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Getting on: A Guide to Good Practice in Inter-Institutional Collaborative Projects

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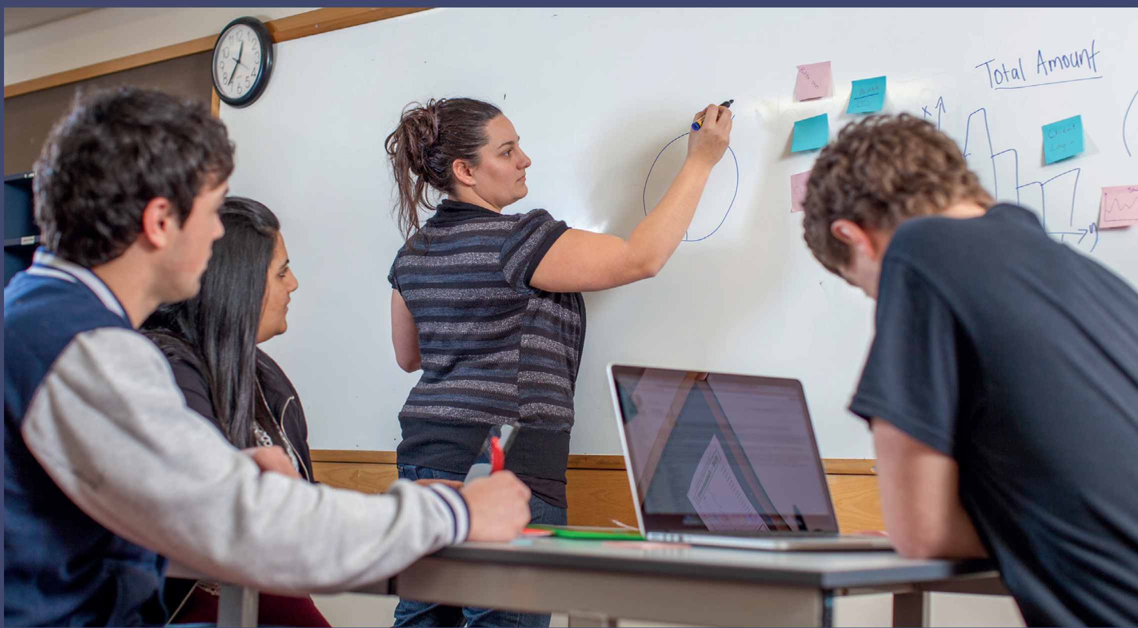

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Te Kura Matatini ki Otago

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This booklet accompanies the report "Critical success factors of inter-institutional project collaborations" led by Cath Fraser, Bay of Plenty Polytechnic. To download a copy of the report go to: https://akoaotearoa.ac.nz/research-register/list/critical-success-factors-inter-institutional-project-collaborations

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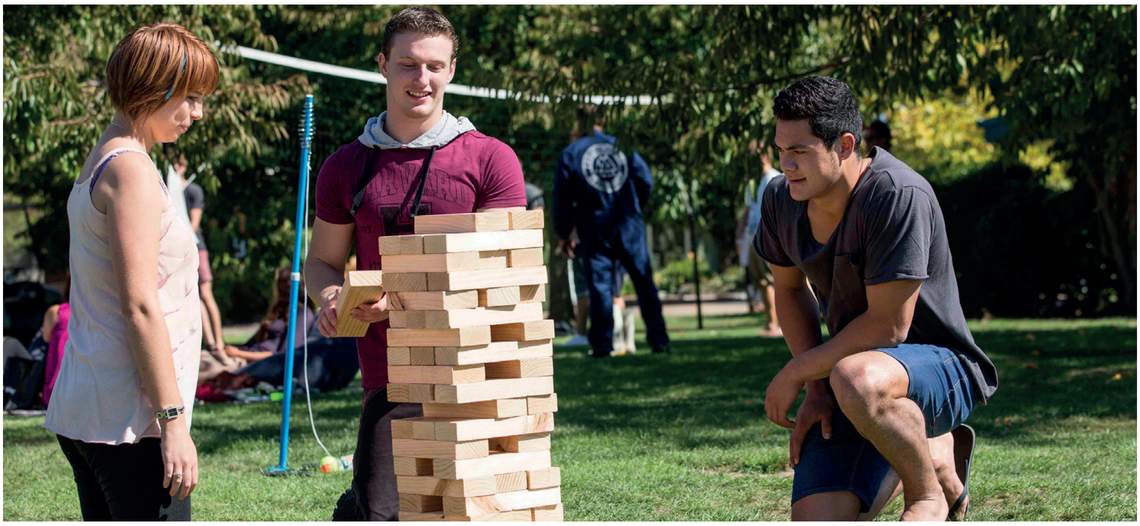
Introduction



This booklet is based on findings from the study *Critical success* factors in inter-institutional project collaborations (Fraser et al., 2015), and it is designed to assist YOUR new collaborative group to think about how you will manage your own unique collaborative context and enjoy a successful collaborative experience.

Successful collaboration projects involving members from multiple organisations share some common traits. They plan ahead, and develop strategies for managing how and what they will achieve in the shared project. While working towards their objectives they monitor and evaluate their own performance as a group, and they build on the relationships and learning that occur to explore ongoing professional opportunities.

This guide draws on the work of Gray (1989) to suggest a four-stage approach to a new collaboration, with key questions and messages to think about for each stage.

A brief scenario, based on real-life collaborative experiences offered by four of the study participants and reproduced with their permission, is included for each stage as an example of the issues and decisions others have encountered, and could be used as a starting point for a team discussion.

The table of collaboration factors on page 7 is designed to act as a summary and quick reference guide to elements which are important or crucial for the collaboration team to consider at each stage of their work together. The 24 factors were used in the study's online survey, and are adapted from the Wilders Collaboration Factors Inventory (n.d.), a widely used tool to assess engagement in the collaboration. Further information about the tool and the amendments and additions made by the project team are included in the report: *Critical success factors in inter-institutional project collaborations.*

Precondition: Learning about each other

The precondition stage begins when collaborators come together to form the working relationships which will underpin the group's work. In the study on which this work is based, survey results showed that *'**mutual respect, understanding, and trust**'* between team members was the third highest scoring collaboration factor across the 22 projects represented; for the 18 interview participants it was the single most significant enabler for collaboration. Linked values include 'equality', 'transparency' and 'commitment'.

Key questions to think about

- Who are your new colleagues? Share your work roles, prior experiences in collaborations, and teaching and learning interests.
- What level of research experience have team members had: previous experience in externally funded projects? Sole or co-authored peer-reviewed publications? Applications and proposals? Conference presentations?
- What skill sets does the team have? Ask members to identify their strengths, and any areas in which they would like to grow capability, such as communication and facilitation, technology, statistics, qualitative data analysis and academic writing.

Key messages for success

Personal value and benefits are powerful drivers for individuals in collaborations, and a consideration which can help group process when made overt. There are many outcomes and outputs which the team might consider over and above achieving the original project goal, and which may, or may not, be shared by all members. Examples include: new resources and strategies to support practice; research outputs and publications; new or extended professional networks beyond their own organisation; stimulating ventures to enliven their daily role, or developing new skills for career progression.

Organisational expectations should also be discussed. Host institutions will be supporting the projects with resourcing – financial or "in kind." Understanding each other's commitments such as PBRF outputs, staff training workshops and resource and expertise provision is an important precursor to setting workload and timelines.

Finally, team members need to know about the **additional commitments** others may have, whether personal or professional, that could impact their availability at any point in the project lifespan. Events such as family gatherings, association or community representation and sabbatical leave can be worked around when shared early in the collaboration process; this is also a good time to discuss how the team will cope with unexpected events like a long-term illness, restructure or redundancy and revisit provisions made in the original proposal document.

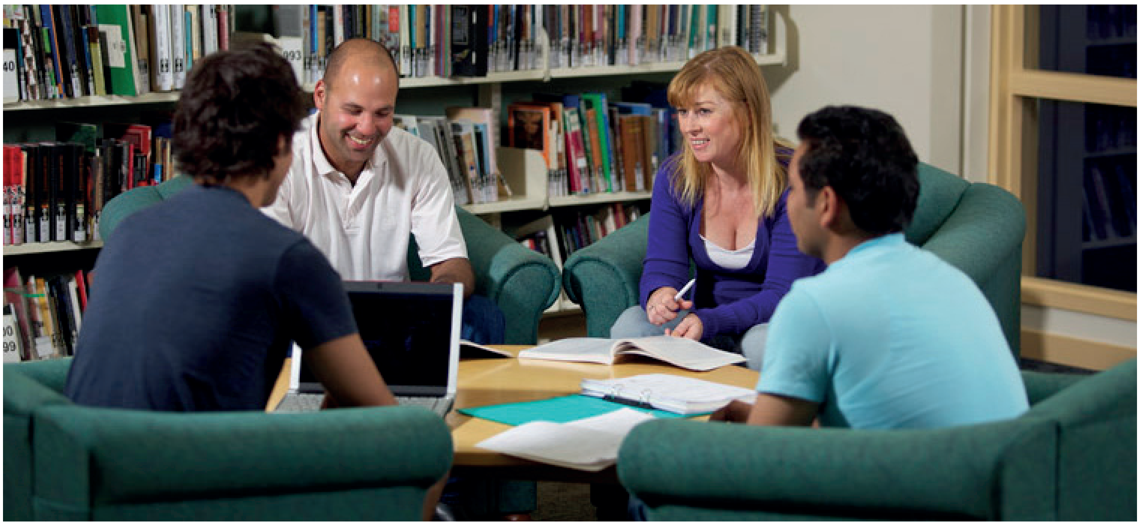
Group discussion exercise: Scenario 1

"From the very first…when I went along to the meeting, I guess in their mind it was decided that I was going to lead it. I didn't realize that at the time until a bit further down the track."

This collaboration began at a regional providers' meeting, when a group of PTEs expressed interest in "doing research" and asked a colleague from a university and one from an ITP to join them. A series of topics were brainstormed and a selection made, but this was not of interest to the university member, who decided to withdraw – although they didn't announce this to the team at the time. The polytechnic member took responsibility for completing the proposal, with others giving feedback. As the project progressed, several members said they were happy to participate, to organise focus groups and so on, but didn't have the time to do the research, or the writing up. A partial solution was a day-long "writing hui" to progress institutional case study accounts, which most members attended. However, the default leader was left to chase up missing contributions, to analyse the material and complete the final report in what they felt became more of a "solo effort."

Question: How did different institutional cultures and imperatives impact team interactions?

Getting set up: Establishing processes



This stage occurs in the early days of a collaboration when the work is planned and operational structures agreed. It is a good idea to record decisions and circulate afterwards to ensure consensus, and act as a memory prompt. Minutes with agreed actions, names and dates provide a useful tick-box way to record progress, and can also form part of the milestone reporting process.

Key questions to think about

- Do all team members have a common understanding of the project's concrete, attainable goals and contributing objectives? Can the group formulate a vision statement about their core purpose which can be revisited throughout the project to assist with focus?
- How will the team communicate? Will this be predominantly face-to-face, by email or video conferencing? How and where will the team store shared documents for easy access by all – such as an institutional platform with links to "guests", or a cloud storage provider?
- What are each member's roles and responsibilities? One of the key advantages of any group work is each member being able to offer their specialised knowledge for the benefit of the entire project: how has your group maximised the available skill sets and expertise? Are there any gaps, and how will you address these?

Key messages for success

This is the time to discuss ***Leadership*** and whether this should be the domain of a single member, or "distributed" across the team, allowing for a broader spread of individual initiative and expertise. Distributed leadership means taking turns and sharing responsibility; it also assists with minimising conflict, and mitigating the effects of different institutional cultures and perceptions of "seniority" within the team. One way to start negotiation of roles and responsibilities is by drawing up a table of project stages and milestones and asking who would like to lead each section – although the ultimate coordination and budget monitoring will usually need to sit with a representative of the "host" organisation.

A clear ***timeline/project plan*** needs to be established, working back from the agreed completion date. Are there agreed milestone dates to track and report progress, and if not, would these be useful to the team to add? What "worst-case scenarios" could befall the team and what ***contingency plans*** are in place? For example, should each role have an allocated understudy?

It is also important to ***preview reporting responsibilities***, such as evidence of learner benefit and changing practice. Will this fall automatically out of the project, or can the team strengthen their process to ensure this is captured? Perhaps additional tools such as journaling might assist with the capture of anecdotal comments and passing observations for later follow up.

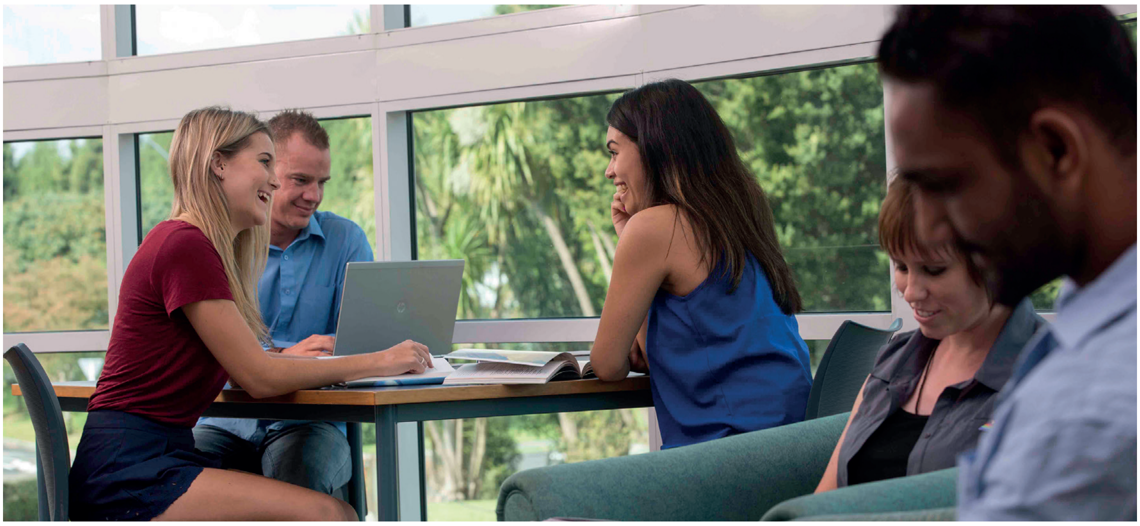
Group discussion exercise: Scenario 2

"I don't think everyone in the collaboration has to do the same job, it's about identifying which bits"

This collaboration looked at classroom strategies to assist all learners, but especially the Māori learners, in a design degree "by putting their culture at the centre". It involved Māori and non-Māori researchers, from a polytechnic and a university; one of the research team was a recent Master's graduate whom another team member had supervised and assisted to get a teaching grant to participate in the project. These two instigated the project through the planning and funding stage, then travelled together around the country conducting interviews together – one asking questions, the other responsible for recording and transcribing. They were supported by cultural advisors from each institute overseeing the appropriate research frameworks for the project, with a fifth team member who came in towards the end of the collaboration and who had prior inter-institutional research experience, as well as the skills to "pull it together", identifying the strategies and outcomes that emerged from the data, and helping to shape the report. While the academic collaborators undertook the researching, thinking, reading, and writing, they also acknowledged the importance of administrative support to deal with logistics, like booking travel and arranging interviews.

Question: What different perspectives are represented in this project, and how do you think these contributed to its success?

During the collaboration: interaction, decision-making, self-monitoring



This is the “process” stage where collaborators work together and make decisions about their data/experiences/observations and the conclusions which can be drawn. If the project has been conceived as an ***action research enquiry***, with a cycle of implementation – evaluation – reflection – re-application, the team will need to consider whether all these steps are being followed and documented. Where changes to practice are occurring, evidence of this needs to be collected.

Key questions to think about

- How is the teaching and learning intervention/research/resource development/new practice proceeding? Is the pace appropriate and adequate to meet the project ***targets and timeline***? Are milestone reports being prepared and delivered according to the project contract? Are full and complete records (such as meeting agenda, minutes and action plans) being kept?
- Is the team mindful of their ***own process***? Is their own collaborative interaction using best practice? What challenges and changing conditions have been encountered and have members been able to respond with adaptability or resilience? Are all members comfortable with the assigned roles, responsibilities and level of input – their own and one another’s?

A useful approach is to include team process as an agenda item if regular, formal meetings are being held. Some teams, too, might be interested to consider the use of the Wilder Collaboration Factors Inventory, or a variant, to measure the team’s effectiveness, and add another dimension to their learning during the project and reporting dimensions at its conclusion.

Key messages for success

As well as the project outcomes, final ***reporting responsibilities*** will almost certainly require an account of costs and resourcing. This will be significantly easier if the team conducts ongoing monitoring and documentation of their "in kind" input, both hours and physical resources contributed by the institution, such as travel or equipment use, and variants to the original proposal plan. A spreadsheet in the team's shared directory is a simple and effective tool where responsibility for entries can be shared across the group, ensuring again that all team processes are open and transparent.

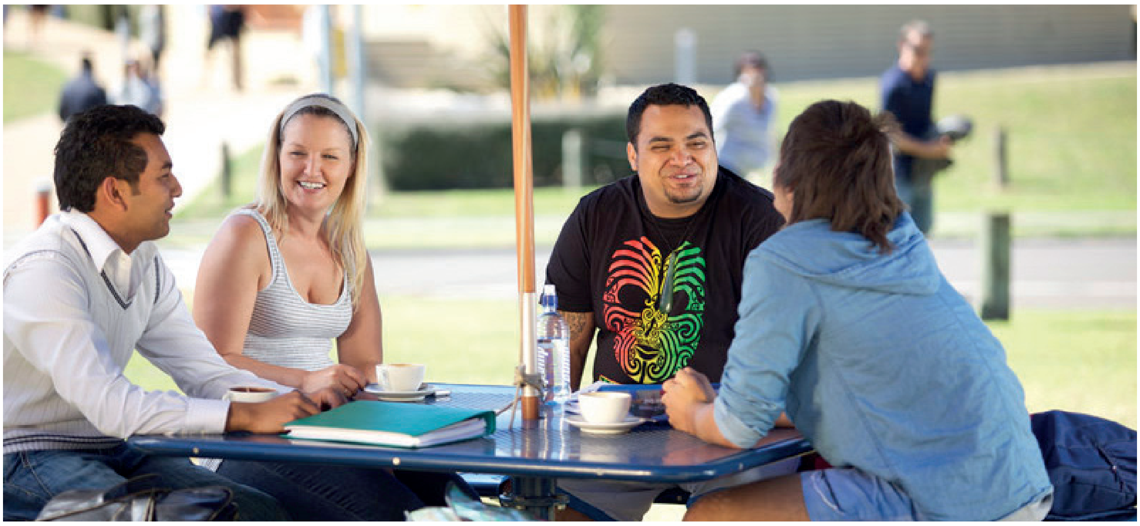
Group discussion exercise: Scenario 3

"From all this research we have this new way of managing work experience…just us looking at our data – what are we responding to? Did this help improve outcomes for students?"

Three PTEs with different programmes, but catering to the same student population of Youth Guarantee students, developed a collaborative research project to look at the outcomes for students, collecting feedback from five stakeholder groups: students; whanau members; tutors and academic managers; employers; and secondary school career advisors. These different data sets highlighted two areas of potential concern for the organisations, which they moved to address even before the final report was completed. First was a mismatch in perceptions about the qualifications students gained and the level at which they were suited to enter their industry – easily addressed by including an overview of the sector and career pathways in the orientation programme. Second, there was an inequity in the work experience students were getting. Responding to feedback which said that this learning component was vital, the number of work experience days was doubled, and new guidelines and reporting documents were created for the employers, so that expectations and role exposure became more standardised. The solutions were arrived at collaboratively, although each organisation's implementation was configured to match their particular context. We each evaluated the changes we made and shared findings, and continue to do so.

Question: How did the collaborative framework contribute to individual organisational learning?

After the project: Sustainability



At the "outcomes" stage, attention is primarily (and understandably) on the delivery of agreed outputs, review and final publication and dissemination. However, there is also important work for the collaboration group to undertake together which will affect the long-term outcomes for practitioners, organisations and learners.

Key questions to think about

- What gains have occurred from the project for the participants, organisations and students? What growths in capability and capacity? Which other stakeholder groups has the project impacted? While such considerations are likely part of the final report to the funding agency and/or project sponsor, it can be useful for the team to have a succinct summary statement of achievement, including selected evidence or examples as highlights. Are there promotion opportunities with organisational marketing teams, internal newsletters, relevant industry groups and local media? How can the team maximise awareness and leverage the success of their project?

Key messages for success

A ***collective debrief session***, where collaborators assess and reflect on the effectiveness of their efforts, growth in learning and capability, and any shifts in their own practice, is invaluable. Useful questions to consider here might include: How has success been celebrated? Has involvement in the project resulted in workplace satisfaction and/or internal recognition for team members? What post-research benefits and opportunities for team members can be identified?

Critical reflection has a place in all educational endeavours and should not be overlooked here. What do team members think went well – for individuals, and for the group? What aspects of the collaboration were less satisfactory? What would the group do differently next time?

Finally, it is always stimulating to finish one undertaking and have the ***next project*** in mind! Is there further work in the same area which can be done? Can some or all of the group continue to work together and build on the synergy which has developed? If this is not about research or resource development, are there possibilities for shared authorship or co-presentations? Guest lectures and workshops? Committee work, article or policy review? For many participants in inter-institutional collaborations, it is the collegial network which endures long beyond the original reason for coming together, which is most rewarding of all.

Group discussion exercise: Scenario 4

"We're a very open group. The symposium has morphed into a more generic, ongoing thing – although the partners change constantly. So the framework remains the same but the collaborative partners might change from year to year, dependent on interest. It's evolving."

This collaboration began when members from three institutes met to organise an event to promote e-learning capability across the sector. Even six years ago, most organisations were still delivering predominantly face-to-face, with pockets of expertise and enthusiasm developing in an almost ad hoc manner. The project team felt that early proponents were finding it very difficult to get support within their own institutions to change, so they needed to seek to collaborate with others, because it was a new venture for everyone, and no single group had all the answers. The original symposium which shared useful tactics and strategies was so successful that it has been run, and has continued to grow, ever since, with several regional events each year. While a fairly standardised framework is used, localization comes from the different contributors who are invited to lead various sections according to the particular topics to be covered on that occasion. This provides, say the organisers, "a common pathway, but not a restricted pathway", to shape practices, reflect on good practice.

Question: How does an open membership impact sustainability – of a project, and of a professional community?

Setting YOUR project up for success

	Collaboration factors	Precondition	Getting set up	During the collaboration	After the project
1	History of collaboration or cooperation in the tertiary sector	🟢			
2	Collaborative group seen as a legitimate leader in the tertiary sector	🟢	⚫		⚫
3	Favourable political and social climate	🟢	⚫		
4	Mutual respect, understanding, and trust	🟢	⚫	⚫	⚫
5	Appropriate cross section of members	🟢	⚫	⚫	
6	Members see collaboration as in their self-interest	🟢	⚫	⚫	⚫
7	Ability to compromise	⚫	⚫	🟢	⚫
8	Members share a stake in both process and outcome	🟢	⚫	🟢	⚫
9	Multiple layers of participation		⚫	🟢	
10	Flexibility	⚫	⚫	🟢	
11	Development of clear roles and policy guidelines		🟢		
12	Adaptability	⚫	⚫	🟢	
13	Appropriate pace and development		⚫	🟢	
14	Open and frequent communication	🟢	🟢	🟢	🟢
15	Establish informal relationships and communication links	🟢	⚫	⚫	
16	Concrete, attainable goals and objectives	⚫	🟢		
17	Shared vision	⚫	🟢	🟢	
18	Unique purpose	⚫	🟢		
19	Sufficient funds, staff, materials, and time		🟢	⚫	
20	Skilled leadership	🟢	🟢	🟢	
21	Post-research benefits	⚫			🟢
22	Learner benefits	🟢	🟢	🟢	🟢
23	Retention/workplace satisfaction				🟢
24	Personal value	🟢	⚫	⚫	⚫

🟢 Important to this stage in the collaboration ⚫ Also occurs at this stage

(Acknowledgement: Factors 1-20 are adapted from the original Wilder Collaboration Factors Inventory; 21-24 have been added by the project team)

Useful links and resources

- The *Wilders Collaboration Factors Inventory* is the original tool for measuring effectiveness in multi-organisation teamwork. Available from http://wilderresearch.org/tools/cfi/index.php
- An article which describes validation of the Wilders tool in a higher education setting: Townsend, A. and Shelley, K. (2008). Validating an instrument for assessing workforce collaboration. *Community College Journal of Research and Practice*, 32(2), 101 – 112).
- An article which describes alternative collaboration evaluation approaches: Whaley, D. L., & Weaver, L. (2010). Approaches to measuring more collaboration in communities. Retrieved from http://tamarackcommunity.ca/downloads/index/Measuring_More_Collaboration.pdf
- A book which describes the stages of collaboration:
  Gray, B. (1989). *Collaborating: Finding common ground for multiparty problems*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- *"Critical success factors in inter-institutional project collaborations"* is the report outlining the research into effective collaborations on which this guide is based. Available from https://akoaotearoa.ac.nz/research-register/list/critical-success-factors-inter-institutional-project-collaborations

What factors will be most significant for success in YOUR collaborative project?

What does YOUR team need to do?