



# 4. Recruiting & Engaging participants

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## Recruitment strategies & gatekeepers

Different participants and projects may need different strategies for recruitment. Sometimes collaborators are found by chance; at other times, a more formal request is required. It's also important to be aware that individuals who are approached may not be able or willing to participate due to time or job constraints, or other factors related to confidentiality.

Recruitment strategies depend on the nature of the project. For example, if your project requires your team to survey members of the general public you will probably require different recruitment procedures from those involving

a formal institution like a sports club. Some projects may require researchers to target a diverse group of participants; others may need to target a small group with specific knowledge and/or experience. If you plan to work with participants in marginalised or stigmatised groups that are hard to get to, sometimes respondent-driven sampling is the method of choice for recruiting a sufficient number of participants. This sampling procedure would require researchers (or NGOs supporting their work) to identify a small number of respected persons who then help to generate interest and trust in a research project amongst others in the broader community. Working with communities requires artists, researchers or artist-educators to have the humility to acknowledge that they may need others' advice in order to understand the most appropriate modes of action (Harris Lawton, Walker & Green, 2019, p. 82).

Depending on the social structure the study relates to, the artist may plan to:

- spread the word through community newsletters or local authority websites;
- use social media to disseminate information;
- attend church or local association meetings, if applicable;
- spend time at a community centre or with captive audiences (like in a home for the elderly), so that people can hear directly what the project is about;
- ask community leaders to speak about the project on your behalf, or with you;
- spend time going door to door;
- spend time in places where the community

meets naturally, for example, a social club;

- make changes to initial plans based on meetings with community members
- contact relevant organisations that work with potential participants.

In research projects that fall under the responsibility of a higher education institution like a university, for example, an ethics review will normally precede recruitment, and will often require the involvement of a 'gatekeeper', especially if the project proposal revolves around the participation of vulnerable persons or groups. Ethical considerations are especially important when engaging with sensitive topics, and gatekeepers may offer a safe zone for potential participants in which they feel protected against possible misuse of personal data. Involving gatekeepers in arts projects can add another layer of vigilance to those put in place by the researchers or artists themselves and institutions' ethics committees.

*The project unLOCK (2014) worked with inmates in Malta to develop collaborative skills, as well as individual identity. The artist and co-creator worked with the prison authorities to carry out the project, arranging for participants to leave the prison to attend the opening of the final exhibition of their work. [viva.org.mt/uncategorized/unlock-pierre-mifud](http://viva.org.mt/uncategorized/unlock-pierre-mifud)*

Gatekeepers can help you access potential participants and settings and are usually in key administrative positions (such as heads of schools or directors in hospital wards), or leaders of NGOs who work closely with de-

finied groups, persons who are perceived as being representative of a particular social structure and even family members.

*The performative project No Different (2019) worked with an at-risk group (vulnerable women working in prostitution) with no prior experience in drama or drama therapy, who were very cautious about taking part. Through Dar Hosea, which offers support and assistance to vulnerable women, the project was able to make contact with potential participants and gain their trust.*

Permissions and support granted by gatekeepers to conduct research within such structures can be essential

- to obtain ethics approval;
- to disseminate calls for participation;
- to ensure respect for local cultures or sensitive issues;
- to follow accepted regulations within such groups;
- to aid with data collection;
- to assess any potential risks for participants;
- to offer professional support to participants in case it is required.

Whenever researchers and artists need to ensure the anonymity of participants (meaning that even researchers themselves would not know respondents' identities), gatekeepers (or professionals sub-contracted by them) may be in a good position to liaise with both researchers and respondents to make sure that ethical procedures are respected.

It is important to remember that gatekeepers may have different motivations or views about a project than artists or researchers related to recruitment of specific persons, research duration or issues of confidentiality. In this sense, gatekeepers can influence research outcomes. Maintaining continued support from gatekeepers and a clear research focus is occasionally a challenge and may require negotiations and agreed benefits between gatekeepers and research teams. For example, formal organisations represented by gatekeepers may receive a summary report of research findings (Saunders, 2006). Alternatively, the organisation could receive funds for a particular cause. It is usually better to involve gatekeepers early in the research process in order to minimise misunderstandings or complications later on (such as denial of access to research participants).

## Incentivising participants

While the aims of the project should benefit the community taking part, sometimes an additional incentive - or at least an 'advertising' of the project's benefits - may be needed. It might be clear to the artist how the project will benefit participants, but it might not always be so clear to communities - especially if they have no prior experience of art projects. The artist will need to speak about the project in a clear way, and in a way that will make people want to take part, possibly using different terminology from the language you may use when pitching the project to potential funding bodies or institutions.

There may also be different layers of 'benefits' to participants, including benefits that you might not have expected. One way is to ask them, and develop ideas for activities with them to make sure that participants appreciate the fact that the project benefits them in various ways. Benefits may also help to maintain regular attendance during project meetings. Some benefits include:

- teaching participants a practical skill, which can have a positive impact on one's confidence and employability;
- helping participants to learn collaboration and negotiation skills through group work;
- involving participants in activities that have secondary benefits like entertainment, socialisation, keeping fit, and so on;
- helping to increase knowledge and respect for participants' memories and traditions;
- giving participants the possibility of making their voices heard in the community and beyond;
- transcending economic disadvantages that may function as barriers to participation in the arts;
- giving participants access to research results that may help them to advocate for a particular cause;

- issuing a token payment to individual participants;
- letting participants keep any artefacts produced during workshops;
- making a contribution to the upkeep or equipment of a community centre.

An example will help to illustrate some of the issues related to recruitment and the benefits described above.

*In 2018, artist duo Aglaia Haritz and Abdelaziz Zerrou led a series of artistic workshops with several Filipinas working as carers in Malta. The artists behind this project (called 'Exiled Homes') were supported by anthropologists, a Maltese cultural foundation and a few Filipino leaders in the community. The project aimed to study similarities and differences between the Filipinas and Maltese persons they cared for and to understand the experience of the exile of migrants who travel thousands of kilometres from their homes in the Philippines to find work. One of the main outcomes of the workshops carried out with the participants was a number of cushions embroidered with narratives created by the women themselves. Amongst the benefits for the women, there was a small honorarium for each participant, the development of embroidery and story-telling skills, and the public dissemination of experiences that may have helped to advocate for their rights as migrant (and relatively poorly paid) workers (in an ex-*

*hibition that was open to the public in the cultural foundation's premises).*

*As for recruitment, the organisers faced a challenge from the initial stages of the project. While Filipino gatekeepers helped in the selection of caretakers for participation in the project, the intention to involve their employers as well (elderly persons) in the research and artistic stages proved to be impossible for two reasons. The health status of some elderly persons would not permit them to participate, while most Filipinas did not wish to share their stories in their employers' presence. The organisers therefore decided to focus exclusively on the caretakers' experiences throughout the project (Galea, 2018).*

It is very important that prospective participants are recruited to research projects only after their consent is obtained. The equitable selection of participants also requires that artists or researchers only involve participants who are appropriate for their research and are not vulnerable to coercion. Participants should not be put at risk from being exposed through the study but, at the same time, vulnerable groups should not be automatically excluded from research, especially if they could benefit from the results.

## REFERENCES

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