



# Imagine: Writing in the Community

A collaboration between communities in Rotherham  
and the University of Sheffield





## Imagine: Writing in the Community

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Cover image: Shahin Shah.



# Common Cause Research

**This case study was produced in 2018 as part of the Common Cause Research project.**

**Common Cause aimed to document and explore existing collaborative research between universities and Black and Minority Ethnic community organisations. The project was funded under the AHRC Connected Communities Programme and included partners from University of Bristol, University of Liverpool, Xtend, University of Nottingham and Runnymede Trust.**

**We hope that these case studies will provide inspiration to those thinking of engaging in collaborative research, as well as insight into the challenges and benefits of such partnerships. Our intention in these case studies is to document the relationship between the partners from the academic institution and the community organisation. We have not evaluated the projects or engaged with the project participants. However, by capturing the perspectives of the partners, we hope to understand the structural and practical support needed to initiate and run projects involving universities and Black and Minority Ethnic organisations.**

**You can find more case studies, resources and information about Common Cause Research at [www.commoncauseresearch.com](http://www.commoncauseresearch.com).**

## At A Glance

### Title

Imagine: Writing in the Community

### Key Partners

Imagine at the University of Sheffield

Various charities, youth groups and public services in Rotherham.

### Funder

Economic and Social Research Council/Connected Communities Programme.

### Dates

2013-2017

### Website

<http://www.imaginecommunity.org.uk/>

### Selected outputs

- **Article - Collaborative working practices: Imagining better research partnerships**
- **Article - The University as the 'Imagined Other': making sense of community coproduced literacy research**
- **Book - Campbell, E. Pente, E. Pahl, K. and Rasool, Z. Eds. (2018) *Re-Imagining Contested Communities: Connecting Rotherham Through Research*. Bristol: Policy Press.**

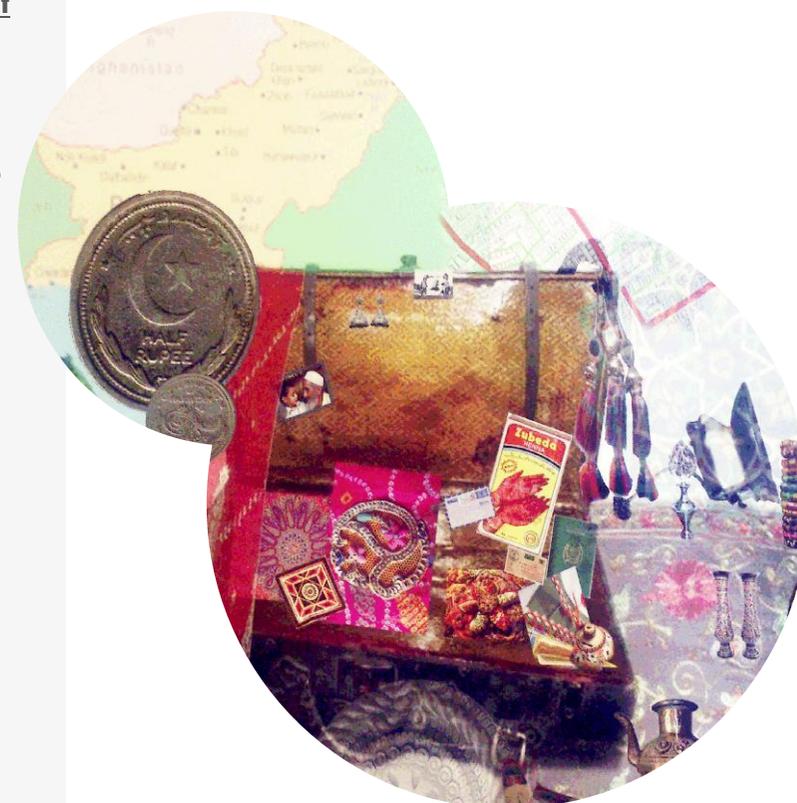


Image: Shahin Shah

## Project Summary

**Imagine: Writing in the Community** was part of a broader initiative called 'Imagine', a five year project from 2013 to 2017, delivered by a consortium of lead universities including the Universities of Brighton, Durham, Sheffield and Huddersfield and a network of community partners. The focus for the overall Imagine project was the context of civic engagement with a significant emphasis on the co-production of research through Community University Partnerships (CUPs). The Imagine programme had four work packages: The Social Context; The Historical Context; The Cultural Context; and The Democratic Context. The University of Sheffield coordinated the Cultural Context work package which included a strand called 'Writing in the Community' as one of several projects delivered in partnership with communities.

The University of Sheffield was founded in 1905 and developed from three local institutions that were brought together in 1879 to form the Firth College, described as a centre for teaching Arts and Science subjects. The University has expanded significantly since its inception and in 2016 had approximately 28,000 students including overseas students from 150 countries.

Partner organisations for Imagine: Writing in the Community included a charity working with children and families, a local library, the Youth Service, a school and a community sports trust charity. The community partner interviewed for this case study led the Writing in the Community projects and invited the other partner organisations to collaborate because they all worked with minority communities and have a shared ethos to challenge inequalities and listen to community voices. Writing in the Community encompasses three initiatives working with communities in the town of Rotherham, South Yorkshire. These initiatives aimed to create safe spaces in which women and girls could explore, through narratives and writing, the social and cultural context of the lives of minority ethnic women in Rotherham. The initiatives were:

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**A women's writing group that met regularly in a community library and wrote about their experience of life, domestic violence, oppression, patriarchy, inequality and hope. The women come from different parts of the world and writing is said to have given them a voice.**

**A school women's group, already established in the school attended by their children. The women produced an herbal medicine book, sharing learning and bringing together recipes handed down through generations.**

**A girl's poetry and art group of Pakistani-heritage and Roma/Slovak girls meeting in a community centre. The girls worked with the poet Helen Mort and the artist Shahin Shah to explore and write about their identity and issues impacting on their lives. They produced artwork and a book of their poetry titled 'Threads of Time'.**

**Connecting communities to research was achieved through the use of arts-based approaches to understand daily language and literacy practices of different communities in Rotherham.**

## How the collaboration came about

**The academic partner has a long-standing interest and work in community literacies, home literacies, community development and had previously undertaken work in Rotherham. While working with a community literacy initiative, the academic partner came across a project on hidden histories of British Asian communities which was led by the community partner interviewed for this case study. An interest to learn more about the project led the academic partner to request a meeting with the community partner. This first meeting revealed a common interest in literature and the academic partner mentioned wanting to undertake a community literacy study.**

**I felt that when you look at literacy in schools that's only part of the picture. And one of the things I wanted to do was a community literacy study in a home to kind of demonstrate we just don't know what's going on in the homes. As part of my work as an evaluator for Inspire Rotherham, a community literacy initiative, I looked at a funding application to (a community literacy initiative) which was all about hidden histories of British Asian communities, I was fascinated by this, and the person in charge of this (community partner) so I managed to email her and set up a meeting. And I kind of wandered in and met this woman and we immediately started talking about books that we like to read and libraries, and we just talked as if we were kind of old friends. And then I said 'Oh and I want to do this community literacy study', so the next thing I knew I was sitting with her sister and her children down the road and talking to (community partner) and her sister about how can we research home literacy practices.**

**(Academic partner)**

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The academic partner went on to work with the community partner's family to document their home literacy practices. Both partners discovered they had several shared interests and experience including community development work with Black and Minority Ethnic communities.

**I think (academic partner) worked in community development in the CRE (Council for Racial Equality) years ago, I think that's why we connected.**  
(Community partner)

There was a significant amount of contact and building a relationship based on mutual trust and respect before both partners went on to collaborate on the Imagine project. Reaching a common understanding about key terms and concepts such as Arts and Humanities, collaboration, race and ethnicity is said to have evolved as both partners worked together prior to collaborating on the Imagine project. The academic partner recounts that they share an understanding of literacy practices in the community but have a different conceptual framing.

**I mean that's quite hard in the sense that we have different conceptual framing. She and I both share a real understanding of this idea of literacy practices in communities, and literacy practices being ideological and not one literacy aim. Now I don't think that's Arts & Humanities but I think conceptually that's what we share. I think in terms of collaboration, one of the things I would say is that the people all in that room on that day (discussing ideas for taking forward the Imagine project) who wrote the bid all had the same idea of collaboration. I think the people who came after that meeting who didn't write the bid had a different experience because they weren't in on the initial discussions. In terms of Arts and Humanities we were really clear that our work package was not social science.**  
(Academic partner)

I think in terms of collaboration, one of the things I would say is that the people all in that room on that day who wrote the bid all had the same idea of collaboration.

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The immediate rapport at the initial meeting between the academic and community partners, a shared interest in literature and mutual experience of undertaking community development work with Black and Minority Ethnic communities are some of the factors highlighted as significant to supporting subsequent collaborative work. An academic partner who is able to interact with both the community and the university is described as important to university-Black and Minority Ethnic community collaborations.

**It will be difficult, it will (for people in the community to connect with a university), because I think half the work that (academic partner) started with Sheffield University (and communities) would never have happened. So when she leaves it will be hard again, I don't think the University will pick up her work in Rotherham.**

(Community partner)

Reaching a common vision and understanding about the Imagine project is said to have been facilitated by involving community members in early discussions and inception of the project; those joining later are described as having a different, perhaps less fulfilling, experience.

## Developing Collaborative Research

The idea for developing Writing in the Community projects was proposed by the community partner at a meeting convened by both partners to discuss The Cultural Context package agreed for delivery by the University of Sheffield. Both partners brought together other potential community partners, known to them through their existing networks, for this meeting and everyone present is said to have made a collective contribution to developing the Sheffield strand of the Imagine project. The Arts and Humanities approaches and collaborative ethnography are described as significant to developing the local programme of work.

So basically we all had these different ideas, but the Arts and Humanities was core and I think the only thing that has overlaid it was this idea of collaborative ethnography and the Elizabeth Campbell work, the idea of the community framing the questions and also this idea of hidden histories. So The Other Side of Middletown is a key text for us because as described in the original study 'Middletown: A Study in Modern American Culture', the original researchers, a team from the 1930's looked only at the White community in the city of Muncie; subsequently the research team led by Eric Lassiter and Elizabeth Campbell were invited by the Black community to research and give voice to the African American community living in this area and this work is presented in 'The Other Side of Middletown'.

(Academic partner).

Both partners had prior experience of working with Black and Minority Ethnic communities and community development work. This shared experience, combined with an awareness that these communities were underrepresented in accounts of local history, is said to have informed the focus to collaborate with them.

## Funding

The Imagine programme is funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) through the Research Councils UK Connected Communities programme. The funding application for the overall programme was developed across the four universities. The original Principle Investigator at the University of Edinburgh, initiated the bid. Each work package worked with potential partners in their region to develop a joint Case for Support together relating to their specific work package. Additional funding to support specific aspects of the Writing in the Community projects was secured through the Connected Communities Festival in 2016, funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council.

All community partners in the Cultural Context package contributed to developing projects and funding bids, including costings for specific aspects of the work. The academic partner then collated the contributions and wrote the bids.

So with the Imagine project, as I said, (community partners' contributions) they all went in. The subsequent bids I remember Threads of Time we (several community partners) just sat down and brainstormed for about an hour, it was a bit of a nightmare because (with) the AHRC we could go for different things, like 5 grand, 10 grand, 15 grand, and it was so confusing because they said it had to be at Somerset House. We all got muddled up, anyway we did it all together. The costing mostly (community partner) does. I think I've got very confident about that being collaborative. The only thing that sometimes happens is I am sitting at the end of the day writing it all up. But actually the ideas come from the community, you can trace them all through. So I feel quite confident as a co-producer in that sense.

(Academic partner)



Image: Shahin Shah

**Under-funding of projects is described as presenting challenges relating to how many paid staff, with specific skills and expertise, can be brought in to work on projects. In this project the decision to employ a historian meant there was insufficient money to bring in Research Assistants and this put pressure on the academic partner to undertake the tasks they would have undertaken.**

**I was going to have two RAs (Research Assistants) and this would have helped. And then we had to cut, because we had to bring in the historian. Now at the time I thought oh it's fine, I'll do it all myself – that was a mistake. And I think the under-funding at that point bizarrely created a problem. I just think, looking back, I think I should have had a paid person in there not me. So, that was a big problem, it was underfunding. And the other thing is bringing people in, like working with a new artist, and there's something about bringing in new people that's been really helpful.**

**(Academic partner)**

**Funding calls are said to incorrectly presuppose that all potential community collaborators will be familiar with the language used by funders and be able to navigate funding applications. This is said to highlight an 'invisibility' about differences in experience between academic and community partners.**

**The follow on funding and the Connected Communities funding presupposed an understanding that people have experience outside the local context. So I remember (one community partner) not knowing where Somerset House was, she said oh we can all go down to Somerset. So I think another thing that's really worrying is how invisible those people are. They're not seen as part of the School of Education, certainly not part of my department. If I was going to ask funders for one thing it would be the money to place community researchers, who have been**

**a long time in projects like Imagine, even for a week as a researcher in residence or visiting fellow, so that there is money to make the University sit up and look at the community research team and think 'Oh they're part of the School of Education' – they're never seen as part of the school, I feel really upset about that.**

**(Academic partner)**

**All community partners in this project participated in developing funding bids and project costings, which were then written up by the academic partner. The feedback on funding processes and applications suggests that academic facilitation of this process was important, otherwise communities may have found it difficult to engage with the language in funding applications.**

## Undertaking Collaborative Research

**Applying arts-based methodologies is described as valuable to engaging the women in this project and giving voice to their experiences, concerns and aspirations. The input of the Principal Investigator from Sheffield University is described as helpful and important to developing the methodology. Adopting research methods and approaches to data collection that were relevant to communities and for generating community knowledge is described as an important component of the collaboration.**

**One of the things about collecting data is we're not predominately social scientists. However, we did write field notes but we weren't able to use them because we didn't have ethical permission to use them. And Threads of Time is not so much data as a source of knowledge in itself that we learn from. So I think we've stopped seeing it as a kind of 'this is the dataset and this is us' but more the learning has threaded through the project in these books and art materials, and through that learning we've written, almost writing is a form of enquiry. So I would say the co-writing and writing has been where the learning happened. We haven't done much collecting of social scientific data because that's not what the project was about.**

**(Academic partner)**

**And also the Roma community, being a voice for the community. The girls were comfortable doing the art work rather than the poetry because their language skills weren't at that level, so it's just adapting the project.**

**(Community partner)**

So I would say the co-writing and writing has been where the learning happened. We haven't done much collecting of social scientific data because that's not what the project was about.

**The community partner is currently undertaking a doctorate and this is said to have facilitated greater consideration regarding the relevance of academic theories to knowledge held by and generated with communities.**

**I think because (community partner) then becoming involved in doing the doctorate she started to read stuff about Funds of Knowledge, she started to read Homi Bhabha. She's been looking at theory. And these academics come along and (community partner) will talk about that, talk about this idea of a basket of knowledge. So I suppose what happened was that I have to say it was (community partner) doing the doctorate that kick started the ideas coming into that academic sphere, and then it did seem to kind of merge more. So theoretically, I think we're still searching.**

**(Academic partner)**

**Undertaking the doctorate degree combined with input from visiting Maori academics has provided the community partner with opportunities to reflect on the relevance, or not, of academic theories to community knowledge. This is described as empowering and has highlighted the importance of community knowledge belonging to the community.**

**They (Maori colleagues) kind of worked from their own knowledge perspective. They've got their own universities, small scale but you know that accredit their learning and doing in their mother tongue and they're trying to retain the knowledge, and they are sharing it according to how the people wish the knowledge to be shared rather than White researchers coming and taking the knowledge and never going back. So they ask permission of the people who they research 'can we share this knowledge, can we go to England and talk about this, how do you want to do it?' So, knowledge always belongs to the community, it's their knowledge, and they decide how to share it. And it was very empowering,**

**what they're saying is the universities here are so obsessed with theory, I've been looking at theories for my research project and they don't fit. Then I'm using the Maoris' research to support my thesis. But it doesn't fit, and it's like the obsession with theory, they created their own theory, they've created their own knowledge system, they're saying it's our knowledge, we'll keep it, we'll share it with you, but we will share it equitably. I mean I think somebody emailed me and said the obsession of British universities, European universities on theories is ridiculous. How can you fit something if it doesn't fit? When I met the Maori researchers it did click, so I'm looking at more of their theories and their research.**

**(Community partner)**

**International perspectives regarding ethical approaches to doing research with communities, are described as useful to gaining perspective and learning from others. In this project the input of visiting Maori colleagues is said to have provided insight into approaches that are culturally sensitive, respect community knowledge and challenge the imposition of theories that have little or no relevance to this knowledge.**

**Allowing ideas to evolve through contact and communication with local communities is described as a beneficial approach to engaging communities in research.**

**The 'Writing in the Community' projects that (community partner) set up, which were fantastic - one was a project in a school which was happening at the same time as the library project. It was a group of ordinary mothers, mostly Pakistani but some White British, and I remember sitting there and (community partner) saying to me 'What do you know? Let's do something on Funds of Knowledge' and they all came up with this herbal remedies idea, this is the book they produced.**

**(Academic partner)**

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The importance of a safe space to write is highlighted, spaces where communities feel they will not be judged or criticised for expressing their opinions. Finding the right space is also described as a potential challenge, in this project participants were able to meet in spaces they were already familiar with; a school, a library and a community building. Partner organisations collaborating in the project already had buildings and this is described as beneficial for the project because these venues already provided safe spaces; otherwise it would have been necessary to spend time searching for suitable alternative venues which is described as a challenge.

The women participating in the library group met once a week over 18 months, they read poetry and produced their own writing. They are said to have been able to articulate the everyday experiences, past and present, as well as imagined futures, giving rise to the idea that writing itself could be a safe space.

Women meeting in the school focused on women's empowerment. They produced a book of herbal remedies based on their inherited knowledge and celebrated the everyday knowledge that goes untapped in communities.

The girl's poetry group met in the community building and the group is described as presenting opportunities for hope, resilience and a space to articulate issues that are not given voice in the mainstream media. Writing about issues that impacted on their lives and giving voice to their concerns through writing is said to have facilitated the girls to visualise their hopes for a better future. Working in a community research project also inspired the girls from the poetry group to look at higher education, one had gone to University and two others were in the process of applying.

All community partners were invited to regular partner meetings and away days organised by the University to discuss the Imagine project and to present the work at conferences, this is described as beneficial. These events are said to have enabled community partners to gain a better understanding of their project and connect with other strands of the Imagine project being undertaken by partner universities. However, related challenges are also highlighted in that there can be an incorrect assumption that travel, overnight stays and attending conferences are agreeable activities for all community participants. Similarly, there is a lack of appreciation about recognising religious and cultural responsibilities that may impact on participation in activities and events.

And I was thinking this Connected Communities programme, they assume a kind of cosmopolitanism. I really respect the people here and respect their knowledge and respect their understanding, but if you're not from a middle class culture, it's really difficult to describe, a lot of people don't travel. So I have learnt that some people in my projects just don't like staying in hotels and don't like travel. I think they (Connected Communities programme) don't understand the barriers. You know and during Ramadan I mean (community partner) bravely did the first opening slot on this (event) you know really quite a high profile day, dry mouthed, you know. And then in a Cardiff festival I remember asking a singer in a high profile music event how she was in the evening in Ramadan and she said 'look this is just a really difficult thing to be asked to do.' She did it, but you know it's kind of recognising the rhythms of people's lives. Yeah, and the whole conference thing is a very weird idea for people who are unfamiliar with such events.

(Academic partner)

The feedback indicates community partners and community participants have been actively involved in the generation of research ideas and knowledge for this

**project. Arts-based methodologies are described as key to facilitating this process. Facilitating all community partners to participate in meetings and events organised by the University is described as supportive to understanding the broader Imagine project and the work of colleagues on the other strands. A lack of recognition regarding how the preferences and commitments of community partners might impact on their participation in project activities is highlighted as a challenge that requires greater understanding and acknowledgement in collaborative work. The project is said to have facilitated reflection on the relevance of academic theories to communities and community knowledge, the community partner will continue to reflect on this including as part of work for a doctoral degree, beyond the lifetime of the project.**

## Roles and responsibilities

The academic partner describes carrying the bulk of responsibility at the start of the project. As the project progressed and the roles and responsibilities of all participants became clearer and more embedded, a more equitable approach emerged. The learning acquired through delivering the Imagine project will inform the structure of future projects in terms of roles and responsibilities, including greater involvement of community partners in university spaces. Mentors, advisory groups and critical thinking groups are considered an important source of support and input to collaborative projects.

At the beginning I carried everything, it was a bit depressing. Now I've learnt to have mentors, but I've also learnt that a collective, a core collective group, is a useful tool to get things done without being in a mire of endless meetings. So that book writing with me (and 3 others) felt like a really equitable space, an editing team and I think now I've learnt how to do that. So in the new project, which isn't Imagine, rather than me being the complete person that does everything we've got a critical thinking group, social cohesion group, the community who meet regularly and who are paid properly. So what they do is they direct the project and they tell us what to do and they mentor each bit of the project. And then I have a mentor for myself. So what I've done with my new project, I've built in a way for recognising more fully the contributions of community research teams. What I now think is for it to be sustainable and structured, in order for you not to do everything, which is dangerous in a way, you have to build that into the funding proposal. What I should have brought into Imagine was a mentor for me, a mentor for each project, a critical thinking group, which is an advisory group,



Image: Zahir Rafiq

**and far more community partner involvement with the university to equalise the space.**

(Academic partner)

**Empowering community partners to participate in roles as critical thinkers is described as beneficial to collaborative work with communities.**

**The academics are totally outnumbered (in the follow-on project), and the critical thinking is really critical thinking, and it's a much more ... it feels a more horizontal structure. And although I do need it, and I'm definitely the leader, I'm very buttressed by some really strong individuals who themselves kind of tell me what to do. It's much better.**

(Academic partner)

**Creating an equitable structure for roles and responsibilities and making this sustainable is said to require resources and learning from the Imagine project has highlighted this needs to be built into funding proposals.**

## Accountability

**A shared sense of accountability and recognition that everyone is accountable in working with communities is considered important.**

**I think we're all accountable when we work with communities. And I suppose community partners, when the research is finished they've still got to work with those communities, it's important that we do work in an ethical way, we're accountable to them. And if they are kind of saying something, we've got to feedback to the university and say this is what our participants are saying, this has happened, or this happened but should have happened this way, those kind of things ... open, honest discussions.**

**(Academic partner)**

**A key point in this feedback is the recognition that community partners continue to work with communities beyond the research project. Accountability to communities is seen as key, as is the need for an ethical approach in this respect.**

**Community partners, when the research is finished they've still got to work with those communities, it's important that we do work in an ethical way, we're accountable to them.**

## Outputs and legacy

Several tangible outputs have been produced including meetings with government departments and officials to communicate learning from the project and the perspectives of communities. Tangible outputs include:

- Three exhibitions of artwork produced by the women participants, two held in libraries and another at the Millennium Gallery in Sheffield.
- A book of poetry called 'Threads of Time' launched alongside a display of artwork produced by the young women.
- A Folklore Herbal Medicine book produced by the school women's group.
- A toolkit also produced by the school women's group to encourage parents to think about literacy.
- Two articles, one written by the community partner and the other by the academic partner on university-community collaborations.
- A retreat attended by academic and community partners to write up their work on the Imagine project.
- A book about The Cultural Context strand of the Imagine programme was being prepared for publication at the time of writing. One chapter of the book has been written by the Department for Communities and Local Government.
- Several conference presentations made individually and jointly by academic and community partners and some with community participants.
- Presentations and policy briefings have been given to the Department for Communities and Local Government which are said to have influenced their Empowering Women initiative.

Follow on funding has been granted to the academic partner to undertake a project called 'Taking Yourself Seriously', looking at the role of arts in community cohesion.

**The community partner is undertaking a project, as a follow on from The Threads of Time work, documenting the stories of three generations of Pakistani women.**

**It (the school women's group) was a very successful project, and a lot of them went on to further education, it was just very positive. And some of the women involved in the Imagine project produced a toolkit to raise awareness of CSE (child sexual exploitation), so the Imagine project was a platform leading to women doing other things, Imagine has helped to empower women. And the other very successful thing we did was get a little bit of extra money to do this project with the girls called 'Threads of Time', which was part of 'Writing in the Community'. And then from that (community partner) is now doing the project with three generations of Pakistani heritage women and looking at their stories. And I think what's happened is she's really come out as she's running her own research projects, she's doing a doctorate, that's been one of the best outputs.**

**(Academic partner)**

**The outputs are said to be owned either by the artists who created the artwork, or co-owned by community participants and the academic staff producing them. There is a lack of clarity regarding whether the university owns any of the outputs at all, including copyright of publications.**

**I would say the book is ours (people who wrote it), it's not the University's at all. I'd say the exhibition is ours. I don't think the University owns anything. And although the copyright I guess, but actually no I don't think they do.**

**(Academic partner)**

**A range of non-tangible outputs are highlighted including the bringing together of several community partners to work on the project, which is said to have expanded existing networks and strengthened existing relationships. Community participants**

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have gained knowledge, skills and experience through the projects they have participated in and been able to do so in safe spaces. The community partner is now confident to submit her own research bids and undertake research independently, she has been inspired to undertake a doctorate degree and will be a co-investigator on the follow-on project 'Taking Yourself Seriously'.

Several other community participants are said to have been inspired to take up courses, including further education, to enhance their learning and skills.

The Imagine project is described as happening at the right time, albeit by coincidence, because otherwise when the Jay Report (independent inquiry into child sexual exploitation) was published some of the young people participating in the project may not have had the same opportunities to voice their thoughts and feelings. The work they did on the Imagine project has received attention from officials in a way that might not have otherwise happened.

**I think Imagine in a way happened at the right time. Because sadly the Jay Report came out – young people wouldn't have had a voice to say those feelings and the girls benefited hugely from it, to be able to articulate what they felt at a time when Rotherham had public spotlight on it. The poetry the girls wrote was very powerful and their book was circulated to people in local authority. Like, yesterday I was supervising 12 young people at an event which was part of the Rotherham voluntary sectors Children, Young People and Families Consortium that brought together young people who are part of the Different but Equal board and young people organised the conference, they decided on the activities such as dance, henna and sport. And one of the things ... the young people decided who would come to their event from the local authority leadership team; it is giving ownership to young people.**

(Community partner)

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**The tangible and non-tangible outputs that have emerged from the project are described as empowering for the community participants and have contributed to the voice of local communities being presented to local and national government. Legacies of the project include the expansion of community networks, strengthening of existing partnerships and community participants being inspired to access opportunities for further learning, including in further and higher education. There is a lack of clarity regarding ownership of some outputs, this has not created any challenges or conflict but greater clarity may be of benefit going forward.**

## Structural inequalities

**A number of structural inequalities are identified as having an impact on collaborative work, including the 'invisibility' of community collaborators in university environments and in particular those from minority ethnic communities. Similarly, the lack of representation of minority ethnic communities in accounts about the local history and industries is described as leaving their contributions invisible and unacknowledged.**

**We had a situation where the museum didn't have anything about the community. A councillor who said that she saw the display of the steel industry at (a local visitor attraction) and she felt that there was nothing about the minority ethnic contribution to steel. So we decided to have a meeting at (the visitor attraction) and the libraries people came, communities came, there was a volunteer who came, and she left her child she got her sister to look after him so she could come to this meeting, the people from local government came in and they almost did not listen to the community.**

**(Community partner)**

**And it was shocking, actually I've never seen racism quite as blatant. There was classism as well, but then the really good thing is when we had that Maori event on community knowledge in June 2017 and (a local government official) said at the end 'Ah, now I get it' about knowledge. And is actually probably beginning to get the message.**

**(Academic partner)**



Image: Shahin Shah

**The use of the word ‘co-production’ and the lack of an ethical approach to involving communities at the local authority level is highlighted as a barrier to meaningful participation.**

**I mean what I find, these local authorities especially are using the word ‘coproduction’ and I’ve said to them ‘It’s not coproduction’. And what they do is they kind of call it coproduction, get the funding, but then they do it quickly and say we haven’t got time to co-produce. And then also they don’t work in an ethical way. When they get the funding then they kind of look at the communities and ask them to you know actually reduce the funding they receive.**

**(Community partner)**

**Funding cuts have impacted significantly on local Black and Minority Ethnic-led organisations and those working with women. This is said to limit the number of such community organisations with whom collaborative work can be developed.**

**We’ve lost a number of BME organisations and this is due to the cuts. They didn’t survive. And also women’s organisations are struggling as well, whether they’re BME or general women’s organisations.**

**(Community partner)**

**A lack of understanding and appreciation about the practices and knowledge held in different communities are described as structural inequalities that prevent people from engaging in community activities and other provision.**

**And it’s also the practices, again its elements of racism here. When I said in my community our child rearing practices are slightly different, we are brought up by grandparents as well - ‘Oh no no, we want mums to come to our drop-ins’. I said ‘Sometimes the mums can’t come, the child can get stimulation and the grandma can learn as well’, because we’ve still got that old practice where you put sugar in**

**babies' milk and all those little things, you know you've got to change those. And now because there's a lot of high employment, a lot of grandparents are looking after the children. Communities have different cultural framings and different practices and engagement is not going to happen if people are made to feel inferior.**

**I was brought up by my grandmother in an extended family and I remember health professionals questioning mother and child bonding; however, now it is okay for White parents to leave their children with grandparents all day while they go to work and some grandparents also take the children on holiday, because it is linked to economy and income. It is okay to do that as childcare is very expensive but if those who are termed as 'other' do the same as part of their social and cultural way of life then it becomes frowned on, we live in a world of double standards which also applies to academia.**

**I mean if you look at herbal medicine, what the ladies have done, years ago the White communities would have said 'ooh rubbish'. Now they use herbalism and alternative health, yoga, meditation and acupuncture. Yet we tell minority ethnic women 'you need to learn English, you need to learn Maths, you need to do this, you need to do that' and we never say 'What knowledge do you have?' Women have life experiences and knowledge is created through lived experience. We (academic and community partner) went there to the school women's group and said 'What do you want to talk about? It's up to you'. And they said they wanted to talk about herbal remedies. They were so pleased, they went home, two sisters whose granny was in her 90s, they spoke to her she sadly passed away last year but they talked to her about herbal remedies. I remember my grandma used to do something with herbal remedies and it just worked – for earaches, colds and sore throats. And what we say is if somebody doesn't speak English it means that they don't have any knowledge. I mean I have spoken to women from the**

**Afghanistan community, I say 'What did you do back at home?' 'I was a midwife' 'I was a teacher'. A lot of knowledge of medicine plants and alternative health practices comes from indigenous communities; their knowledge has been taken by the West and claimed as their own. The work with the women just reinforced colonial history of taking advantage of communities being researched.**

**(Community partner)**

**The likelihood of being given less attention if people are from a minority ethnic group, or women, is highlighted.**

**The voice of BME women is very important to me and I hate it when people talk for them, even well-meaning friends should not do that. A quote by Alice Walker resonates with me when she says 'No person is your friend who demands your silence or denies your right to grow.' Gender, ethnicity, can be a huge barriers if you allow them to be. When there are issues in the community the powers that be go straight to the men, and women's voices get lost and this then strengthens the male hierarchy and then we hear comments like BME women don't engage, when have authorities tried to engage them in a meaningful way?**

**(Community partner)**

**The structural inequalities highlighted illustrate that impact on knowledge production can come from a range of sources. They include: unacknowledged contributions of minority ethnic communities to local industry; approaches to coproduction in local structures that do not sufficiently facilitate community participation, despite securing funding to do this work; the impact of funding cuts on Black and Minority Ethnic community organisations and women; and insufficient knowledge and acknowledgement about the traditions of specific communities and the knowledge they hold.**

**The voice of BME women is very important to me and I hate it when people talk for them, even well-meaning friends should not do that.**

## External Impacts

**External events that took place while the project was under way had an impact on the work being undertaken, as well as the people involved. The Rotherham Child Sexual Exploitation issue came into the spotlight after the project commenced and is described as having a negative impact on local people including those working on the project.**

**It did (have an effect on the project), because obviously everything was normal, then all of a sudden it did impact emotionally on the people, community researchers that worked you know in Rotherham and anybody else from the University that worked here. And the young people and the participants just had a horrendous time.**

**(Community partner)**

**As a result of this issue surfacing and the impact it was having on local communities and staff working on the project, both academic and community partners thought a change in focus was needed. In discussion with the funders, it was agreed that creating safe spaces for women and girls would become a key focus for all local Imagine projects and the 'Writing in the Community' projects would specifically focus on what would help women and girls to become more empowered.**

**Another impact was the high number of Far Right marches taking place in Rotherham which, among other things, meant people from minority ethnic communities were afraid to leave their homes and therefore unable to attend activities and events outside.**

**Like that poem in ‘Threads of Time’ about being able to go out. And I think it’s difficult ... I mean sometimes (community partner) emailed me on the Saturday saying ‘Well at least I can work because I can’t go out’ and I’m thinking that’s the reality – people can’t go out of their homes.**

**(Academic partner)**

**Yes, we’ve had 17 Far Right marches, so that has had an impact. I never knew there were so many Far Right groups. I live near the town centre, you have to pass the railway station as the racists come into Rotherham so I have to pass them to get home. Some of their comments are really vile and incite hatred.**

**(Community partner)**

**These incidents, combined with a focus on creating safe spaces, enabled participants in the ‘Writing in the Community’ projects to vocalise and express their thoughts and feelings about the impact of these events, on them and their communities.**

**Following the publication of the Jay Report after the Child Sexual Exploitation incidents in Rotherham and then the Casey Review into opportunity and integration, the academic and community partners, along with other members of the Imagine team in Rotherham, were invited to speak with civil servants at the Department of Communities and Local Government. The community partner gave feedback at this meeting on the ways in which the Muslim community in Rotherham was affected.**

**The public narrative on Muslim women can be demeaning, the negative stereotype such as Muslim women can’t speak English. This is third, fourth generation, I mean it’s only my mum whose 78 can’t speak English, everybody else does. New communities, women who are arriving from abroad can’t speak**

**English, then that's generalised so the next day you go to the doctor's and the receptionist says 'Can you speak English?' And you say 'yes I was born in Newcastle.' They've seen the news. And it's all those things. And one of the other things I did bring up was the need for more community development workers, the need to work with communities to develop their capacity rather than 'doing to' communities. Because it's very difficult for people to take that first step into something. And as a result of that I have worked with another organisation and we've kind of secured a bit of money from the Council who got the funding from the Ministry of Housing Communities and Local Government to look at offering community development and activism training to local women. Sometimes women need somebody to knock on the door and take them to that activity or event, that was how I started as a community development worker in the 1980's. Once they've done that initial step, the biggest part of it is leaving your home and coming out. It's pointless having great initiatives if people don't come out of the house and if they don't know about opportunities, face to face work is important.**  
(Community partner)

**The potential impact of stereotypes and incorrect assumptions about communities is highlighted and the importance of recognising that communities are always evolving and changing. Community development work is described as key to engaging people who may otherwise be excluded from participating in available opportunities, including collaborative projects.**

## Representing Communities

**All community partners in the Imagine project are said to have established strong links and trust with local communities and other community organisations. Through these links and networks they are able to have a wide reach in terms of informing communities about opportunities including participation in projects such as Imagine. This is said to be important in reaching and engaging with people from diverse communities and community partners play an important brokering role.**

**I've been working in Rotherham for 30 years and I am part of a few consortiums in Rotherham, I know people and especially in the voluntary sector. We work well together most of the time and have the same values and ethics. The voluntary sector has been hit by funding cuts but every day in these organisations people come to work to make an impact. And you know people who will say 'yeah we'd love to get involved'.**

**(Community partner)**

**The focus of a project, such as geographic location or to work with specific communities, is described as influencing who participates. The importance of being aware about changing demographics and where new communities might be located geographically is highlighted.**

**We're kind of working in the central areas (of Rotherham) mostly, but that's where they (minority ethnic communities) are, most of them. But obviously we've got communities now moving into other areas as well. But because of racism they get exposed to, they then move out to the BME areas. I mean the two particular communities I've been working with on the University projects are young people from the Pakistani community and the Roma community. And what we do have in**

**Rotherham are new emerging communities like the Spanish community, African community, Afghani community - so we are getting new communities who are making Rotherham their home. And it's just being aware of who else is in Rotherham. Because Rotherham's become much more diverse than it was before, because it used to only have the Pakistani and Yemeni community and in the last 10 years we have kind of grown and we've got to be mindful of the fact, that there are other communities moving in. I only recently found out we have a Tamil community in Rotherham and also we sometimes forget about the host community so they feel isolated.**

**(Community partner)**

**Identifying and reaching the full range of communities in a locality is described as a potential challenge; addressing this requires vigilance about changing local demographics and extending networks to include people and communities who are more recent arrivals in the locality. The role of brokers is highlighted as significant and includes brokerage between different communities as well as within specific community groups. People in new communities who speak English are described as being more likely to have a role as broker between the project and the community.**

**It is a broker usually. There's a Spanish group, they have got somebody who speaks English. Basically it's the people who speak English, and then they advocate for the community and they help you engage that community. Because we deliver football sessions so we get diverse communities play football together and through that we identified young men for the University project. You don't know sometimes which communities are there. Basically you get one person who speaks English and that's the person that kind of talks to others as a broker. Rotherham is changing in diversity so very quickly, or very differently. Sheffield have had that diversity, we've just got it now. Increase in migration does create**

**Increase in migration does create tensions if people rely on media narratives and don't meet anyone different to themselves. Universities and communities can work together to connect people.**

**tensions if people rely on media narratives and don't meet anyone different to themselves. Universities and communities can work together to connect people.**

(Community partner)

**The limitations of applying generic terminology that encompasses a wide range of communities is described a problematic; such terminology does not always represent how individuals define their own identity and it can mask differences within specific communities.**

**And they (officials) kind of cluster all BME people together, because South Asian, Indian, Pakistani, and you say no, no. This is because the Indian community in Rotherham is professional doctors and people like that who came here first. While the Pakistani community was working in manual work. So there was that class difference. Yes, the host community lumped us together. And for me the young people's voice came through because around the citizen agenda, it's like the British citizen and they'd show themselves as global citizens, they did not see themselves tied because of the social medium or the global links to travel. So they were citizens of the world that did not see themselves as British and how the fashion and music influenced their daily upbringing.**

(Community partner)

**The academic partner spoke about developing a potential future project to look how young people view their own identities and the concept of global citizenship.**

**I think one thing I will be talking to (a colleague) about is this idea of a film project. One of the things that's come out of Imagine is the importance, like (community partner) was saying, of hearing young people's voices, but particularly doing unconventional ways of getting different models of young people's identities. So one of the things I want to do is a project with a colleague**

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**who's working in Brazil, which might be about young people as global citizens and also thinking about their identities differently.**

**(Academic partner)**

**The focus on young people for future projects is said to be informed by the recognition that their voices need to be heard more widely and both partners are inspired to develop work that empowers them.**

## University–Black and Minority Ethnic community collaborations

**Developing equal partnerships with Black and Minority Ethnic communities is described as important and the community partner made a number of suggestions about how this could be achieved:**

- **Universities supporting people from communities to become researchers. This would build capacity to research, be a voice for their own communities and have time to reflect.**
- **Community collaborations with universities also enable community partners to collaborate with local communities outside the university on specific projects and topics. This is important and should be recognised.**
- **Involve people who can do justice to the communities that participate and represent their voice to policy makers and funders.**
- **Address stereotypical assumptions about Black and Minority Ethnic communities because “once assumptions are made you can’t change those people’s assumptions.” There is no connection between communities that live in different areas so they base their assumptions on what they see and read in the media.**
- **Reach out into the communities and get to know them, the environment they live in, their cultures and traditions.**
- **Recognise that research can empower communities and many people from minority ethnic communities have skills that do not reflect their day jobs. “In Rotherham we have the most qualified taxi drivers,” and “people with accountancy degrees, legal degrees, ending up in call centres.”**

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**Facilitating people to learn from international perspectives about university-Black and Minority Ethnic community collaborations is considered important, especially where such perspectives can provide insights that are not available or accessible in one's own country. In this collaboration, the encounter with Maori researchers and their work on knowledge production is described as very beneficial by the community partner.**

**Universities should make an effort to go out into communities and this may help address the divide that exists between them.**

**I think if universities really try and go out into the communities, they will find people like me but you don't get the opportunity to connect because universities stay in their ivory towers, we stay in the community. And it also empowers young women, cos the girls I work with are now doing A levels and looking at applying to Sheffield University as well, so they're getting the students that way as well. I know the University have got a big focus on getting overseas students, because that's the money, but what about young people in your own towns, in England?**

**(Community partner)**

**Matching academics with communities and community interests is considered important.**

**It's got to be right. Yeah, cos I did go to the School of Education, one of the meetings I think, and you know some people have a good understanding, and (academic partner) worked in, her background was CRE (Council for Racial Equality) community development. Also you come across community researchers that you connect with as well, so yeah ... so it is the right kind of person. Otherwise you send the wrong kind of academic, it can destroy a lot you know, like (academic partner) has built a lot of relationships between the community and**

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**Sheffield University. So if somebody else comes without the necessary knowledge and skills, it can be undone quickly.**

**(Community partner)**

## The future

**The two academic and community partners interviewed for this case study intend to continue working together on collaborative projects in the future, even though the academic partner is moving to another job in a different geographic location. Both partners believe there is much more work to do in support of communities, there is said to be disconnect in strategies that intend to address issues which impact on communities but don't deliver and this is a shared concern for both partners.**

**It is lovely to have aspirations and vision and often strategies developed by local and national government are not realistic and communities feel let down if they cannot be delivered. Above all, the vision should come from the communities and it should be collaborative which does not happen.**

**(Community partner)**

**Both partners have decided to continue working in partnership to develop and deliver other projects with a particular interest in those looking at young people, identity and citizenship.**