. The evaluation showed that in some cases co-creation refers to the regularity of collaboration, the

use of open access approaches, or the interdisciplinary character of the approach (Muhonen et al., 2020). In this study, co-creation refers to collaborations in which various actors actively join forces to tackle a shared challenge. The participants each bring, and make use of, their own experiences, skills, knowledge, and networks. All parties offer information and know-how to aid the problem-solving process and participate in both defining and solving the problem in collaboration with one another. By merging different areas of expertise and experience, new and innovative solutions and knowledge are created that would not have been possible if each actor were to tackle the challenge individually (Hannon, Dewaele, De Smet and Buysse, 2019; Vandael, Dewaele, Buysse and Westerduin, 2018). Phipps and colleagues (2016) describe a comparable process of ‘knowledge mobilisation’ (i.e., making academic research accessible to non-academic audiences and supporting collaborations between academic researchers and non-academic partners) through what they call a ‘co-produced pathway to impact’. The latter refers to collaborative efforts and an iterative relationship between researchers and non-academic stakeholders. The model supports a continued relationship throughout the knowledge mobilisation process, from the beginning of the research through dissemination, uptake, implementation, and, finally, to impact (Phipps et al., 2016). Within this model, researchers and stakeholders have their ‘own space’ in which they work, but there is an overlapping space of collaboration where co-production takes place at every phase of the pathway. Continued collaboration at each phase also generates crucial feedback loops, which allow critical reflection on knowledge production and its use (Phipps et al., 2016).

Thinking of pathways to impact as a strictly linear process (i.e., from research results to uptake by stakeholders to achieving impact) is overly simplistic and ignores the more complex bi-directional association between knowledge production and societal impact (Boswell and Smith, 2017). The Co-produced Pathway to Impact model overcomes this

limitation, as it stresses the interactive and iterative nature of knowledge mobilisation (see, e.g., Frechtling, 2007). However, it also has limitations. For example, the idea of knowledge dissemination and uptake reduces knowledge to tangible outputs (such as publications, workshops, patents), while knowledge is also produced by ‘lived experiences’ (Axelsson et al., 2020) and related to “a generative process that is less about delivering predictable impacts and outputs and more about developing new communities, interactions, practices, and different modes of knowledge and value production” (Filipe, Renedo, and Marston, 2017, p. 5). Moreover, every model that separates academic researchers from the ‘other’ stakeholders increases the risk of creating a boundary between groups of stakeholders and compromising equality in collaborative relationships.

A model was recently developed that tries to overcome the aforementioned limitations. It is based on a synthesis of qualitative studies that describes successful knowledge diffusion amongst stakeholders through collaborative relationships (Dewaele, Vandaele, Meysman, and Buysse, 2021). The latter usually occur in a multiplex environment where stakeholders’ ideas and knowledge are not well aligned due to organisational asymmetries. This can lead to a lack of parity of power in the engagement process, where some voices are heard above others. Effective brokers can overcome these asymmetries through bringing stakeholders into a new dimension where distortion and conflict are allowed, yet creativity and mutual understanding eventually lead to knowledge diffusion and to solving a complex challenge (Dewaele et al., 2021). This model is better suited to understanding the sometimes complex collaborative processes that occur in community-academic partnerships (CAPs). These CAPs are characterised by equitable control, a cause that is primarily relevant to the community of interest, and the aim to achieve a specific goal, as well as involving community members (representatives or agencies) who have knowledge of the cause alongside academic researchers (Drahota et al., 2016). When CAPs evolve towards a more permanent,

institutionalised character, the term becomes ‘community-university partnerships’ (CUPs), which can be classified either according to the mode of initiation (i.e., ‘front door’; ‘networked’; or ‘embedded’ approaches) or by the focus of engagement (i.e., ‘place-based’ or ‘issue-based’; see Harney and Wills, 2017). *Front door CUPs* operate as a ‘front desk’ point of contact with communities, while *embedded CUPs* focus on embedding university staff in communities in order to find issues, mobilise people, and develop projects. *Networked CUPs* tend to work with third-sector and civil society organisations that are already in relationship with academics, nurturing and developing pre-existing relationships and their projects by redirecting university resources towards them. *Place-based CUPs* focus on a specific geographical area, ranging in scale from a city down to neighbourhoods, while *issue-based CUPs* tend to focus on commitments to a specific set of issues, topics, or values (Harney and Wills, 2017). Although most CUPs exhibit elements of each approach to some extent, in this study we focus on a CUP that is networked as well as place-based: the case of youth in the public space.

The case of youth in the public space

The public sphere is an environment where young people can break free from adult supervision and construct their own social identity by experimenting with social interactions with peers, but also with local residents, police, and youth social workers (Eggleston, 2000). Interactions occur on different levels: the microlevel refers to the environment where youth, local residents, the police, and youth social workers meet or clash with each other; the mesolevel concerns interactions between youth and the institutions they encounter (e.g., school, home, the job market); and, finally, the macrolevel refers to politics, legislation, and media, which create the context within which youth live their lives. These interactions often go relatively unnoticed unless they have negative consequences. In this study, the focus is on a specific municipal park where nuisance and criminal activities engaged in by youth were

perceived and framed, by involved professionals from different organisations, as an important challenge that had to be tackled.

In the park on which we focus for this study, various city employees have recently noted that the issue of drug dealing by youths has become worse. This alarmed people who work with youth in this specific park. The youth involved are often vulnerable in several dimensions (economically, emotionally, and in terms of their social networks and lack of social support). Therefore, drug dealing is sometimes a way out of a precarious economic situation (Van Goidsenhoven, 2019). The problem is thus complex and multi-causal. It was perceived that several organisations and partners needed to be involved to tackle this complex challenge. This case offered us the opportunity to address the broader research question, “What are the conditions that facilitate or hinder successful collaborative interactions aimed towards solving a shared challenge between partners from different organisations?”.

Methods

Study design

This research applies a qualitative study design based on the analysis of four co-creation sessions with stakeholders involved in the case study. Given that qualitative studies on analysing the essential ‘ingredients’ of successful collaborative processes are relatively rare (see Dewaele et al., 2021; Anderson, Grove, Williams and Grand, 2019), we opted to analyse co-creation sessions with key stakeholders, selected by the project initiator (city representatives including a drug coordinator, the community director active in the neighbourhood, and the youth prevention officer that worked directly with the youth involved). The broader stakeholder group included city employees, the local police department, the prosecutor’s office, a youth (mental) health counsellor, a youth organisation (with a club house in the park), and researchers from criminology and psychology. We applied

a grounded theory (GT) approach (Charmaz, 2014) which is a research method concerned with the generation of theory, which is 'grounded' in data that has been systematically collected and analysed. GT is well suited for studying processes with a focus on conditions and consequences of complex social phenomena (Scott, 2004). This approach allows us to try to understand how diverse stakeholders engage and experience progress or decline during the collaborative process. To safeguard trustworthiness and authenticity as alternative criteria developed (see Lincoln & Guba, 1986), we used several strategies. First, triangulation (i.e. integrating different perspectives on the study topic) was ensured through involving external experts (during the preparatory meetings and the co-creation sessions) and through gathering critical feedback within the research team (organising peer debrief sessions). Secondly, feeding back the final results to the research participants increased the credibility of our results. Thirdly, all transcripts, coding structure, visual maps etc have been kept available to allow an external audit for evaluation of the research process, results and interpretations. Finally, all participants completed a brief questionnaire after every session to assess their experiences and the group dynamic. The scores on this evaluation instrument (see Vandael et al., 2018) showed a positive appreciation of stakeholders related to (amongst others) openness to new ideas, a climate of trust, and respectful interactions (for complete results see Anderson et al., 2021).

Case study and sample

In May 2019, the academic coordinator of an interdisciplinary research consortium sent out a call to diverse stakeholders asking them to submit proposals on specific societal challenges that could be addressed by bringing together various stakeholders and making use of scientific knowledge. A case was submitted related to nuisance and antisocial behaviour by youth at a municipal park and selected as a pilot project to further investigate collaborative processes and to achieve positive impact in a CUP. The short time available for this project raised

serious ethical concerns over how to involve young people that experience diverse challenges in their lives. This was compounded by the Covid-19 pandemic that prevented us from meeting the youth in-person at the park's club house, which would have supported the development of trust. The difficult decision was therefore made by the city representatives with the academic partner not to involve youth themselves in the pilot project. A longer follow-up study is instead planned where we will build relationships with the youth and ensure their voices are heard.

Table 1 shows characteristics of 14 participants who were involved in the co-creation sessions. Most of them participated in every session. Originally, three co-creation sessions were planned between April and July 2020, facilitated by an Innovation-by-Design agency (www.appolo18.be). An additional session was organised in September 2020, as it was deemed necessary by the group members to specifically address the topic of sharing confidential information. This additional session also allowed us to explore the conditions of 'successful' collaboration and, in line with a GT approach, enabled participants to provide feedback and reflection on how they perceived the outcomes of the collaboration.

[Table 1 here]

Each co-creation session was carefully planned and followed up in order to clearly identify the shared challenge and steer towards specific outcomes. Several presentations by researchers created a common knowledge base during the sessions (e.g., the results of a field study in another deprived neighbourhood). To encourage active engagement, several pre-session assignments were given. In preparation for the first session, participants had to describe their 'journey' with regard to a fictional case involving youth dealing drugs and a neighbour that is confronted with a fight between those youth, that could happen at the park. In this journey, each stakeholder described how they themselves would be involved with an

incident which might happen at the park. Each stakeholder had to explain their journey during the first session and answer specific questions (e.g., What would be the barriers to acting efficiently?). In the following weeks, the partners had the opportunity to choose topics they found relevant to further address during the sessions (e.g. the impact of youth group dynamics on crimes that happen at the park,), as well as appropriate "How can we...?" questions. After collecting the topics and questions, all partners voted to select the most important question. The most popular question was: "How can we create new forms of collaboration between different actors to achieve an integrated approach towards young people in the public space?"

Between the second and third sessions, the project coordinator drafted an informative brochure based on the journeys to clarify the working methods of each partner organisation. The final draft was carefully checked with each stakeholder. This brochure (see Anderson et al., 2021) was evaluated during the third co-creation session, when we also explored our expectations for the future, such as how to continue the collaboration beyond the pilot project, how to continuously share information with each other, and exploring the options of developing a protocol that would allow the sharing of confidential information. Finally, the fourth session gathered more knowledge on how participants perceived the outcomes of the collaborative process. Thus each session built on the previous one to systematically gather input from each stakeholder to 1) gain insight into the modus operandi of each stakeholder (their 'journeys'), 2) develop a shared problem identification ("How can we..."), 3) work on an outcome that could (partly) address collaborative obstacles (the brochure), and 4) evaluate and reflect on the collaborative process. A more detailed description is available in the pilot study synthesis report (see Anderson et al., 2021).

Data analysis

All co-creation sessions were video recorded and transcribed verbatim. Four transcripts were analysed following a GT approach (see Charmaz, 2014). Data analysis includes two main

phases. The first phase is ‘initial coding’, where one goes through the data line by line and starts naming phenomena or concepts. In the second phase, one moves towards ‘focused coding’, in which concepts are developed into theoretical categories. We used NVivo software (release 1.6.1) for coding the data. The coding process was open and inductive: every meaningful unit of text that related to the research question was labelled. Only those codes with enough substance for allowing theme development, were withheld. Initial visual maps were first manually drafted. For the final visual representation of the study results (see Figure 1) we used software Visio 2019.

Two themes emerged from the data: *conditions that influence collaboration on different levels* and *characteristics that define a successful collaboration*. A visual map was developed and a first draft of results was written based on these main themes. The visual map was then further developed to integrate associations between theoretical categories. This eventually led to a new visual map that logically connected associations between organisational aims, roles, and mandates; access to information; the level of visibility/accessibility/connectedness; and how the aforementioned determined a successful collaboration (‘moving stones’). Two researchers independently conducted the coding process, after which consensus was sought about how to develop a final visual conceptualisation. The final result was presented back to stakeholders during a ‘member check’ session in August 2021 . This was an opportunity for participants to approve the interpretation of the data that they had provided (see Doyle, 2007). The consensus from this session led to more emphasis being placed on the importance of developing a shared identity during the collaborative processes (i.e., getting to know each other, the common experience of powerlessness, institutional restrictions, and the role of an experienced facilitator). The member check session helped us to assess the credibility of our interpretations. While most stakeholder comments on the proposed model were positive, one participant indicated he was mainly interested in future collaboration and in practical

implications rather than in ‘the academic exercise’ of bringing data together into a conceptual model. This comment could indicate that the academic agenda does not always align with a more applied focus on tackling societal challenges.

Findings

In what follows, we will discuss how the findings of this study show how different organisational aims that lead to individuals taking on different roles and responsibilities, and flows of information between these organisations and their representatives, determine whether or not collaborative interactions are deemed successful in terms of achieving impact related to the case of youth in the park. The findings are represented in Figure 1.

[Figure 1 here]

Managing different organisational aims and levels of collaboration

Although the different levels of collaboration cannot be disentangled completely, they were discussed as each creating a framework that determines individual aims, expectations, and ways to collaborate. Despite differences in professional roles, managing complexity was relevant for all participants, whether that was at the level of the youth (“breaking the vicious circle in which they are caught”) or at the level of sharing confidential information amongst partners.

There is the complexity of working with different organisations, the very complicated legislative structures as well as the complexity in the lives of the youth who are in contact with these organisations on several levels. ... How do we bring all these partners with different mandates together, with all the issues of confidentiality, and then make a difference for these youth? (Youth Prevention Officer, session 3)

Conditions to manage that complexity, and to eventually achieve success through collaboration, were perceived on the level of working with individual youth at the park as well as on a structural level.

Flows of information and communication related to critical events at the park

Sharing accessible and comprehensible information with other professionals plays an important role in developing a shared knowledge base and role expansion (Nooteboom, Mulder, Kuiper, Colins and Vermeiren, 2021). However, when incidents happened at the park, miscommunication amongst the stakeholders and difficulties related to sharing confidential information meant that partners struggled to collaborate:

As concerns collaboration with youth social workers, that's a different story since we [the public prosecutor's office] have a different aim and are bound to professional confidentiality. So, on the level of an individual, we cannot share information unless we have a protocol ... Youth social workers sometimes have information they cannot or will not share, which is their right of course, but that does not facilitate collaboration. Often there is a lack of understanding related to things youth social workers do not want to share and vice versa. (Session 2)

In cases of critical events at the park, such as drug dealing, stakeholders are involved or notified in different ways. The police, for example, are informed through complaints; youth social workers observe what happens because they are 'on the ground'; and the community director is indirectly informed by youth social workers. Several partners recognised that immediate follow-up of particular signals about critical incidents was an important condition for a positive collaboration:

I guess that is what I look for in all directions, getting to know the internal chain. I do not always know what happens with a particular signal in the different partner

organisations ... I understand that within the police department there are several teams but for me it is sometimes difficult to know...when I give a signal...what then happens exactly? (Community Director, session 2)

Furthermore, being present at the park was perceived by some as a requirement for knowing what happens there, yet no partner can be on location all the time. Youth social workers sometimes felt disconnected from some youth, which was perceived as a threat to achieving positive results. For the community director, youth services were also a 'blind spot'. An additional complexity, in terms of developing a shared knowledge base, is that the situation at the park evolves constantly (with new groups of youth, new types of drugs, etc.). Managing this complexity can be addressed through collaboration with different partners on different levels, as illustrated by the Community Director (session 2):

We see the added value of working on the level of the neighbourhood as well as on the level of the city. My role is on the level of the neighbourhood, but I need the citywide level to function well. Vice versa, the neighbourhood level is useful for [the city's drug coordinator and youth prevention officer] to develop policies from a meta-perspective.

A certain level of visibility as a professional, as well as accessibility and connectedness with youth, seemed pivotal in knowing and keeping up to date with 'what's going on', yet it was hindered by practical constraints. The role of feedback loops could be essential in making sure that collaborative partners are continuously informed. A recent study (Moreno-Serna et al., 2021) on multi-stakeholder collaboration also showed that feedback loops are powerful in the consolidation of learning, and help connect the external impact of the collaboration with the internal dynamics of a partnership. The role of a facilitator remains important to promote reflection and ensure the development of relationships of trust (Moreno-Serna et al., 2021). In

our case study, a perceived lack of feedback loops and disconnectedness from youth and activities at the local park seemed to require a close collaboration between the different stakeholders involved. However, collaboration on a more structural level introduced other barriers.

The roles and mandates within organisations

Participants discussed the collaboration on a more integrated level, where policy aims were identified, legal issues sometimes played an important role (especially when related to sharing confidential information), and where chains of collaboration between and within organisations needed to be aligned and smoothed. This led to a discussion about the aims of the different involved organisations and how the roles and mandates of stakeholders within each organisation determine ‘chains’ of actions and flows of information within and between organisations.

Although participants agreed that they cared for the involved youth (“We all want to invest in and have a heart for these youth.”, academic, session 3), it became clear that not everyone pursued the same goals. A distinction was made between a focus on 1) intervention (when something happened at the park); 2) investigation (who did what at the park and who should be sanctioned?); 3) prevention (avoiding harm to individuals and society); and 4) giving aid and support to youth. This creates a tension where youth workers that invest in youth wellbeing cannot always protect youth from getting into trouble yet police officers with a focus on intervention mainly aim at keeping society safe.

Youth workers make sure these youth have a warm place, we will always stay close and listen to them. However, by ourselves we cannot break that vicious circle of youth getting caught selling drugs, having fights, getting convicted... (Youth Prevention Officer, session 4)

Some of them [police officers] are more like cowboys who do not really have a thing with social workers. They rather think like ‘Oh yes I know that boy, he is an offender and it is our task to protect society’. Maybe that is also their strength. Yet the strength of social workers is to be there for the youth unconditionally... (Drug Coordinator, session 2)

Distinct organisational aims seemed to create a tension between the different stakeholder groups. Within each organisation, stakeholders felt limited according to their roles and mandate and explained how this influences associated actions related to collaboration:

Often tremendous efforts are being made but then crimes cannot always be proven so that’s a problem. Also, the department of justice is often limited in how it can act. Sometimes measures are imposed on minors but then they or their parents are not willing to cooperate. And then there is the lack of space in community institutions. (Public Prosecutor’s Office, session 1)

Some had a focus on working individually with youth (i.e., the end users) such as the youth welfare workers, others worked with youth in groups, while yet others did not work directly with youth but rather at a policy level:

I regularly hear from the public prosecutor's office because I have a permanent contact there regarding drug cases. But when it is about specific youth, then I need my colleagues at the youth department ... and it is not always easy to find the right person. (Social Director, session 2)

Autonomy also played a role, with some staff members able to decide how they organise their work while others are limited by their position in the organisation:

On the level of the neighbourhood, that’s different, because we have a briefing every day about what is going on and what should be done. For those on intervention, that’s

completely different since these people are constantly managed, they do not have the freedom that I have. (Youth Inspector, session 2)

In terms of access to information, some individuals were bound by professional confidentiality, while others had an obligation for discretion, but were able to share some information. The public prosecutor's representative was bound by legal confidentiality rules. These all had different implications for how partners could interact with each other.

Finding the right person within an organisation to provide the information one needs seemed important for many, but throughout the sessions a tension arose over whether collaboration should be pursued on an informal personal level or on a more structural level. While developing good personal contacts between organisations was seen as fundamental to building trust and exchanging even confidential information, it might not be sustainable in the long term (e.g., contacts quit their jobs and the connection is lost). On the other hand, a more structural collaboration tends to enhance sustainability and stability, yet it is a long-term procedural endeavour that might be less flexible in terms of who can get involved and what people are allowed to do:

We should be careful not to end up in a legal framework where we do not see the beginning nor the end while the youth themselves disappear from our sight. (Youth Prevention Officer, session 4)

Overcoming barriers on a personal as well as on a structural level would eventually enable collaboration in terms of achieving the pre-determined goal (i.e., the envisioned societal impact). This was reflected in how participants described the key elements of such a successful collaboration.

Moving stones: Achieving impact through successful collaboration

An effective collaborative dimension should allow the development of informal interactions to increase mutual understanding and to construct a common ‘empowering’ language, as well as creating a bond between partners that is perceived as credible and legitimate (Dewaele et al., 2021). This does not, however, necessarily mean that if these conditions are met, complex challenges can be solved in the short term. Rather, as stated by a youth counsellor, things happen one step at a time:

“And through strengthened trust, we can optimise some things, not that we will stop the river from running. It’s rather about moving some stones in that river.” (session 4)

Progress in tackling complex issues takes time and it is, to a certain extent, always incomplete. In this respect, Termeer and Dewulf (2018) refer to the concept of small wins: Identifying and valuing small steps forward throughout the process of solving complex problems in a way that energizes stakeholders instead of paralysing them because of unrealistic expectations. Some of our participants referred to the positive dynamic within the group as “a beautiful organic process” that could or should lead to developing a “learning network” or “a community of practice”. The latter then refers to moving beyond active learning as individuals by participating in structured, collaborative learning activities that are engaging, interactive, and relevant (Handley, Sturdy, Fincham and Clark, 2006). Recognising ‘failure’ was also perceived by some as part of this learning process:

“Sometimes it’s not so much about solving the situation but rather...I think it sometimes brings peace when we acknowledge together that we did not succeed.”
(Community Director, session 2).

Developing a shared identity and purpose (“who we are as a group”) relates to gaining an insight into each other’s expectations, which is also associated with the unique aims of each organisation, the options and limitations actors experience in relation to their roles and

mandate, and the way in which they can or cannot share confidential information. Finally, building trust was perceived as key, which was linked to being visible as a partner or being recognised, known, seen by the youth, or the opposite: “Unknown is unloved, isn’t it? (laughs)” (Public Prosecutor’s Office, session 2), or as the youth inspector (session 1) said:

“And about confidentiality, as soon as they know you, then the problem is gone for me. Since I know Frieda, Linda and Diego. So things are easily shared ‘between the lines’. And that helps us to get back on track.”

Trust and ‘a climate of openness’ also depended on what we could call ‘feedback loops’ (what happens to signals that are sent out). This also shows that improved sharing of information is possible not only through developing formal protocols; it can also be the result of strengthened informal ties between partners and being aware of the complexity of internal organisational chains:

That tool [produced during the project with flowcharts on how the involved organisations work internally] was really important for our organisation because we often had the frustration that our signals were ignored, because we did not know how complex all things are. Now that we know ...that gave a real boost in our trust. (Youth Social Worker, session 3)

To summarise, participants perceived a successful collaboration as slowly evolving towards small successes (‘moving stones’), being able to accept failure, working in a climate of trust and openness, developing a shared identity and expectations, informally sharing information, and being able to connect with youth as end users.

Discussion

Studies and theoretical models have stressed the fact that research impact is generated through collaborative interactions and that the associations between knowledge production and impact are far more complex than relatively simple linear models describe (i.e., a flow that goes from research results to uptake by stakeholders to societal impact) (Boswell and Smith, 2017; Dewaele et al., 2021; Phipps et al., 2016). However, empirical qualitative studies that help us understand how exactly characterising elements of collaborative interactions lead to research impact are rare (Dewaele et al., 2021). In this case study, we focus on a community-university partnership (CUP) that is centred around a continued investment in pre-existing relationships ('networked') and around a specific geographical area (place-based). Our analysis helped us develop new theoretical understandings relating to how collaborative interactions can lead to positive societal impact. This is visualised in a model (see Figure 1) that describes associations between the organisational aims to which different stakeholder representatives belong, i.e., their roles and mandates; how they get or are prevented from getting access to information; their level of visibility on the ground, as well as their accessibility towards and connectedness with youth; and, finally, the key elements that determine a successful collaboration ('moving stones').

Organisational asymmetries

When trying to solve a specific societal challenge, one of the issues in collaborative interactions is that problems are conceptualised within the realms of different professional contexts. Also, diverse stakeholder groups (e.g., non-profit organisations, municipalities, researchers) tend to have different views on what they do and why they do it (Stier and Smit, 2021). Facilitating interaction between these stakeholders is therefore at least partly determined by finding the right 'fit' to overcome organisational asymmetries (Dewaele et al., 2021). Our study showed that, for stakeholders, what happens in the 'other' organisation – in terms of referral, protocols, and sharing of information – was often perceived as a black box.

This confirms previous studies that show a lack of understanding and awareness considering the different roles of other professionals and of what those roles encompass (Nooteboom et al., 2021; Supper, et al., 2015). To address those issues, feedback loops were perceived as pivotal by our participants. Even when a partner seems not to take any action, feedback about why this is the case can alleviate feelings of mistrust. Indeed, these loops have been proven to support the legitimacy of collaborative interactions and to enable achieving positive results in complex interventions (Van Tulder, R., and Keen, 2018). Confidentiality issues and the sharing of information touched upon a different aspect of barriers related to restrictive organisational (meso-level) or legislative (macro-level) regulations. Interestingly, close ties seemed to enable stakeholders to bypass these regulations. Building closer, informal relationships with collaborative partners is, in that sense, one way of improving access to knowledge (Quayle and Kelly, 2019). Tools that help researchers and their stakeholders to invest in the quality of relationships and enable the early identification of problems (e.g., feelings of mistrust or other negative emotions) have also been developed (see co-creation tool by Vandael et al., 2018) and could help with forging these strong ties to overcome organisational asymmetries. Other tools have been developed for improving research impact planning (see Hannon et al., 2019), yet they mainly focus on researchers, frame achieving impact as a relatively straightforward linear process, and lack hands-on guidelines to help tackle the diversity of participants in co-creative collaborative interactions.

Managing expectations through boundary organisations and boundary objects

With variety of roles come diverging expectations (Gluckman, 2018). The participants in our study clearly had different roles related to the youth about whom they were all concerned, which were associated with 1) youth wellbeing versus safety of all citizens; 2) direct versus indirect involvement (i.e., policy-related work) with youth; and 3) being able to determine one's own work agenda versus being steered top-down (i.e., level of autonomy). Therefore,

the relationships that our participants could develop with each other, as well as with the youth in question, were restricted as well as enabled by their organisational mandates. Boundary organisations that involve the participation of actors from diverse stakeholder groups, staffed by professionals who serve a mediating role, might play an important part in overcoming these divergences (Reed, Bryce, and Machen, 2018). Professionals with a mediating role (i.e., brokers) can be deployed to make sure that conflict and the iterative nature of collaborative processes (e.g., going back and forth, accepting setbacks) are managed well, and that communication is smoothed. These brokers also have an advantage in that they can play the role of being a neutral yet knowledgeable outsider (Dewaele et al., 2021). During the process, it became clear that products of the collaboration process (particularly the co-created informative brochure describing how each organisation functions) were more important in terms of sustaining rapport between stakeholders than in terms of the actual aim of the brochure itself (closing the knowledge gap). Such tasks can be seen as ‘boundary objects’ (i.e., objects that facilitate communication across disciplinary borders by creating shared vocabulary; see Brand and Jax, 2007) and potentially play an important role in achieving positive societal impact during a CUP.

To summarise, there are several strategies that can be used to overcome organisational asymmetries and to manage the expectations that arise from different organisational roles and mandates. First, installing feedback loops can help to overcome feelings of mistrust and forge close ties. The latter contributes to smoothing communication and sharing information across stakeholders. Second, boundary associations and objects (and the involvement of skilful brokers) can facilitate collaborative processes and thus potentially play an important role in achieving positive impact in CUPs. Third, existing tools can help to steer the process, but new or improved tools are also needed to tackle diversity in collaborative relationships. These strategies can help to achieve what were perceived by the participants in this study as essential

elements in a successful collaboration: being able to develop a shared identity and shared knowledge base; building up trust; connecting with end users; and going through a process of collaborative learning while accepting occurrences of failure.

Limitations and conclusion

Some study limitations should be considered. It is important to acknowledge that this specific case study has particular characteristics (i.e., a networked and place-based CUP) that prevent us from generalising our findings to all types of collaborative interactions. We therefore recommend this research is extended to other types of CUPs.

Unfortunately, time limitations and the COVID-19 restrictions meant that it was not possible to include youth representatives in this study. We recognise that not including youth, their parents and teachers, or community members precluded important perspectives and voices being heard. The fact that stakeholders were all active professionals is also likely to have skewed the narrative towards power relationships within this particular group rather than between professionals and citizens. As the neutral brokers in the process, the researchers value the lived experience and knowledge of individuals from different organisations.

However, we recognise that this inclusive ideology might not be shared by all and that a different collaborative process might have merit when decisions need to be made in the short term or during times of crisis.

Another limitation was that the co-creation trajectory was relatively brief (four sessions) yet highly structured (with participants getting assignments, a professional facilitator, etc.). By no means are all collaborative interactions structured in that fashion. We therefore call for the use of a standardised typology that characterises different types of collaborations and could help assess how partnership characteristics can influence the pathway to impact. Although quantitative studies could shed more light on outcomes related to collaborative interactions,

impact is difficult to assess quantitatively and the causes of impact can be hard to attribute (Pedersen et al., 2020). Impact is rarely the product of one specific piece of research, but more commonly of a whole body of work, as well as a web of collaborative interactions (Hill, 2016), which makes the issue even more complex. However, that should not prevent us from trying to understand these complex processes. A systematic way of qualitatively synthesising pathways to impact could advance this relatively new field of study. Our study shows that empirical case studies are able to provide insights on how collaborative interactions are driven by organisational aims and the importance of finding a balance between a structural and a more informal collaboration. The latter has implications for sharing access to information and building trustful relationships with end users in order to try to solve complex societal problems.

Funding

This study was funded with the support of the European Union's ERASMUS+ Programme.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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TABLES

Table 1: Participant Characteristics and Attendance During Co-creation Sessions

Organisation	Nickname & Role	Session 1 (n=13)	Session 2 (n=14)	Session 3 (n=12)	Session 4 (n=12)
Ghent University	1. Martin (Academic Supervisor)	x	x	x	x
	2. Cindy (Project Coordinator)	x	x	x	
	3. Yasmine (Academic)	x	x	x	x
	4. Anne (Master Student)	x	x		x
	5. Jurgen (Academic)	x	x	x	x
City services	6. Frieda (Community Director)	x	x	x	x
	7. Linda (Youth Prevention Officer)	x	x	x	x
	8. Diego (Drug Coordinator)	x	x	x	x
Innovation-by-Design agency	9. Sabine (Project Facilitator)	x	x	x	
Local police office	10. Dirk (Youth Inspector)	x	x	x	x
Public prosecutor's office	11. Tine (Public Prosecutor's Office)	x	x	x	x
Youth association	12. Wannes (Youth Social Worker)	x	x		
	13. Brandy (Youth Social Worker)		x	x	x
Mental health service	14. Danny (Youth Counsellor)	x	x	x	x

FIGURES

Figure 1: A Model Representing Conditions for Successful Collaborative Interactions - The Case of Youth in the Public Space

