

Transition Research Primer

Transition and Researchers:
Unlocking the potential for collaboration

Transition
Research
Network.org



Transition Research Primer v1.0
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I. Who is this primer for?

Welcome to the first ‘official’ publication of the Transition Research Network. We’re aiming this little booklet right into the heart of Transition, into the core groups and project teams within Transition Initiatives, Low Carbon Communities, CRAGs and Sustainable Places, in the hope that you’ll get excited and unruly about an amazing and under-utilised resource out there – researchers.

Forget those preconceived notions of researchers sitting in labs staring through microscopes or pacing around with clipboards and calipers, fixated on the paper they’re about to submit to an ultra obscure publication with an unpronounceable title. No, we’re talking about a different breed – sure, they’re still brainy and methodical and may have their favorite theories or statistical

techniques. But they’re also engaged with the larger problems of the world, they understand humans as well as the data and they enjoy rolling their sleeves up and mucking in.

And best of all, a large number of them want to direct their work where it has the best chance of a prompt and meaningful impact – at the community level.

So this little book will shine a little light on the murky world of research. It will first ask if it’s possible for these two disparate groups to work together. It will examine how an enhanced research capacity in your initiative might be invaluable to making progress. We’ll then cover where to go looking for researchers, how to engage with them and how to make sure everyone gets the outcome they’re looking for.

2. Researchers and Transition: a match made in heaven?

Before we cover why you might need a researcher, let's examine whether transitioners and researchers have enough in common to be able to work together productively.

Well, the nature of the work for each is similar – it's experimental, it tests out ideas and theories in the hope of figuring out what will work best in practice. Both Transitioners and researchers are prepared to make a U-turn if new information presents itself.

The approach to asking questions can be complementary. Transitioners are asking high level questions such as, "If we collectively changed our buying patterns, how much opportunity is there for more local businesses here?" Researchers can help by initially focusing that huge question into a bite-sized chunk, for example, "Let's just look at food for now", then breaking that down into answerable questions, such as, "What proportion of this community's spend goes on food?" and, "Where is that money currently spent?" They'll formulate and implement a research method that will bring solid

answers to those questions. Beyond that, they're likely to know of prior research on important aspects of the project, such as buying patterns, that could really help inform how to pose the right questions and the next steps that your initiative might take in this area.

Transitioners and researchers often bring complementary viewpoints to a problem. The former have inside knowledge about, for example, which new low carbon transport options might be viable in their locale. The latter are able to conduct a rigorous inquiry and establish which option could bring the greatest reductions in emissions or benefit the largest number of local people.

The independence of researchers and the robustness of their work bring a reliability and credibility to the important work that Transitioners are doing. This can become crucial if, for example, the research results are used to support a motion at the local council, or if you would like to promote your initiative's latest campaign to wider local, national and international audiences.



3. Researching and doing

There's clearly scope for a beneficial relationship between Transition and research approaches that promote social change. Action research takes real-world issues as its starting point, and seeks not just to understand them, but to do something about them at the same time. Positive impacts are a built-in part of the process of doing research, not a possible afterthought. In permaculture terms, it is a way to 'stack' intellectual and practical outcomes into the same project.

In many ways, action research is a lot like Transition. Both see something in their community they would like to improve, they learn more about it and try something out. What they learn affects what they do in the future.

A difference is that researchers put more emphasis on documenting and analysing what happens.

This is also important in Transition, but easily overlooked when things are moving at a hectic pace.

In participatory action research, researchers and non-researchers work together on an equal basis. This allows a Transition Initiative to add the skills of researchers to those already within the group – and/or to take advantage of research skills of existing members. For some researchers it's a big step out of their comfort zone, but done well it can create synergies that enhance academic aims – and be a lot of fun.

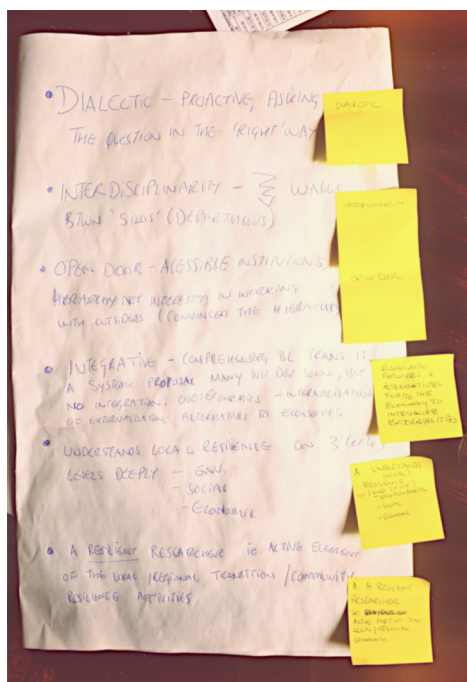


4. What can researchers do?

Action research isn't the be all and end all, and it's not right for all researchers or for all projects. You might prefer a more conventional approach if you have clear needs for information but lack the time or other resources to get it yourselves. Sometimes a closer or fresh look at an issue can lead to new ideas and projects.

The possibilities for constructive collaboration between Transition groups and researchers are endless. Some of best ideas we've come across are:

- Measuring the impact a Transition initiative is having on the wellbeing of its local community, in economic terms and beyond;
- Assessing which local areas would benefit most from a “draught-busters” or retrofit programme;
- Evaluating local authority efforts to initiate and/or support Transition groups;
- Co-creating methods for self-evaluation by Transition groups;
- Helping with a ‘leaky bucket’ economic analysis of your community;
- Assessing levels of community inclusion and diversity within a Transition initiative, and exploring action that could be taken to improve these;
- Analysing local business trends and identifying key barriers to business participation in the Transition process;
- Building a picture of local buying habits, to demonstrate where key areas for improvement are and to help shape actions for promoting the local economy.



It's nice if research can feed directly into a project, but even if not it can still be worthwhile. Interviews and the like can be a welcome chance to pause and reflect on your work, and talk about it with someone different and in new ways. A temporary guest in your initiative, someone who understands and respects your situation and supports your work, can by itself be a breath of fresh air. And who knows what you'll inspire them to do once their research is over?

5. What can go wrong?

It's not always rosy, and some Transition groups have reported negative experiences of working with researchers. Interviews, questionnaires and other research exercises can take a lot of time and energy. Having observers at meetings or events, extracting information, may become disconcerting.

Another potentially problematical area is timescales. Transitioners need results quickly to feed into a project but, depending on the type of research, a researcher often needs what may seem like a lot of time to get the work written up. Of course it's standard practice – and a minimal ethical requirement – for a researcher to share data and report back on their findings. You just have to make sure this happens on a timescale that suits your initiative, and perhaps agree this in advance. Some sort of interim feedback can be a good compromise.

By the nature of their work, researchers can also expose Transition groups to public or semi-public scrutiny. Respecting requests for anonymity and confidentiality are fundamental research ethics. Even so, seeing yourself in print

can be less than comfortable, and it's important to consider the potential consequences. New groups, fragile groups and those going through phases of change might prefer to stay out of the spotlight.

Research projects with funding behind them offer scope for sharing resources, but this has its dangers. A financial or other type of donation can be a straightforward way to honour your contribution to the research effort, but accepting payment, whether individually or on behalf of your group, implies a certain level of responsibility to the project. In addition, group dynamics can change dramatically when money enters a previously voluntary initiative.

Some funding programmes are not based on a considered appreciation of the needs and circumstances of community groups. In these cases, money carelessly thrown at a group can do more harm than good. If the prospect of financial or other compensation is your only motivation for getting involved, chances are it's not the right project for you.



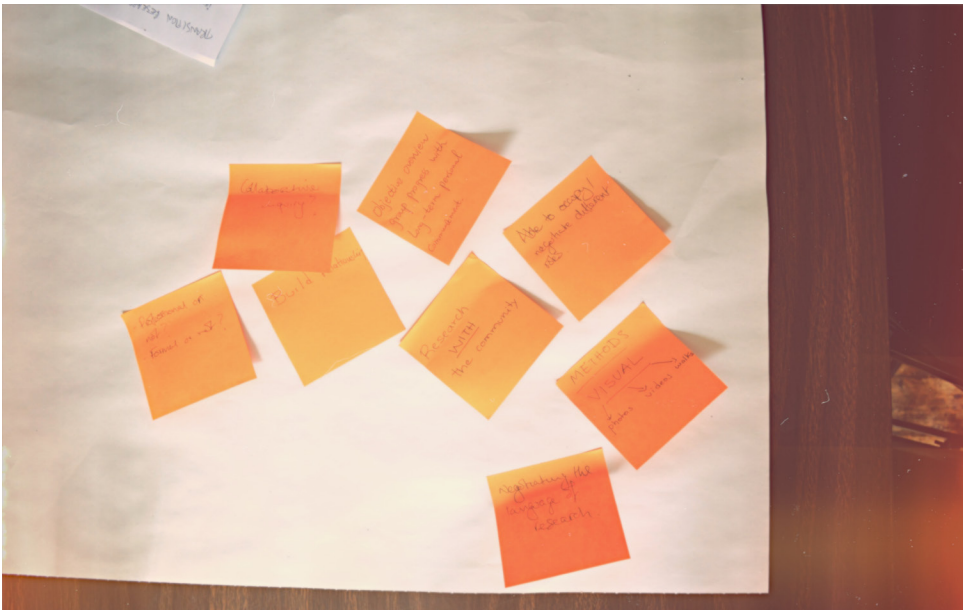
6. Avoiding and resolving problems

Being aware of your strengths and limitations can help when weighing up whether a potential collaboration is likely to be right for you. Do you feel comfortable with a researcher's attitude and expectations? Are you confident in your capacity to work with them effectively? Does the proposed arrangement fit your needs and interests? If you have doubts about any of these, it's important to raise them early and either change or abandon the plan. Otherwise you might end up involved in something that doesn't work for either party.

If things do go wrong despite your precautions, you are free to back out of a voluntary collaboration at any point. If your involvement is more binding – for example, if it involves monetary or other material exchange – it is important to be clear

about obligations from the outset. Either way, it is good practice to agree upon a written memorandum of understanding. If you have this in place at the start, it will be a useful fall-back document in the event of any later dispute.

No-one likes to tell tales, but it may be your only choice if problems arise that reasoned discussion can't solve. Universities apply ethical protocols to research at all levels, from student projects up. You can ask a researcher to provide a copy of these, and evidence that their project has satisfied them. This should also indicate who you can go to if things do go badly wrong. Ethical review processes aren't perfect, and the people enforcing them should welcome feedback when things don't work as they should.



7. Fishing for researchers

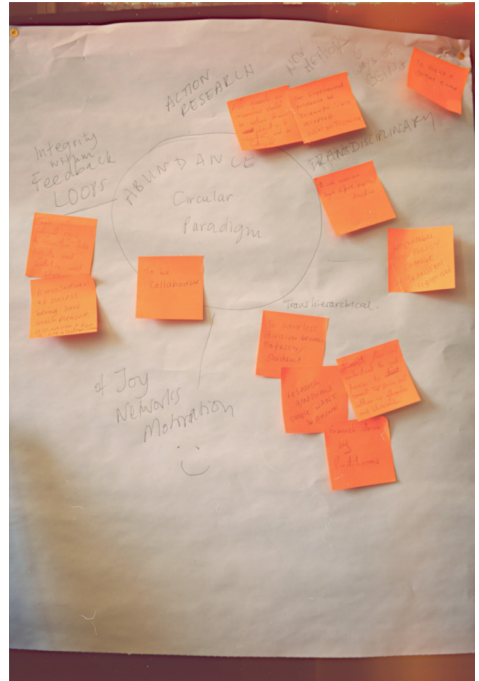
Most of the researchers in your community probably hang out at your local university. From the outside, it might seem like a bewilderingly complicated organisation, full of departments and units and with no simple way of telling who does what, or where. From the inside, it probably looks just the same. Tracking down your potential Transition researchers might seem like an intimidating task, so here are some pointers to help get you started.

Some universities are pretty keen to get their researchers working with people out in the wider world. Programmes to support this use many different terms, some common ones are:

*Science Shops,
Public Engagement,
Knowledge Exchange,
and Impact.*

If you find a department or post with one of those in its name, chances are they'll be delighted to point you in the right direction.

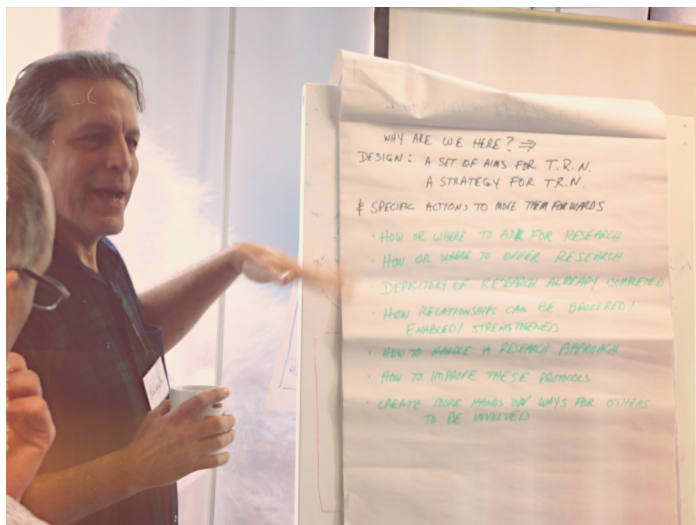
Universities also like their staff to tell the world about all the wonderful research they are doing. Cruise the web pages of likely-sounding departments and research groups and drop an email to anyone who looks like they might be your kind of researcher. Bear in mind you'll most probably be adding to the logjam in what is already an overflowing inbox. If your message is brief, to the point, and has a very clear ask, it's far more likely to get their attention.



7.1 What about the F-word?

Typically, research needs to be paid for. You may get really lucky and either find, or be approached by, a researcher with funding already in their pocket. If your requirements match up nicely with their aims, that could be a very quick courtship and research could be underway very promptly.

It might be that your research needs match up with an available funding stream, in which case a researcher may ask you to get involved in a collaborative funding bid. If this is the case, make sure you know what's in store – onerous applications, long turnaround times and low success rates might turn that 'opportunity' into a long and rocky road for which you have neither the time, patience or stamina.



8. DIY Research

You don't have to be part of a university or some other high-powered organisation to do research. There are some wonderful research projects that Transition groups have done themselves, like the Reconomy Project's studies of local economic potential.

Of course, it often makes sense to work with a university and take advantage of the capacities and resources it provides. A good university-Transition partnership can help build broader networks of collaboration within a community. This is most effective – and minimises the risk of being disempowering – when it acts as a two-way exchange of skills and knowledge.

The climate change research group at Lisbon University has come up with a good system. It employs a number of activists in local Transition groups part-time as action researchers. Transitioners bring skills and knowledge that complement those of

faculty members. They can often access more data, more quickly, than researchers not directly involved in Transition, giving good value for money. The work provides a good Transition livelihood and an opportunity for activists to deepen their knowledge and understanding, helping to build capacity within their initiative.

If you feel up to several years of serious commitment, you could join the growing ranks of Transition doctoral researchers. Rob Hopkins became the original Dr. Transition in 2010 on the completion of his PhD at Plymouth University, based on action research in Totnes. The PhD funded aspects of his work with Transition Town Totnes, enabling him to document the emerging process in significant detail. His thesis is a valuable 'nuts and bolts' document that now informs Transition elsewhere, and the first of several Transition PhDs now completed or underway.

9. Researchers are human too...

Like everyone else, researchers have needs and are happiest when these are met. If you can understand and honour these needs, and fit them with your own, you've prepared the ground for a successful collaboration.

A researcher's career and livelihood depend on them churning out papers and bagging research grants. The pressure to produce can be tremendous, which in large part explains why academics often seem so self-serving. Some, of course, are genuinely self-serving, and will see you as only as a route to publications and funding. These researchers might have limited patience for meetings and reflexive group processes.

Funders increasingly oblige researchers to demonstrate their work has relevance outside academia – what's known in the trade as 'impact'. Some respond by trying to tack Transition and other community groups onto their funding bid as an afterthought – sometimes referred to as 'bid candy'. Other researchers embrace this development as an opportunity to do something useful and meaningful. Your local university could be bristling with academics who would really like to get more involved with Transition, but never seem to find the time. The impact agenda may be what finally gets them through the door.

Above all, researchers are members of your community and are just as likely as anyone else to want to change it for the better. They have skills and knowledge to contribute to Transition and will probably appreciate it when these are recognised and valued. As with any other issue of inclusion, you could ask yourselves if researchers would feel welcome in your Transition group, and want to be part of it.

Do your meetings and events provide the support and inspiration their professional lives might lack?

On the other hand, many academics are confident public speakers and used to leading groups, so if your Transition group uses more horizontal organising methods it might be worth making sure that a new academic understands and honours these.





10. Why we're really passionate about this

Transition is about learning, together. Learning how to undo the effects of centuries of fossil-fuel dependency. Learning how to imagine and co-create alternatives to growth-driven economies. Learning how to make happiness and cooperation the basis of society, not competitiveness and greed. Learning how to live and work together as meaningful communities. Learning how to feed, shelter, care for and educate ourselves and each other – without preventing others from doing the same, and without destroying the natural wealth of the planet.

Learning how to do so many things differently is a enormous challenge, possibly the biggest that humanity has faced. The expression of curiosity and the advancement of knowledge

have brought us many remarkable achievements, and specialised knowledge producers have played an important role. Like so many things, it's impossible to say exactly what the nature and role of researchers and research will be in the post carbon world we are building. One thing that's certain is that they have a big role to play in getting us there.



II. About us

Transition Research Network.org

The Transition Research Network is a self-organised collective dedicated to furthering the contributions of research to Transition. Collaborating closely with Transition Network, we promote, support and undertake research projects, hold reasonably regular events, and host a number of resources for Transition research, including at our website: **www.transitionresearchnetwork.org**

Other key resources include:

Research Guidelines – a deeper treatment than this booklet, recommended for academics looking to work with Transition groups and Transition groups considering working with researchers: www.transitionresearchnetwork.org/research-guidelines

Research Marketplace – an online forum to match researchers interests and Transition groups' needs: www.transitionresearchnetwork.org/the-transition-research-marketplace.html

Transition Network's Research Forum: www.transitionnetwork.org/forums/process/researchers

Interactive Transition Research Bibliography - trying to keep track of published research on Transition: www.citeulike.org/group/15407



12. Resources

A few of our favourite research projects and programmes (some directly involving Transition, some not):

Connected Communities

www.ahrc.ac.uk/Funding-Opportunities/Research-funding/Connected-Communities/Pages/Connected-Communities.aspx

Memories of Mr. Seel's Garden

www.mrseelsgarden.org

Brighton University's Community-University Partnership Programme

www.brighton.ac.uk/cupp

National Coordinating Centre for Public Engagement

www.publicengagement.ac.uk

Centre for Social Justice and Community Action at Durham University

www.dur.ac.uk/socialjustice

Manchester Beacon for Public Engagement

www.manchesterbeacon.org

Grassroots Innovations

www.grassrootsinnovations.org

Our Food

www.ourfood.org.uk

Beyond our Backyards

www.agroecol.eu

BASE: Bottom-up Adaptation Strategies for a Sustainable Europe

www.base-adaptation.eu

Low Carbon Liverpool

www.lowcarbonliverpool.com

EVALOC: Evaluating Low Carbon Communities

www.evaloc.org.uk

UK Permaculture Association Research Strategy

www.permaculture.org.uk/research



13. Acknowledgements

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Big thanks also to our colleagues on the AHRC project Michelle Bastian, Hamish Fyfe, Naresh Giangrande, Nicola Hillary, Rhys Kelly, Ute Kelly and Rachel Pain, to members of Transition groups in Cardiff, Durham, Lewes, Totnes and West Kirby who participated in interviews, to Florence Scialom and to everyone else whose experiences in some way fed into that project.



Observe What's Happening
Identify: Inputs — Needs
Outputs — Yields
Create Beneficial Interactions
Work out how to do it

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