



# Identifying and formulating a project

University as a Living Lab toolkit

## First steps

- Identify a real-life situation, problem or opportunity of interest
- Identify the key stakeholders and discuss what a possible collaboration would look like, what their availability to participate is, and what outcomes would be valuable to them
- Evaluate the potential for a learning opportunity (research, teaching or both) that can also produce a useful solution for stakeholders
- Ensure that relevant data is available and/or can be generated within the timeframe of the project
- Consider the need to test and evaluate prototype solutions in real-life settings – and ideally in partnership with stakeholders
- Consider that it may be difficult to identify stakeholders who are willing or able to input, particularly if they are required to attend focus groups or participatory workshops – have a backup plan!
- *Contact SRS for further tips or contacts, and so we know your project is taking place*

## Generating valuable outputs/outcomes

Living Lab projects are in their nature collaborations between researchers and stakeholders surrounding a real-life problem. While researchers are often looking for an interesting problem or question, stakeholders tend to be looking for a practical solution or information that can help them solve a specific problem. Researchers and stakeholders should articulate to each other their desired outputs and outcomes and agree on what the project can realistically accomplish. Staff working in the

operational side of the University will often have little time to spend on activities beyond their core remit, so it is important that their priorities and constraints are communicated to researchers.

Living Lab projects are based on developing an understanding of a problem and testing and refining possible solutions. It often happens that what the first phase of research reveals is that the actual problem and the way it is experienced by stakeholders is more complex than originally understood. Projects will invariably offer new insights and new possibilities, but they cannot guarantee that they will solve the specific problem proposed.

**If you work in University operations/professional services**, you and your colleagues will be able to reflect on your work and approaches, and consider what challenges you face, or what could be improved. Where could researchers help draw out new solutions and ways of doing things? You may be tempted to propose a list of all sorts of problems and challenges you experience at work, in the hope that researchers will help. However, a Living Lab project needs to be sufficiently interesting and important to merit a research project. In the majority of cases, a way to frame a problem that is interesting for a particular researcher or team of researchers can be found through discussion and compromise.

**If you're a researcher (student or academic)**, it is tempting to frame your research questions around gaps in the literature, your previous work, or what you find most interesting. However, it is a good idea to review published reports and then make contact with practitioners to discuss your project ideas and find out where there is overlap with their needs.

The SRS Department works within the University to help identify project ideas and links where research could help improve practices – **get in touch to find out more and to propose new project ideas, and check our 'research priorities' page on the website.**



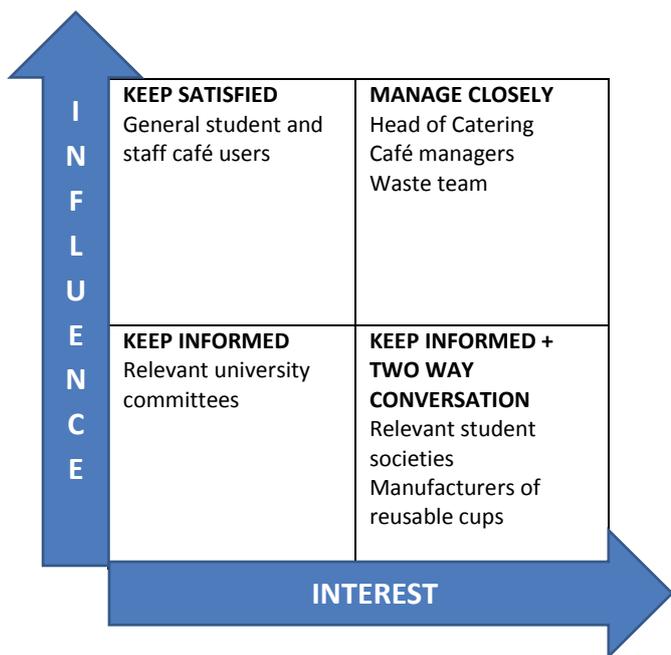
## Engaging stakeholders

If you're a researcher (student or academic), it's important to identify which practitioners should input into the project, and ascertain their availability and willingness to participate from the start.

If you work in University operations/professional services and you have an idea for a project that could be undertaken in collaboration with researchers, you need to make sure relevant colleagues will be available to input their ideas and experiences, in addition to your own.

You could carry out a stakeholder analysis (see example below), and keep a note of names, contact details and whether you have secured their availability to participate in the project.

*Example of stakeholder analysis e.g. project to encourage use of reusable cups in University cafes:*



## Suitable timescales

It is widely recognised in the Living Lab literature that practitioners and researchers may operate to different timescales. Practitioners often have fixed targets and project cycles, and are likely to be looking for solutions fairly rapidly. Academics may operate to longer timescales depending on the nature of the project – for example if a project forms part of an initiative funded to take place over several years. On the other hand, students completing Living Lab projects are likely to be limited to a few weeks or months – if doing coursework or a dissertation project.

It is a good idea to agree with all parties on a written plan including timescale and deadlines.

## Availability of data

Accessing the right data to answer a research question can be challenging. It is a good idea for researchers to consider exactly what sort of data they will require to answer the given question, and discuss with practitioners what data is already available, and what data they will be able to collect.

## Interdisciplinarity

Living Lab projects that operate in a real-life setting provide the perfect opportunity to collaborate with researchers from different disciplines. Have you considered whether you could simultaneously investigate different aspects of the issue in question by involving other researchers with different skills and ideas? However, it is important to bear in mind that working across disciplines requires additional effort to understand each other's perspectives, methods and evaluation criteria.

Prepared January 2017 by Liz Cooper, Catherine Magill, Ewan Klein