

Aspect

Beyond the Academy:
Engaging with the
Creative Industries

(Cardiff Report)

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1. Introduction

1.1 Background

Over the last two decades there has been an increasing interest by the policy making and academic communities in the relationship between HE institutions and the Creative Industries as a means of delivering economic growth. Previous research – especially in the urban/regional development field – has outlined the institutional/policy making landscape underpinning knowledge exchange interactions noting that it is “heavily mediated by what might be described as system and institutional realities (of funding, organisational structure, institutional culture and tradition) and disciplinary cultures (shared ideas across the academic-practice nexus about such matters as artistic credibility, professional repute, disciplinary values and norms)” (Comunian et al. 2014, p.2467). Whilst an understanding of the wider context within which this relationship is located is helpful there is room for additional insight into the nature of these collaborative partnerships and how they play out “on the ground”.

To this end, this report presents findings from a project serving as a “follow-up” to Creative Industries Deep Dive projects previously undertaken at Manchester (Rouverol, 2021) and York (Stockley-Patel, 2021) Universities. Previous Deep Dive projects revealed the particulars of partnership building between academic institutions and creative industry professionals and/or organisations. They reported that formal partnership and engagement infrastructures at university and faculty levels enabled connections with the creative sector on a larger scale. It was evident that this connectivity positively impacted the work of all those involved. Previous work also revealed that academics benefited from their own personal connections when trying to establish partnerships. In turn, it is perhaps unsurprising that those individuals who were recognised as both a creative and academic were in turn better able to develop these relationships. Other issues highlighted in the previous regional Deep Dives – also reported in the Cardiff project – included the

impact of language gaps between those involved and the existence of competing project timeline expectations and practices in project development. In terms of sector specific issues, it was recognised that greater efforts must be made to ensure those from BAME communities were given far more priority in the way the creative industries operated and grew.

In line with this previous work, the Cardiff Deep Dive follow-on project aimed to examine the business engagement partnerships between universities and the creative industries. We are grateful to colleagues at the Centre for Creative Economy at Cardiff University who enlisted the support of research participants from the Creative Cardiff network. Creative Cardiff is well placed to do this work as its aim is to bring together individuals from across the full spectrum of Cardiff’s creative sector. Our report reflects the opinions of those individuals who shared their experiences of partnerships in the creative industries.

1.2 Summary

Exchanging knowledge between academic and non-academic institutions can take different forms including research, academic or business engagement. This report, based on insights from academics, creatives, and business engagement professionals presents findings on various aspects of the business engagement process. It uncovers some of the motives underpinning each party’s participation in such initiatives and outlines the various challenges that such work entails. More specifically, the report highlights the gaps that often have to be bridged in terms of the diverse vocabularies creatives and academics use; different timelines informing academic and creative/business work and the need to gradually develop mutually beneficial deliverables (as opposed to a scenario where one party is subservient to another). Other issues the report touch upon the restricted access academics sometimes have to the creative sector; the logics underpinning the brokerage of work and attempts to draw connections around the type of institutional support required.

What is interesting is that these findings reveal the

complexities of this activity even when the ecosystem is well-developed with the availability of dedicated mechanisms to enable business engagement. There is recognition of these challenges in this report whilst also a welcome pragmatism that more needs to be done to ensure the emerging ecosystem is more open, effective, and inclusive.

1.3 Method

Participants took part remotely in recorded interviews, by video, on Microsoft Teams and Zoom. Interviews lasted between 40 and 60 minutes. The sample was informed by the work undertaken previously by colleagues at Manchester and York studies. Subsequently, participants were selected with the help of colleagues at the Centre for Creative Economy, part of initiated by colleagues at the Centre for Creative Economy at Cardiff University – aiming to foster connections and collaborations among creatives (and academics) in the broader Cardiff region. Similarly to the York Deep Dive, 15 interviews were conducted and a range of participants including academics in social sciences or arts/media with an experience in business engagement (n=4), creative industries professionals/business people in a Business Engagement project (n=7), artists (n=2) and postgraduate students involved in similar projects (e.g. internships) (n=2).

2. Research Engagement

2.1 Key Findings

1. Academic institutions can often act as an important conduit for accessing funding that helps creative organisations innovate.
2. Attempts to innovate can be challenging because the commercialisation of creative ideas is complex and pertains to a range of sources of funding and the logics such funding arrangements embody (market route vs arts councils).
3. Academic input in engagement projects often consists of providing justification/validation for creative ideas or insight into how to reach various audiences, which has a positive

impact on innovation.

4. Interaction with creatives may entail delicate power dynamics depending on whose ideas take precedence and this requires careful accommodation by brokers.

2.2 Rationale behind business engagement

Various terms have been coined to refer to knowledge-related interaction between academic institutions and industry including “academic”, “research” and “business” engagement. These types of endeavour are formed around different formats such as consulting, contract research, collaborative research, student placements, informal ties and affiliations (Perkman et al. 2021). In place of capturing the exact nature of the various business engagement actions in which participants were involved this part of the report aims to provide more insight into what may incentivise the various parties to participate in business engagement projects.

Interviews revealed a multifaceted rationale for engaging with creatives. Some of the research participants were involved with a project underpinned by a desire to stimulate a start-up culture, encourage innovation, and make creatives aware of the merits of taking an idea to the market as opposed to solely pursuing funding for their projects through UK government funding councils.

“The university is acting as a conduit for funding, which is clearly beneficial for the companies cause often, particularly in the creative industries, there’s a challenge with doing research and development because the creative industries tend to be an awful lot of freelancers and micros but the bigger companies don’t tend to put funding aside. They don’t think outside the format and so what we do is we help fund them to think outside the format, cause only really big tech companies tend to put a lot of money into that” (Business Engagement informant).

Developing a more commercially orientated art sector is not without challenges. Trying to reconcile differing experiences and motivations is challenging because such orientations are deeply embedded in the ways things are done. From the

perspective of colleagues with a business background it was felt at times to be difficult to enlist creatives who were not used to thinking in a more commercial fashion and were accustomed to Arts Council types of funding for their projects:

“There’s a lot of them [creatives] used to an Arts Council kind of funding cycle where they would have an idea, get some Council funding and then a few months into that idea they are already thinking about where they’re going to get their next funding from. And we’re trying to encourage people to develop their idea but think around a bit what we just talked about with the marketing stuff. Explore the idea but then also try and understand any commercial benefits for that idea so it does become self-sufficient to a certain extent and you’re not so reliant on funding as it grows.” (Business Engagement informant).

The goal behind the projects instigated by university affiliated individuals (academics or business engagement professionals) was often to instil more commercial thinking and an ethos of innovation. Creative businesses participating in those bids were often driven by a social as well as a business agenda (which resonates with findings from the Manchester Deep Dive):

“I think it’s two-fold really [rationale for participating in a collective bid/consortium].

Some of the advantages, particularly with [name of project], it’s a project of scale which enables a load of partners to be involved which tackles some sort of strategic shortfalls and deficiencies in the sector, which are type of things which on your own you cannot sort of try to tackle. When we talk about diversity and inclusion, it’s quite a big issue for our sector. You know the TV sector generally is sort of white public school, dominated.

Historically it’s had a problem with diversity and inclusion, but broadcasters and the producers together are trying to improve that. In Wales, we have our own sort of specific challenges cause diverse communities are smaller than they are in, say, you know, London or Leeds or Manchester or whatever, so it’s harder to address. Therefore, looking at ways of engagement, whether it be social, economic or sort of other diverse

communities, it’s easier and it’s more achievable by working on this sort of consortium type approach (Business Engagement informant).

In addition to addressing equality, diversity and inclusion issues endemic to the screen sector, the commercial benefits stemming from working collectively were an equally strong incentive for organisations to participate in bids. One participant explained that the collective/consortium approach to securing funding allowed their organisation to try out hybrid ways of working by lessening the financial risk attached to such endeavours.

I think with our [name] project, which is about remote editing, hybrid ways of working there, it’s more of a tech, technology and working on technology and more traditional sort of project investment. And there I think the grant funding which was available was able to sort of de-risk the economic risk if you like. And so [there were] different reasons for being involved” (Business Engagement informant).

Academics involved in such engagement projects often acted as a critical friend or someone who would help provide research-based evidence that validated a creative idea which might also allow it to reach a far wider audience. The interaction between academics and creatives requires a delicate dynamic whereby the former needed to be cautious so as not to be perceived as imposing an idea but as someone acting as a sounding board. The following quotes illustrate the scope of an academic’s engagement which might range from that of a consultant (sounding board to a creative) to full-fledged collaborator on a joint funding application.

The first thing tends to be through insight. Because creative people don’t want to be told what the idea is. They want to have the idea. They’ll come in, listen to people talk about the audience, because they recognise that they want to tell a story as a TV programme. So, I’m interested [as a creative] in any academic stuff that’s going to give evidence, or at least a sense of the direction of the change in audience consumption, audience behaviour. So, if you were an academic and you are researching uh brain

control interfaces, you can make that interesting as an insight to the creative sector just by going, well, how might people consume entertainment in the future? How might we communicate to them in the future? How might we design things from the future given by centre of expertise? So, it's basically just slightly reframing the subject and those sorts of people doing short talks" (Business Engagement informant).

"With [name of project] we got Cardiff Met, Cardiff University and University of South Wales and we had a pool of academics. And then for each project it was good for the creative to sit down with the academic and go: 'right, this is what I'm doing' and then 'you need to go and speak to that school' and some were more engaged than others...because it also has the scope to lead to additional funding for a reunion" (Business Engagement Informant).

Participants with a "dual" identity (academic and creative) also highlighted the contribution of academia in providing the intellectual tools to identify and solve problems whilst their continuous engagement with the creative sector as an academic stemmed from an impact agenda:

"This is why I became an academic to think, OK, we might as artists instinctively know that something's wrong, but we don't have the tools to work out what that is and I wanted to find the tools to try and work out what that was so we could fix it. And that's literally why I did my PhD. I very much value when we have those tools and also, we've got a real drive towards impact and engagement. We don't want our research to just sit in the box, sit on a shelf somewhere and it needs to kind of go back into teaching, but also more importantly, it needs to go back into the industries we're talking to where it needs to go back into the communities for it to mean anything" (Academic informant).

The impact agenda reflects growing expectations on academics and universities to create not only economic but also social good. The funding landscape increasingly requires academic partnerships to demonstrate value for a wider body of stakeholders that also attends to grand challenges. This is the case in the arts humanities

and social sciences and is reflected in the work of Creative Cardiff to build economic and social value through innovation and entrepreneurship in the creative sector.

3. Partnership Challenges

3.1 Key Findings

1. Access to creatives is often restricted to academics and so there is often a reliance on personal networks and connections to help create relationships.
2. Individuals with a dual identity (academic and creative) may be better equipped to navigate the challenges of boundary spanning, which is to bridge creative, academic and business worlds
3. Physical presence in each other's workspaces (for academics and creatives) may be necessary to dispel previously held erroneous assumptions and establish a common ground.
4. Universities could use dedicated officers with a commercial orientation as a way of being more accustomed with business needs including differing timeframes.
5. Institutional support may extend into support from actors such as local governments for sector wide bids.

3.2 Access to creatives – Establishing relationships

As academic engagement projects, in general, can be seen as an exercise in boundary spanning, this part of the report – much like the Manchester and York Deep Dives – presents our participants' views on the various challenges around the "inner workings" of these relationships. Prior to the task of aligning interests and language, one of the issues our academic participants raised was the challenge of accessing the creative industries. A participant with a background in theatrical productions contended creatives (be it individuals or organisations) may be resistant to the idea of working with academics:

"Quite often in the creative and cultural industries,

there is resistance to academics observing your methods because nobody wants to be told that 'that's symbolically violent what you're doing. It's bad practice because there's been 10 years' worth of research on this, and we can back this up. Nobody wants to hear that. No one wants to hear that because it's terrible. It's an awful feeling and there's also the bigger picture of being fearful of academics coming in to observe because if those findings then go back to their fund, they will lose their funder. The risk there is we will lose our funding, the doors will be closed and all of our aims and objectives that we've been trying to get better at will be null and void. So, there's a lot of fear around academics doing research" (Academic informant).

Beyond the tendency of creatives to sometimes resist academic involvement, looking at the issue from the other side participants highlighted the importance of a brokerage role (which often Universities take on) in terms of connecting academics to creatives:

"Academics are very good at finding academics. John. From uh. Sheffield University. That one great academic from Cambridge or Cardiff or whatever. But it's how do you find people to extrude what you're doing when actually it's not within your academic realm.

Cardiff is very well placed with this because we are literally one building here and the next one is the BBC. You know, so it makes sense that in the end that actually there's a middle ground, there should be someone in. Here's the interface to say how do we turn some of what you're doing or use some of your research to help us put together some of this stuff we're doing. (Academic informant).

In conjunction with the importance of the brokering role some respondents also indicated that some individual academics were careful to guard their connections and social capital. Subsequently, developing relations with creatives often ended up being an exercise in individual determination on the part of academics:

"We have lots of connections in Cardiff with the National Museum, which is also based in Cardiff. You know we have formal established networks,

but only if you're in the in crowd. No, these aren't open because people only have a certain amount of time and money, and effort and people want to be seen to have these formal networks. There's not an open-door policy...This is what I have found, it's through those personal connections and serendipity and luck and fortune [that access to creatives may be secured]" (Academic informant).

Separately to the issue of securing access one of the participants flagged up the importance of multiple success criteria – agreed upon by all partners (academics, creatives, business engagement professionals) – which would help balance a commercial as well as prosocial agenda for such projects.

"Connecting people, right? And so yeah, if you can connect the academics to the communities, to the creatives. That's something wonderful. But it's getting it right, so doing it, there's a reason to do it. And just how to do it, it's got to be not self-interested. It's got to be purely catalytic and have a metric to judge itself, to judge its success [success of the engagement project]. You've got to have multi-variate criteria for success and not be purely bottom line. It's important, but it's like only a third of the relevance or the potential of these organizations, and if you do the other 2/3 of it the first thing will take care of itself. The first third will take care of itself, because everyone wants to be involved. You're multiplying your stakeholders and your community and your audience, and people will put money at it" (Academic informant).

These challenges reflect broader issues around academic work and the increasing requirement for academic activities with external stakeholders to be financially viable.

3.3 Language

One of the engagement challenges the Manchester and York Deep Dives identified was the different "languages" academics and creatives often spoke. Unsurprisingly, the importance of bridging the gaps in the language employed was highlighted by Cardiff Deep Dive participants from both academic and business backgrounds.

"How universities market themselves and are perceived by non-university audiences, right? Universities are ideas factories. That's what they are. They may not come across that way and they might not even think of themselves in that way but that's how I think of them. You know, it's an industry of ideas, a foundry. So, it's an ideas factory. Academics articulate themselves through words and often through scientific cold, unambiguous, particular set of vocabularies which obviously is often an obstacle for people who don't speak those vocabularies. Now the creatives are experts in alternative sets of vocabularies, alternative languages and they may have enough ideas to be getting on with. But they might not. They might be looking for the ideas. Ideas factory, expertise in different languages. Connect them together, right? That's what an organization has got to do, both in its messaging and its communication. Get the academics and convince them, get the creatives and convince them. And it's got to set-up channels for it to happen, in ways that are easy and convenient for all concerned" (Academic informant).

"So basically, you end up with a creative industry person. They want a really simple story that 'this could help you in this way or we want to discuss how we think this technology's got opportunities in the creative industry', how could it help you with your problems? Can we meet you about your problems? And unfortunately, it's just, uh, it's a translation issue, if you like. Between the jargon that we use within those sorts of bidding processes and the jargon that's used outside, just as I couldn't write, you know, I write something and someone from the academic sector would have to change some of the languages to go ok can't say that kind of thing, you know" (Business Engagement informant).

"This work [language] can be really applied in terms of the academic world partnerships like museums or cultural industries where languages and purposes are different. So, we need to go through process of "languaging", which means it needs to be slow" (Academic informant).

Some of the academics naturally highlighted their occupational past in the creative industries as an advantage in their interest in bridging both worlds:

"We've got different languages and that is a barrier between the academic world and the creative and cultural industries world. I think I'm lucky because I know I've got use of both languages in terms of what we mean by some of this stuff and literally things can go right". (Academic informant).

"I kind of occupy those two worlds, both research and practice, and I've not let any of those dominate or let go or I kind of treat them as equal. And I think that's one of the key things" (Academic informant).

A theme associated with the notion of "occupying both worlds" was that of physical presence at each party's workspace so that a deeper understanding could be developed around the different modes of operations and the objectives of each partner so that some common ground could be built. This differed slightly from the perspective of participants in the Manchester project who highlighted the importance of a "third place" instead (a territory that belonged to neither organisation).

"Spending time in each other's faces, literally I don't think any of this can be removed from the space that you're working with in and the heteronomy that's within that space. For each organization to be successful in the process of "languaging", you have to understand how that other organization is funded or what their working structure is, where their personnel is coming from and what their means and objectives are. Because unless you know those things, a lot of assumptions can be made that will end up being the wrong assumptions" (Academic informant).

"I think everyone in academia who has at some level of responsibility for working alongside a business should come and work in a business for six months and understand what that looks like, understand timelines" (Business Engagement informant).

3.4 Timelines and objectives

Another theme closely associated with the challenge of bridging the different contexts in which academics and businesses operate was timescale clashes and divergent objectives. There

were recommendations that universities need to clarify exactly how they can help and work with businesses and be clear about boundaries relating to projects as opposed to the project being driven by university related KPIs. The need for academic institutions to engage account handlers (or similar) was also encouraged to ensure clarity of understanding and continued engagement.

“The other challenge is time scales. Again, the universities are a little bit like the healthcare system that you work in. You know, that funding will take 18 months and then it’s a two-year project. This world [business] moves much faster than that and we see an awful lot of stuff going on within universities, particularly within research areas. And you go, “blimey, by the time you’ve completed that, the world has moved on”. The research and your specific project that you’re doing there is too slow. It’s not going to happen because particularly with the massive investment from big tech into creative it’s just moving so fast. So, the universities really have to find a way that they keep pace” (Business Engagement informant).

“They [universities] need to have a much more multidisciplinary approach to how they bring the university resources together to work with a business. And I think that for that to really happen, it needs in effect almost account handlers within universities. Who ultimately are tasked with looking after business and actually go and work in that business, understand the challenges of the business, understand what’s in the universities and those people can then bring those things together and go well ‘Actually, this is where this can help.’ How does the university assist them rather than what are the KPI’s in the university and how does the business assist the university in achieving those KPIs. So, and again, I think a lot of that is on what people are being measured on within universities. I don’t think there are those account handlers within the universities who really get to know the customer [in this case the creatives]: how do I go into this business as a university and add value and what have I got within my tools within academia that can go in and give them value” (Business Engagement

informant).

3.5 Institutional Support

Another theme stemming from our findings relates to institutional support. Starting with the support available by universities the following quotes by one of our academic participants in journalism highlight the importance of staff who may occupy both worlds as academics and practitioners and resources ranging from funding – covering various needs – to media engagement.

“First, it’s staff, it’s finding staff who can work in both those spaces. And I think that’s one of the key things. Uh, it’s, soft skills, you know? Being able to welcome business people and know something about what they do. To keep them engaged, but then also to challenge some of their thinking or what they’re trying to bring in. So, each group has knowledge of each group is vital. So that’s the staff thing”.

“Resources: Could you have some funding that also allowed you to bring in personnel because that’s not often wrapped in. So, on the one hand, you won’t have staff, you won’t have the resources and the resources costed in a way that enables you to bring in both. Resources to say, build a VR [virtual reality] company, but at the same time, to have consultants come in”.

“Because you sort of first and foremost start with the idea you’re trying to build the idea, and then when you nearly got there, you go to market, the media and say this is what we’re trying to do. They need to be there from the onset because you want them to play a role in actually capturing what you’re doing by the piece and putting that out for people to understand” (Academic informant).

Although in general the term institutional support can be seen to refer to the resources academic institutions would provide, one of the participants in a sector wide bid – echoing the so called “quadruple helix” model (university–industry–government–civil society) (Miller et al. 2018) – highlighted the pivotal role of support from a wide range of actors including institutions such as the Welsh government.

“With these types of projects [sector wide], in

order to be successful, you have to sort of demonstrate the wider engagement. And yeah, the UK wide framework is it's a strength in places scheme, so it's about an area or a region coming together to put a strong sort of proposal in if you like to boost sort of research and investment in that sector, in that area. So, it's academia, universities, it's local government, it's national government within Wales, it's the production sector, there are also elements of non-profit organizations such as film Cwmry involved as well. So, there's a number of different set of people and organizations who have effectively sort of coming together to put a bid together." (Business Engagement informant).

creative are better equipped to bridge these gaps whilst participants with a business background pointed to the need for universities to employ staff who would specialise in working with business organisations to establish a common ground. Finally, the enablers for business engagement would include staff and resources and in the case of sector or region wide initiatives support by a wider set of stakeholders/institutions (including national/local governments) is crucial.

4. Conclusion

This report aimed to present findings on the nature of partnerships between academic institutions and the creative sector. The findings shed light on the motivations and role of the collaborators (academic and industry) as well as the challenges encountered along the way. It revealed that at times such projects may enable an innovation ethos whereby University affiliated teams may organise bids and secure funding to help bring academics and creatives together and also encourage the latter to think of alternative sources of funding for their ideas. Whilst connections can often be successfully established, tensions can also emerge in relation to the concerns by creatives about the propriety of their ideas and who is in control of the creative process. Consequently, a clear understanding of motivations, language and ways of working is key to avoid misunderstandings or imbalances of power and responsibility.

It was found that access to the creative community can provide challenges for academics who have limited networks and that this might be restricted further due to existing arrangements and projects that put limitations on opportunities.

There are potential additional challenges relating to different vocabularies, timelines, objectives, or metrics the two parties may be accustomed to. Perhaps unsurprisingly our findings suggest that academics with a previous occupational life as a

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About Aspect

Aspect (A SHAPE Platform for Entrepreneurship, Commercialisation and Transformation) is a network for organisations looking to make the most of commercial and business opportunities from social sciences, humanities and arts research.

Supported by Research England's Connecting Capability Fund, Aspect members sit at the epicentre of discovery, imagination and progress in the social sciences, humanities and arts. We draw together pioneering academics with innovative industry leaders to tackle the most complex societal challenges of our time.

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