



# **Exploring value in KE collaborations between higher education and theatres**

**Report from an NCACE micro-commission  
project by TORCH and the Independent  
Theatre Council**

**Ruth Moore, in collaboration with  
Charlotte Jones, Zoe Bateman and  
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*With thanks to Suzie Leighton, Emily Hopkins and Noshin  
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# Introduction

There is growing interest from researchers based at Higher Education Institutions in exploring 'knowledge exchange' collaborations with theatres and theatre-makers. Theatre is rich with possibilities for such mutually beneficial projects, but ideas around the cost and value of the work involved require careful navigation.

Researchers will sometimes undertake this kind of project as part of agreed activity for their posts or as a funded research engagement project. Some universities have knowledge exchange champions and professional services staff to manage such activity. Theatres, however, often have significantly less infrastructure to support this kind of work, and less capacity to absorb the costs of collaboration.

Theatres were amongst the organisations surveyed in [NCACE's 2021 survey with Arts Professional](#), -this collaboration sought to deepen our understanding for this particular art form. The report aims to uncover the key enabling factors for theatres to agree to take part in a KE project, with particular reference to how to budget for theatrical collaboration in project applications, and how to help HEIs and theatres 'speak' more clearly to each other.

The information for this report was gathered through an online survey hosted by NCACE and promoted through ITC and amongst our wider networks in the performing arts community.

## Who took part?

39 individuals and organisations responded to the survey, representing a broad range of artforms displayed by frequency in Figure 1.

In addition to the most common forms (**Drama, Dance, Physical Theatre and Mixed Media**), numerous other art forms were involved, including immersive, game theatre and storytelling.

The size of organisation was predominantly **individual** (33%) and **2-9 people** (59%), with a further 3 organisations of 10-49 people (8%).

**Touring companies** were most strongly represented (41%), with the remaining organisations broadly spread across **creating and producing work** including community facilitation and festival producers.

There was some geographical spread, however the main regions represented in the responses were **London** (38%) and **England, South East** (23%).

The dataset overall is relatively small, and focussed most closely on small touring companies, however responses do demonstrate a reasonable breadth of art form and geographical spread. While the survey results are limited by the size of dataset and diversity of response, they provide a useful starting point for developing collaborative dialogue between HEIs and theatre-makers.

## Headline findings

- Participants gave voice to a wide range of collaborations with a varied set of academic partners. 57 HEIs were cited as existing or previous partners. We found a richness of experience, alongside a strong level of interest in future collaboration.
- 71% had already engaged in teaching or leading workshops with students and/or university staff, and 46-53% had taken part in full knowledge exchange activities



- Organisations consider this kind of work to be the remit of key personnel, from artistic directors to community producers.
- The main barriers identified were finding information about opportunities, knowing how to get started, and ensuring a realistic time commitment.
- Our close investigation of the costs of collaboration uncovered a range of questions to support dialogue between artistic and academic partners, including: *Have you encountered difficulties in getting all costs considered when setting budgets? Do you feel academic partners understand the costs of production? How can we better give an insight to those without a theatre background?*

## Detailed analysis

### Collaboration so far

Section 1 of the survey was designed to understand the scale and nature of collaborations that respondents had already undertaken. The majority (64%) had already collaborated with an HEI more than once, with a further 18% having collaborated once. The remaining 18% had not collaborated but were interested in doing so.

When asked about the type of collaborations, we found that:

- The most common type of collaboration already engaged in was teaching or leading workshops with students and/or university staff (71% had done this)
- Around half the respondents (46-53%) had taken part in further knowledge exchange activities ranging from co-design of projects to using university resources to develop or add value to their productions
- The least common engagement (20%) was in simply providing space for universities (e.g. to showcase work) and this was also the response that was of least interest to those who had not yet collaborated – 41% would not be interested in this.
- Amongst those who had not yet collaborated in some of these areas, there was strong interest in the majority of collaborative forms of engagement listed in the survey
- A wide range of institutions were mentioned as having taken part in previous collaborations (57). The frequency of mentions per institution is unlikely to be statistically significant (e.g. Oxford University is most frequently cited, but that is likely to be because the survey was shared with our engaged group of collaborators). However what is notable is that the HEIs varied from those dedicated to performing arts (including LAMDA, RADA, ALRA, RCSSD) through post-92 universities (e.g. Bournemouth, Birmingham City, Leeds Trinity) to older institutions (e.g. Bristol, Nottingham, Kent).

### Styles of collaboration

We asked people to share collaborations that stand out as most significant or impactful. The number who gave a free text response to this (72%) indicates a strong level of engagement with the survey and the work cited. Here are some shared stories which reflect the range of collaborations mentioned (*see Q4*):

*Developed in partnership with Durham University, Woven Bones brought to life the untold stories of Scottish Soldiers found in a mass grave near Durham Cathedral. This Cap-a-Pie production written by Laura Lindow offered audiences a unique chance to walk in the soldiers shoes. Woven Bones toured from Dunbar to Durham, the route marched by the soldiers, in 2018.*

*In Summer 2021 we performed at the WSA, Southampton, responding to the work of the graduating artists. We hope to expand and develop this aspect of our work. It reaches new audiences, allows us to do something very specific to our skill set, and has a huge cross-discipline impact on the staff as well as the students, in terms of language and their perspective on their created work.*

*Most of our productions have been in collaboration with academics, most notably though CONTAINED Project which was developed in 2016 collaboration with Dr Marieke van Houte (International Migration Institute)*

*after birth - a stage play about motherhood and mental health. Academic partners: National Perinatal Epidemiology Unit, Dept Population Health, University of Oxford. Charity Partners: Action on Postpartum Psychosis.*

*We're the Associate Theatre Company in Residence at the University of Birmingham's Department of Drama & Theatre Arts. This encompasses directing/devising productions as well as teaching.*

### **Collaboration so far – summary:**

- Participants in this survey gave voice to a wide range of collaborations with a varied set of academic partners. 57 HEIs were cited for involvement in existing or previous work. We found a richness of experience, alongside a strong level of interest in future collaboration.



- The most common type of existing collaboration would not in all cases be 'true' knowledge exchange: teaching or leading workshops with students and/or university staff (71%)
- Half of respondents had taken part in further knowledge exchange activities ranging from co-design of projects to using university resources to develop or add value to their productions
- The least common engagement in the past (20%) or in lack of future interest (41%) was in simply providing space for universities (e.g. to showcase work)
- Amongst those who had not yet collaborated in some of these areas, there was strong interest in the collaborative forms of engagement listed in the survey

## What makes collaborations work?

Section 2 looked at the details of how knowledge exchange collaborations happen in this space.

- We asked who within the organisation would lead on these kinds of projects (see Q5). All organisations responded to this question with 15 (38%) citing ‘director’ which suggests a good level of recognition and embedding of KE activity within these organisations. However, since a high proportion of the respondents are freelancers or small organisations, ‘director’ carries a different meaning than it would within larger theatres. Other roles mentioned included producers, writers, creative engagement producers, creative learning.
- We asked about barriers to collaboration, with responses ranked in Figure 2 below. Nearly half did not perceive a barrier. Then the survey identified a cluster of three most common challenges (affecting 23-33%) which relate to getting started (lack of information, experience and time), with a further one (20%) indicating a lack of response from an HEI.

Response	Count
None of these	16
We are interested but we don’t hear about opportunities	13
We are interested but we don’t know how to get started	11
We’re interested but we lack time or capacity to get started	9
We approached an HEI with an idea but they did not respond	8
We nearly got involved but funding didn’t come through	2
We got started but people involved left the organisation	2
There are no HEIs near us	0
It would be a distraction from our main mission	0
Other	4

Figure 2

## Summary:

- The survey provides evidence that organisations consider this kind of work to be the remit of a range of key personnel, from artistic directors to community producers. These examples could help HEIs and theatres advocate for involvement from relevant and pivotal staff when setting up collaborations
- The barriers identified fall into two helpful groupings for universities or umbrella organisations who wish to support more organisations into collaboration: providing proactive information about opportunities, offering advice about how to get started, and ensuring a realistic time commitment. The second category is troubleshooting relationships – 20% had failed to get a response from a university. There could be a role for organisations to signpost theatres to the most relevant contact at an HEI, so that at the very least an initial exchange of idea and response can take place.

## What do collaborations cost?

Section 3 of the survey presented three case studies to encourage theatre-makers to consider the cost to them of participating in three different kinds of knowledge exchange. In each case they were asked to consider the costs beyond those that could be easily itemised (e.g. actor fees) – the general, and often more hidden, costs of production. We knew this section was an imperfect methodology – it was difficult to word exactly what we were seeking to uncover, precisely because it is rarely discussed, and very variable depending on size and nature of organisation. Some respondents felt the response options were pitched too low, others picked the low end of the scale which we assumed we had included simply to make space for any response. However, the results can provide a useful starting point to be interrogated. In the summary below we use discussion of the results to propose some questions or provocations for further discussion.

### Case study 1:

An HEI approaches you to be a speaker at a 1-day conference about a theme you want to know more about.

It will involve one senior member of your organisation, and a half day of preparation.

What will this cost your organisation?

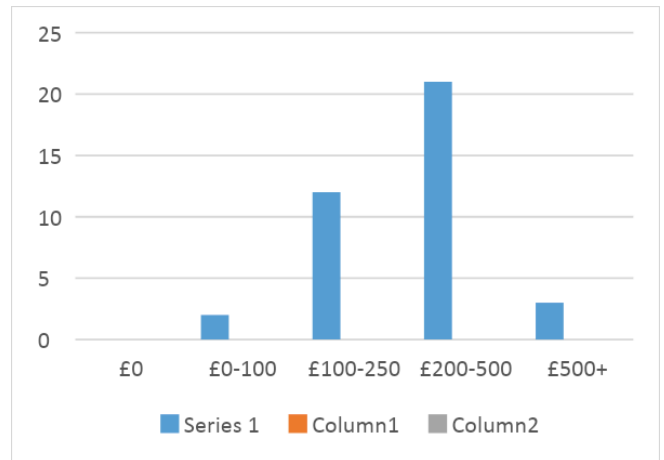


Figure 3: Cost to present at conference

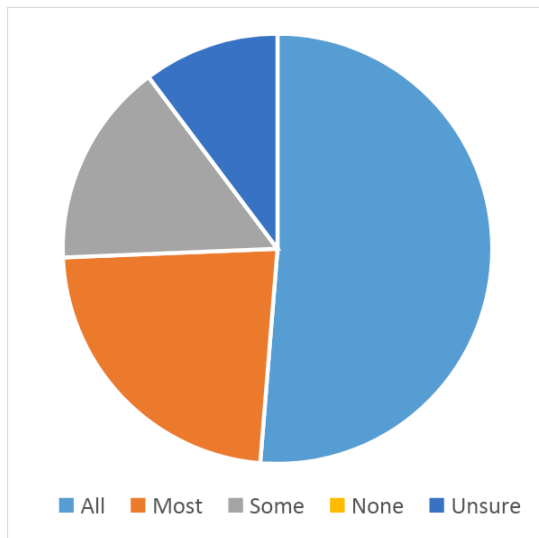


Figure 4: How much funding would you expect the HEI to provide?

- Responses to the first case study revealed that there is significant variation in how much organisations would charge to present at a conference. While fee variation is not unusual, it suggests that there is a useful exercise to be done in increasing transparency on speaker fees for theatre-makers in academic contexts.
- It was notable that not all theatre-makers would charge the full cost of their participation in such an event to the HEI. The reasons for this merit further investigation.

### Questions:

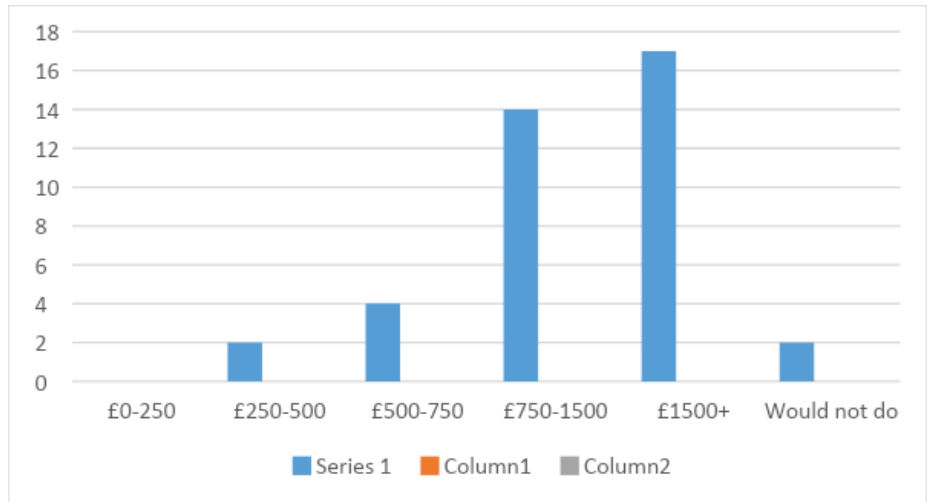
Do you feel equipped to negotiate an appropriate speaker fee?

Is there a benefit to you in speaking at an academic conference?

## Case study 2:

An HEI invites you to be involved in a research project. A researcher wants to explore whether their book might work on stage.

The R&D phase will be a 5-day workshop. You will have the option to develop the project afterwards.



Excluding the direct fees of actors/writers/directors, what will this cost your organisation to produce?

Figure 5: Cost to produce case study 2

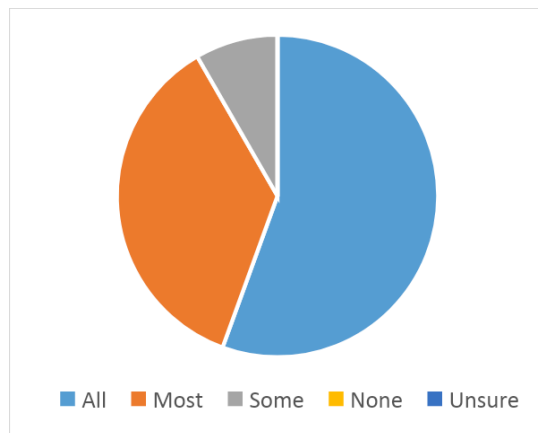


Figure 6: How much funding would you expect the HEI to provide?

- Case study 2 was designed to be clearly initiated by an HEI, calling on the expertise of the theatre-maker(s), and with a possible onward benefit to them. Here we saw a greater confidence in naming the cost, with 36% pitching the production of the project at £750-1500, and 44% at £1500+. 85% would expect the HEI to provide all or most of the funding
- One respondent noted: 'would expect HEI to cover all costs, unless it fits really well with our existing plans, as we otherwise wouldn't have capacity to fundraise for it alongside our other projects.'

- This case study provided clear evidence that there are significant production costs which should be factored into project budgets. Answers to Q7 provided some insight into the kinds of costs this included, amongst them:
  - *Getting a professional record of the process on film*
  - *Access costs*
  - *Financial management*
  - *Realistic budgets for development programmes*
  - *Marketing for the collaboration*
  - *Finishing the project [after the contact]*

**Questions:**

**Have you encountered difficulties in getting all costs considered when setting budgets?**

**Do you feel academic partners understand the costs of production? How can we better give an insight to those without a theatre background?**

### Case study 3:

You approach a researcher at an HEI to collaborate on development of a new production.

You have 5 days of workshops/ visits to rehearsals. The process helps the researcher develop new work.



Figure 7: Cost to produce case study 3

Excluding the direct fees of creatives, what will this R&D phase cost your organisation to produce?

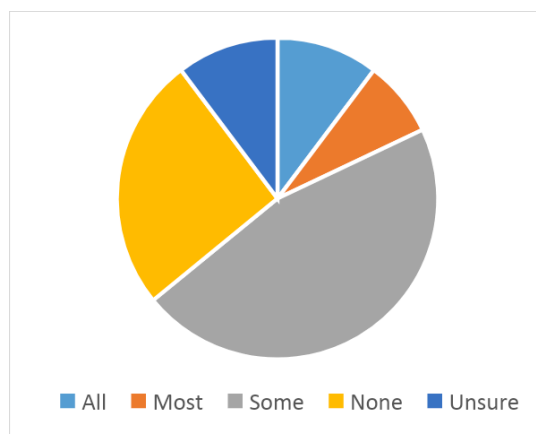


Figure 8: How much funding would you expect the HEI to provide?

- Case study 3 explored an example which was initiated by the artistic partner. The costs of production were largely judged to be in the upper reaches of the response scale: 77% felt the cost to be £500 or more.
- It was interesting that 18% felt that the HEI should pay all or most of the production costs for a collaboration initiated by the theatre-maker – this merits more investigation. A substantial number (46%) set this as ‘some’ of the funding, and some (26%) felt they would shoulder the whole cost.
- One respondent noted: ‘would probably only expect the researcher to cover their own time (i.e. paid for by their institution), but have also worked in scenarios where we fundraise for their time, and scenarios in which they fundraise and contribute to production costs.’

### Questions:

If you involve a researcher in a project you have initiated, do you feel you are using them as a consultant, or as a collaborator?

What drives you to choose projects which would benefit from research input?

## Further thoughts

The survey concluded with an opportunity for respondents to add anything else about the financial costs of collaboration, or any other barriers we had not asked about. The range of responses reflected the very different levels of experience of collaboration, from those who felt confident to ask more of universities to those who were interested in getting started. There was one theme with multiple mentions – getting timeframes to align. These responses may serve as helpful provocations to further discussion:

- *“Universities are notoriously slow to pay and it can really affect cashflow”*
- *“Timeframes for collaborating with HEIs can be really tricky - some work with a very long lead in time and others a very short turnaround time. This can be costly in its own way.”*
- *“it's really good to be aware of the relative power dynamics in a partnership, and consider this when planning the collaboration”*
- *“we agree on a budget but every project overruns - as a consequence, an unfunded company will tend to be required to do voluntary work”*
- *“it is... important that all partners understand the real costs of making theatre from the start. It is essential that all parties get involved in the fundraising.”*



## The way ahead

The survey uncovered a wealth of useful information, and already actionable points. Each partner can now reflect on ways to embed this learning into the way they work to support theatre-makers and HEIs. We envision a further two possible phases of this collaborative project:

### **Phase 2: Dissemination to provoke further discussion**

We have been invited to take part in an NCACE event in October 2022, at which we will present the findings of this survey and discuss the emerging themes. This could provide the opportunity to promote a further dialogue:

### **Phase 3: Follow up discussions**

72% of our survey respondents indicated they would be willing to engage in further conversation on these issues. We do not have capacity for individual conversations as initially planned, but (if all partners would like to continue) this could take the form of an online focus group meeting hosted by ITC between members of the project team and artists. They could be invited to respond to the provocations generated by the survey, as well as further issues they would like to raise.

Each focus group could work towards a 'mini manifesto' / set of top tips. These could be shared with collaborators and included in a second version of this report.

## Appendix: The people

[TORCH - The Oxford Research Centre in the Humanities](#)

[Independent Theatre Council](#)

[National Centre for Academic and Cultural Exchange](#)

### List of survey participants (with permission):

- Sputnik Theatre Company
- Orientale Sarda
- Whitworks Adventures in Theatre
- Old Fire Station, Oxford
- HISTORIA THEATRE COMPANY
- Crack Willow Studios - Flights of Helios
- SLIDE
- Settle Stories
- New Earth Theatre
- Border Crossings
- Crowded Room
- Cap-a-Pie
- Barney Norris
- Certain Blacks
- Turtle Key Arts
- ReachOut Arts UK Limited
- Maiden Moor Productions
- Fluid Motion Theatre Company
- Scarabeus Aerial Theatre
- Red Ladder
- Oily Cart
- Diverse City
- Little Earthquake
- Nutshell Theatre
- Justice in Motion
- Wild Geese Theatre Company
- Attic Theatre Company
- The Last Baguette theatre company
- Story Jam
- Theatre Ruthenium
- Half Moon Young People's Theatre
- Teatro Vivo
- Apples and Snakes
- Company Gabrielle Moleta



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