Requesting a statement of support

Often times my colleagues express their concern about approaching their partners to get a statement to support their impact work. If you have been working closely with a partner for a while, there is probably little to fear.

In public services contexts and when working with companies such references are a commonplace thing. If you are only starting working with a new partner, such as a small business or an NGO you probably will want to write up an agreement about the rules of engagement anyway, the value you undertake to provide and the commitment required from the partner. This is your perfect opportunity to discuss and agree in writing what baseline data the organisation will be able to provide and what data you agree to collect during the course of the collaboration (previous policies, questionnaires, interviews) and after its completion (interview, statement of support, data about key indicators of performance). If you are working with a not very well organised group, such a society bringing together volunteers without formal organisational structure, take advantage of this situation and ask your main contact if they were happy to sing a letter of recommendation further down the line that you are happy to write for them, but let them have the final say in terms of its content.

This guide will provide you with step by step advice on how to get the statement that you need. Requesting a statement of support is a chance to reflect on the relationship with your stakeholder and draw the project to a close. Before you request a statement think about what sort of impacts you think may have arisen from your collaboration and who the benefactors may have been. If you can, bullet point those and think of additional probing questions, based on the types of impact you expect may have occurred. Remember to ask for specific examples of things that changed, or had particular value or meaning. If your stakeholder can quantify the benefits that’s even better. It is good practice to ask open questions to target areas of impact which you yourself might be unaware even existed. Your partner’s perception of the benefits of collaborating with you may be different, or more far reaching than you anticipate.

If you are working with a larger organisation and you suspect there may be documents in existence that you are unlikely to get direct access to, it is worth asking your partner to mention these and outline how your work has fed into their decision making, policies or increases in performance. As a case study will only need to be supported by 10 pieces of evidence (max), referring to any other documents in the statement helps you keep all your evidence in one place and reduce the number of pieces of information you need to keep track of. This also gives the stakeholder the upper hand in deciding what information to select and how it will be presented.
When designing probing questions think of how you can direct your partner to critique themselves rather than critique you. Try to get them to reflect on how you have helped them achieve their personal or strategic goals. This way you are encouraging a balanced and partner-like conversation, rather than fishing for compliments. Guiding the process of producing the statement of support also helps you avoid wasting your and your stakeholder’s time through obtaining letters simply saying how nice it was working with you, which you cannot use.

If you haven’t been working very closely with the partner and checking in on them periodically, or the scope of the work was so large that it is difficult to know where to start, speak to your partner in person or on the phone. If you can, ask the partner if they are happy with you recording the conversation for the purpose of using it to draft the first version of the statement (you can get an RA to do it). A good technique is to say that this will save their time as you will present them with a draft for them to comment on and approve, rather than a blank page.

When requesting a supporting letter remember to outline the purpose of the statement, why you need it, how it will be used and who is likely to see it. Working on the statement may take more than one draft. Some stakeholders, knowing that the statement may be made publicly available, will prefer to be referred to by their position in the organisation rather than their name (even if the statement itself will not go on the HEFCE website, it will be listed under the evidence section).

In its final version make sure you weave into the narrative the details of the publications that underpin the impact. Your stakeholder is unlikely to know what these were, but you adding the details removes any doubt as to the relationship between the output and the impact. Keep those to a minimum and focus on the most important publications.

A good tip is to get a concise quotable summary of the key points made in the testimony; an abstract. Decide what phrases you might want to use in the case study document. If it is cultural impact or policy impact you are after, make sure the summary uses the terminology. Include short and punchy sentences that you will be able to quote in the case study narrative. Once you and the partner are comfortable with the content, ask if it would be possible to have a printed and signed version of the statements on letter-headed paper.

If you are working with a large corporation and for instance, contributed in a small and specific way, it is worth thinking through the implications of your contribution. Rather than saying that you were ‘a talking head on a TV programme’ think about what you contributed to the programme: expertise, local knowledge, choice of a location to film in, artefacts to be presented, narrative to be presented, suggested other guests, used your contacts to
help access materials, objects or locations. Listing these ideas in an email to your contact person really helps, as it can save them time producing the testimony and you get useful material.

**Statement check list:**

- Bullet point what impacts you think you might have achieved and jot down a few probing questions, some specific and some open.
- Make sure you tell your stakeholder why you need a statement and for what purpose
- Either leave the stakeholder to draft the first version of the statement or talk to them, record the conversation and write up the draft yourself (or via an RA).
- In the editing process try to include a concise summary of the impact that you can then use in part, or whole to quote in your case study. Make sure you include in the statement some of the terminology you hope to use in the case study narrative.
- Insert references to your publications into the narrative. Professor Jones’ research into aerodynamics (Jones, 2017. Aerodynamics in the aviation industry) has led to…
- Once you have agreed the final version, ask your stakeholder if they were happy to sign the statement and double check with them regarding whether they would like it to be treated as confidential. If so, get them to say that in an email.

**Some of the questions you might ask when collating your statement could include:**

- How was the relationship initiated?
- What was the specific role of the research in the changes at your organisation?
- What factors do you think influenced the change?
- What value has the project provided that otherwise would not have been accessible to the partner?
- Has the stakeholder been introduced to new partners as a result of your collaboration?
- Do you know of any evidence which could be used to support the claims?
- Were there any other long term impacts arising from the initial engagement?
- Has the collaboration led to new policies/patents/income streams/jobs/exhibitions?
- Are there any secondary changes that you would say were initiated by the academic collaboration?