

# **NCACE Micro-Commissions Evaluation Report**

**Myra Stuart and Suzie Leighton**

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# Contents

Introduction	1
Key Findings	4
The Micro-Commission Projects	5
Overall Evaluation Findings	10
Reflecting on the Micro-Commission Process	13
Recommendations	14

# Introduction

During my time working in the rich and complex ecology that is knowledge exchange between higher education and the arts and cultural sector, I have been fortunate to have been involved in the design, development, implementation and evaluation of programmes that have supported around 150 small, light touch and responsive collaborative projects. Through the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) funded Knowledge Exchange Hub, [Creativeworks London](#) (where [TCCE](#) designed and delivered the knowledge exchange programme) over 100 collaborative projects were supported through a series of creative vouchers, residencies and follow up opportunities for amounts of between £5k - £20k. A subsequent smaller project, [The Exchange](#) co-funded by Arts Council England and HEFCE (as was then) supported a further 30 collaborations between small arts and cultural organisations and early career researchers, who had not had the opportunity to undertake a KE collaboration previously. The Exchange also enabled us to undertake valuable work to support and evaluate the quality of collaboration that the partners achieved, as well as project outputs, using a [values based approach](#).

Whilst these small collaborative projects were extremely diverse in terms of the academic research discipline and the size, nature and motivations of the arts or creative organisations, there were clear correlations in the positive impacts of such small collaborative projects. They tended to “punch above” the level of funding given in terms of academic, sector and social impact. They were important “proof of concept” opportunities for ideas and projects, and many of the partnerships continued to collaborate and went on to lever significant amounts of funding from other sources. Importantly, these small, light touch and responsive projects also allowed the opportunity to take risks, develop collaboration skills and fail fast; to take what was learnt and move on quickly if a partnership, concept or premise were not quite right.

The ambition to offer further light touch support for small creative collaborations was written into NCACE since the very early planning stages of the project. Our research and activity has underlined that collaborators from both the arts and cultural sector and higher education feel a real lack of opportunity for creative thinking, relationship building and experimentation.

There is also little opportunity to explore new and future possibilities for their collaborations that support of this nature could facilitate. In recent years there have been many, very welcomed high-value, high profile funding opportunities for KE; such as Creative Industries Cluster Programme, Connecting Capability and the Cultural Development Programme. However, there is still a lack of support available for small, low risk, experimental “proof of concept” projects.

Many partnerships focus on time-limited projects in response to specific funding calls or policy agendas. They tend to only last as long as the funding awarded, and are not as resilient, productive or impactful for collaborators or communities as they could be. We also know that there are pervasive barriers to dynamic and sustainable partnerships, particularly when engaging in collaboration between universities and small or unfunded arts and cultural organisations. Further, the NCACE [Action Research Report](#) into Skills and Capacity for Knowledge Exchange highlighted the need for the arts and higher education to work closely together to co-design appropriate methods for mutually beneficial collaboration and knowledge sharing, emphasising that HE could learn much from the arts sector’s relational and inherently collaborative approaches. Small project funds can play a valuable role in relationship building and skills and confidence development, as our evaluation of previous small and light touch funding has demonstrated.

Although the concept of delivering small project funds to support cultural KE collaborations has always been a part of our plans, launching NCACE during the spring of 2020 meant that we entered into a very challenging fundraising environment. Coupled with the fact that there are limited routes of application for support programmes of this nature, this has meant that our ability to financially support our Micro-Commission programme is currently much reduced. But we are hopeful that we can bring in further resources to support the continuation of this work in the future.

In the Autumn of 2021, we ran an interactive and action-orientated Ideas Pool bringing together artists, arts and cultural organisations, researchers and knowledge exchange professionals to imagine a new and different future for mutually beneficial collaboration. Through a series of energetic, creative and (dare we say it) entertaining workshops and blue-sky provocations, we encouraged participants to break down existing models and think critically and boldly about future ways of working.

We were delighted to be able to offer a very modest amount of funding (circa £2,000 per project) for micro-commissions to four partnerships arising from the

event. These were to support the development of ideas that had the potential to provide mutually beneficial insights in the field of cultural knowledge exchange. We are delighted that all four micro-commissions are intending to continue, building on the work they've started, applying for further funding and, in many cases, having built methodologies, cross-sector working teams and advisory groups that they intend to continue developing and sharing with stakeholders.

This report gives an overview of the funded projects and shares the key findings from a series of conversations, interviews and focus groups with the participants. It also shares insights and recommendations for future action from the funded projects, as well as drawing on conversations with key unsuccessful applicants about the potential benefits merely of the process of applying for support of this nature.

Suzie Leighton, Co-Director NCACE

## Key Findings

During the course of the evaluation we conducted individual interviews with the Micro-Commission recipients and some of those who had applied for funding and ultimately been unsuccessful. We also used questionnaires and conducted a roundtable discussion attended by arts and cultural and higher education representatives from all the funded projects.

### **Key findings from the evaluation included:**

- This approach offers an important way of beginning to break down some of the barriers to cross-sector working between HE and the arts and cultural sectors, created by a lack of resources and often a lack of understanding of the working environments, motivations and funding structures of potential partners.
- In view of the precarity of many arts and cultural sector workers' employment, it was particularly important that the micro-commissions were able to support time on the project, enabling a space where opportunities to find match-funding for further development could begin.
- From the academic's point of view, our evaluation shows that these projects provided an important opportunity for their arts and cultural partners to more fully understand the contribution that academic research and expertise can make.
- For HE partners, being able to pilot a project highlighted the specific potential benefits of working with arts organisations and created the beginnings of a space to examine the specific benefits and innovations that KE with the arts and cultural sector can provide for both parties.
- There is a need to be realistic about what very small funding pots can achieve, but collaborators from both sides are clear that more flexible and low stakes funding is needed to develop cross-sector partnerships.
- There is significant potential for this 'proof of concept' approach to kickstart more resilient and impactful collaborations, innovative ways of working and the creation of new knowledge across both sectors.

# The Micro-Commission Projects

## Here North East: Northumbria University, Sangini and Vamos

*“It’s really picked up a real head of steam. Just over the last two, three sessions. People are assigning roles, tasks, goals, you know, timelines. It’s good. It’s quite exciting.”*

Dr Susan Ashley at the Department of Arts at Northumbria University had been working with a number of local diverse arts and culture organisations for the past decade exploring the issues that small Black and minority organisations and cultural practitioners face in the region. For this project she teamed up with primary partners Vamos and Sangini, plus a number of other local, diverse cultural organisations. Vamos is a Latin American music and creative festival based in Newcastle. Sangini is a Black led, multicultural women’s arts organisation based in South Shields that works to improve the quality of women’s health through arts, educational, creative and participatory activities that celebrate cultural diversity. The partnership team applied for funding to begin the process of setting up a Black led cultural hub and living archive for the North East. The university was able to provide match funding when the bid was successful, creating a workable pilot project budget. Many small cultural organisations face significant issues of precarity, which are intensified for marginalised cultural workers, whose work is also frequently under-platformed. The funding gave resources to begin planning the cultural hub in a way that was sustainable for the participant organisations. This has in large part been through the development of a Black-led steering group working towards establishing a new CIO called HERE North East. The steering group will continue, working with Northumbria University and three other regional universities, to develop HERE North East into a body that advises on wider local cultural issues and can inform ongoing local cultural activities and policy with regard to equity and antiracism in the culture, creative and heritage sectors.

## Key Outcomes

- A steering group has been established to inform the development of a living archive and welcoming cultural hub for local Black led cultural organisations and practitioners. It meets regularly and has been funded to pay precarious practitioners for their time attending meetings. This has been important to establishing equal partnership as arts and community workers are frequently on shorter term contracts and/or freelance. Space and time for research and attending events is not generally built into their salaries. Marginalised workers are more likely to have factors which further compound this, meaning that paying them for their steering group and planning labour is an important step in inclusion.
- Greater connectivity between global majority led cultural organisations locally, leading to greater information sharing, capacity building and mutual support, as well as an enhanced network with the universities in the region
- The chance for long-term collaborators to create focus in their work together, explore, and develop the next steps of the project

## Shakespeare Birthplace Trust (SBT) and Birmingham City University (BCU)

*“This is our first time working together in the context of an actual funding bid. It’s quite a low pressure or low stress version of that, we’re not entering into a major multi-year agreement with each other. We’re learning how to work together without there being too much pressure.”*

The Shakespeare Birthplace Trust is an independent charity that cares for the world’s greatest Shakespeare heritage sites in Stratford-upon-Avon. Within these locations, alongside many Shakespearean artefacts, they have an extensive collection of international artworks which they are in the process of recontextualising and decolonising within their exhibits. Having previously worked with Birmingham City University through an externally funded PhD project by Dr Helen Hopkins, The Shakespeare Birthplace Trust wanted to move to the next stage of considering the recommendations around decolonisation from Helen’s research. They applied for the micro-commission with Dr Hopkins

and Dr Islam Issa, a multi award-winning writer and specialist in early modern English in a global context. Whilst they had previously collaborated on the PhD funding bid, SBT felt it was not the right moment to apply for a major grant to move the work forward, needing to first plan next steps and continue to explore the working relationship with BCU. They were able to use the micro-commission to do this, working collaboratively to plan what would be needed for a larger research and engagement project around recontextualising and decolonising their international collection.

### **Key Outcomes**

- Micro-Commissions can give the resources for further experimentation, capacity building and opportunities to gather further knowledge of working styles for partners in the early stages of collaboration, before committing to a major bid.
- The project gave resources for The SBT to focus on assessing, planning and researching how to reframe a significant part of their collection. This will potentially lead to a transformed approach to presenting their international work, based on research carried out by experts in the field and guided by relevant communities.
- Helen Hopkin's report will be shared with the sector via the NCACE Evidence Repository for use by other collections wishing to recontextualise their international collections.

### **Ensemble: The Stables and The Open University**

*“As an arts organisation focused on delivery, we would not normally have the resources or time to do [experimentation and research]. The micro-commission has given us the opportunity and built our confidence in collaborating with a university.”*

The Stables, an award-winning music venue in Milton Keynes, teamed up with Dr Simon Holland, the founder and director of the Open Music Lab at The Open University, to explore innovative adaptive technology for Deaf and hearing-impaired people making music. The project has given the opportunity to use a combination of rigorous academic research and real-life experimentation to

develop new technologies and to explore a new partnership that both sides hope to continue. The project has had interest from other university departments, and they plan to continue to develop the technology with further funding. The funding has enabled initial testing which has facilitated knowledge building around working with the Deaf community, something which requires a nuanced approach, and has enabled them to work towards scaling the project up. They intend future iterations to be led by this community collaboration and will share key insights from the project to inform those looking to build KE collaborations with the Deaf community.

### **Key Outcomes**

- The Micro-Commission gave this new partnership a staggered way to begin working together. This felt safer and more possible than committing to a larger project from the start.
- Match funding was achieved once the project was underway, and it garnered interest from a number of departments across the University.
- It is developing insight into approaches for next steps in undertaking collaboration and KE with Deaf and hearing-impaired people's communities.
- The micro-commission gave The Stables space to research and explore, and academics the chance to begin to trial new technology in the "real world".
- It was the first time The Stables was able to undertake KE collaboration, and it is something it would now feel confident to explore again.

### **Exploring value in KE collaborations between higher education and theatres: Independent Theatre Council (ITC) and TORCH: The Oxford Research Centre in the Humanities**

*"There's something about the fact it's been very quick, you know, small amounts of money to just oil the wheels of it, it's probably made us do something we probably wouldn't have thought of doing unless we'd had that. And actually, it sort of opened up lots of avenues of conversation and questioning. So yeah, I think it's been really good actually too."*

Following attendance at the NCACE Ideas Pool in the Autumn of 2021, TORCH approached NCACE to ask for assistance in finding a suitable cultural partner to collaborate with on their planned project to explore enablers and barriers to HE / Arts KE, with an emphasis on helping universities budget appropriately to support capacity to engage in KE. NCACE Co-Director Suzie Leighton was able to introduce them to ITC, a membership organisation of over 450 companies and producers from the performing arts sector. The two organisations worked with

NCACE to develop and undertake a survey of the ITC's membership of their experiences and attitudes towards cross sector collaboration, as well as the financial and in-kind costs involved. For TORCH, the opportunity to connect their research with a wide network of theatre practitioners was invaluable. TORCH were motivated by the initial funding investment to put in a considerable amount of further in-kind time into the project, contributing to much greater achievements than the small initial amount of funding would suggest. ITC appreciated having its expertise valued through co-design of the project, and being financially recompensed for collaboration on the research. They are often expected to subsidise collaboration on projects with higher education, and as a small independent organisation, this is very challenging to resource. The opportunity for the project to be funded meant they were able to explore something they were interested in but would not have otherwise had the capacity to implement. Both parties felt the partnership was beneficial and are keen to work together again.

### **Key Outcomes**

- Increased collaborative capacity leading to increased engagement from the arts and cultural sector partner, adding value to the project
- A new and ongoing collaborative relationship between TORCH and ITC
- Shared impacts across ITC, TORCH and NCACE in terms of data from the survey
- TORCH's research into barriers and enablers for KE Collaboration with the independent theatre sector, including advice on budgeting for HEI's wishing to undertake such projects will be shared with the sector through TORCH, NCACE and ITC.
- The research report written by Ruth Moore, Charlotte Jones, Zoe Bateman and Rachel Hepworth is freely available to the sector via the NCACE Evidence Repository, TORCH and ITC

## Overall Evaluation Findings

The main findings from analysis of the interviews, questionnaires and transcript of the round table discussions are summarised below:

- Micro-commissions can be important and impactful opportunities for “proof of concept” projects, offering the capacity to pilot work that can go on to become much larger scale research. For example the development of The Stables / Open University project to include additional academics from the OU, musicians and further funding.
- Time to develop relationships and agreed ways of working together, experimentation, exploration and risk is important for building good collaborations and is highly valued. Unfortunately there are not enough opportunities for this, and this is one of the reasons that the Micro-Commissions were so appreciated.
- Projects were able to pay arts and cultural collaborators and those on fractional contracts meaning the scope for trialling working relationships and experimenting with research goes beyond the initial partnership: *“they enable us to bring in the resources that we wouldn’t normally be able to bring in, i.e artistic collaborators.”* The TORCH / ITC survey (Appendix 2) reinforces how essential this is for the arts and cultural sector.
- These small amounts of funding can be very impactful from an inclusion perspective, giving marginalised or precariously employed groups the capacity to engage in knowledge exchange.
- Having an external platform to raise internal awareness of their cultural knowledge exchange work was very useful for the academic partners. They were able to platform and grow institutional interest in their projects and showcase the possibilities in cultural sector Knowledge Exchange, often leveraging internal funding and in-kind support to add value to these micro commissions
- The breadth of what cultural knowledge exchange can be, and the richness of research opportunities and potential impacts offered by collaborating with the cultural sector, are perhaps not always understood within HE. As one academic partner stated “Most KE at the university is aimed at business

collaborations, and that's what they're looking for. So raising awareness of the impacts of work of this nature, that's really interesting and good."

- The Micro Commissions helped to develop cultural sector organisations' understanding of the full benefits of working with academics. Cultural projects reported a deeper understanding and appreciation of the benefits of working with academic research beyond tried and tested areas such as evaluation.
- Smaller funding pots can give the evidence needed for match funding, and for interest to grow from other departments and organisations, meaning that they can lever additional resources and deliver impacts and values that "punch well above their weight".
- How money is handled, and how internal academic processes impact on small organisations need to be carefully considered:
  - Freelance or fractionally employed artworkers need to be paid for their contribution. The time and resources needed to participate in further funding bids (often to the main benefit of the HEI) was mentioned by several of the arts and cultural projects.
  - As fractional contracts are becoming far more common in academia too, and the time of fractionally employed academic staff needs to be budgeted for.
  - The arts and cultural sector is facing many challenges coming out of the pandemic, and into the current cost of living crisis. Engaging with research can feel daunting in this situation and needs to be properly resourced. *"Any engagement with the small scale [arts and cultural] sector needs to be very clear, very succinct, very accessible."* - project leader.
  - The way large organisations such as universities and small cultural organisations work with money varies greatly and this needs to be borne in mind when planning the project. One solution can be that a cultural partner handles invoicing and sharing the money between organisations and any freelancers. This can make it possible to circumnavigate the often longer timescales and more complex systems of a university finance department, meaning that multiple partners can be paid sooner and in a simpler way. However this is an additional task for smaller organisations in such a partnership, and may not always be possible or appropriate.

In summary of the points above, any routes to gaining greater understanding and finding adaptive ways of working between smaller organisations and finance/administration systems within universities will better support knowledge exchange.

- *“Shifting from [academic writing] into writing a report is a step into a different world.”* There are cross-sector differences regarding practical things like writing, project planning etc. Both academics and arts and cultural workers can benefit from training on aspects they may need to adopt in a cross-sector research project.
- Projects can benefit from a careful consideration of Intellectual Property. Many of the projects opted for a fairly open source approach, and depending on the subject matter this can be a valuable position and statement to make. There is also some suspicion from both cultural and academic positions at times that the other side may take ideas and run with them or use them purely for their own financial gain or reputation building. Defining expectations and understanding the unique challenges and opportunities that come with cultural / academic partnerships is key to meeting these concerns.
- Communities are frequently complex and genuine listening and engagement takes time. When community engagement is a part of a research project surprises are common, lessons will usually be learnt along the way, and things may take longer than anticipated. Being realistic about expectations, and building in a plan for ongoing engagement can help.

## Reflecting on the Micro-Commission Process

We also spoke to four projects that had been unsuccessful with their micro-commission application. In general, they had had a positive experience of applying for micro-commission funding through NCACE. It is notable that the events leading up to the application process (additional NCACE and TCCE events, and additional support and feedback that some of the applicants received), did have a positive impact on prospective partners. In some cases this had contributed to them seeking and securing funding elsewhere, in other cases these opportunities had boosted confidence, knowledge and connections. This was especially true for early career academics who also benefited from the experience of applying for a less intimidating pot of money and application process, and makes a case for the importance of third-party brokers in developing KE collaborations.

Suggestions for ways things could be done differently included the idea of a small amount of funding being available for completing applications. Although the Micro-Commission application process was kept deliberately light touch in recognition of the very small amounts offered, filling out applications can end up being substantial work without resources for smaller and more precarious cultural organisations and freelancers, as well potentially for earlier career and more precarious academics. Another suggestion raised was for a rolling and reactive “micro pot” fund that could be applied for at a time most suitable for a project. Flexibility and a variety of options including micro-commissions for different projects at different stages were high on the projects’ “wish list”.

Overall, the experience of the unsuccessful partners interviewed was very positive and helpful in moving forward practice, relationships and leveraging internal funding, providing a further example of how a scheme like this can give value beyond the immediate money awarded to a small number of projects.

## Recommendations

Based on the findings of this evaluation, and our wider work within NCACE, we would like to propose the following points for consideration by funders, policy makers and those developing and delivering cultural knowledge exchange:

Micro-commissions across academia and the arts and cultural sector have the potential to open up opportunities far beyond the initial money spent. Both sectors, KE and wider research will benefit from further micro-funding opportunities aimed at cross-sector collaborations.

There is a need for a variety of approaches, which could of course also include larger funding pots alongside smaller commissions that are still light touch and accessible for experimentation.

Small fees available to KE partners collaborating in follow-up funding applications could be explored, especially and probably more feasibly for slightly larger funds, to improve accessibility and inclusion, and support collaborative working at all stages of the process, supporting applications from artworkers, academics on fractional contracts and more precarious cultural organisations.

Rolling funds would enable more flexibility around application timescales, meaning project development wouldn't need to be rushed and that organisations would be able to apply at the right moment for their project.

Support with and potentially research into how administration and finance is organised with regards to KE within HEIs, could help both smaller organisations and fractional collaborators and academics engage with the process. Simple measures, such as considering where money goes and who distributes it, could help in many cases. A wider examination of how collaboration is supported structurally and financially across university systems could be beneficial to the wider process of knowledge exchange.

Training and support of the sort currently offered by NCACE was very useful for many of the project leaders and applicants we spoke with. Continuing to offer training and networking opportunities, alongside funding, supports growing

cross-sector awareness and spreads and develops knowledge of the possibilities inherent in cultural sector KE.

Arts and cultural sector knowledge exchange comes with a lot of opportunities for research and impact. Whilst there is a crossover of opportunities, project leaders who had insight into cross-discipline academic research mentioned anecdotally that they felt there were some specific opportunities that were unique to cultural KE. Further investigation into this could be beneficial. Developing enhanced information sharing opportunities about the specifics of cultural sector KE and what it can offer, including conversations aimed at KE specialists and the wider academic sector, could also further develop awareness of potential opportunities and impacts, and therefore benefit the sector.

[Myra Stuart](#) and Suzie Leighton September 2022

