



Higher education and arts and culture sector collaborations with reference to the work of Crafts Council

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The arts and culture are good at telling stories but we are less adept at the rigour of evidence and research. Indeed, there is a continual complaint that we lack data and that the arts will never win the funding argument if we don't demonstrate our worth.

Evidence of the impact of the arts and cultural sector has been an ongoing conversation for the past twenty years. Driven by the government and funders, such as Arts Council England, these demands are only increasing with ever-diminishing funds.

In this essay I reflect on collaborations between the arts and cultural sector and Higher Education as a means of achieving this evidence. I will use my experience, as Executive Director of the Crafts Council, to illustrate this through examples of its work collaborating with higher education; and to highlight where the challenges lie in creating knowledge exchange and partnerships that are mutually beneficial.

It's true that the arts and culture have had a habit of claiming the benefits of their impact without hard evidence – relying more on anecdote than fact. However, I do sometimes wonder if this seemingly unattainable goal is really a misguided assumption: that achieving some evidence of impact would really result in the flow of more money. And anyway we all know that our value lies not just in economic metrics; and that understanding impact is more than just about the next funding round.

The real benefit of the arts and culture cannot be measured in a collection of 'Gradgrindian' hard facts but then neither is it some amorphous indefinable mass. Those of us who have worked in the arts believe passionately that they generate economic, social and broader cultural benefits both in the short and long term. However, the challenge lies in how to demonstrate the impact of a complex ecology of activities and benefits.

In this context research and knowledge creation in collaboration with higher education is an important means of achieving a clearer understanding of this ecology. It is also a process which can provide deep, meaningful and unexpected insights and results; but is not without some endemic challenges.

When I joined the Crafts Council in 2006 it was seeking to reposition itself as a national agency promoting the value of craft and working in partnership. It was clear that having an evidence base was key to that new mission.

Craft was identified by DCMS as one of the creative industries. Yet, with the exception of an occasional national survey of craftspeople, the Crafts Council had little or no data and research to demonstrate even its economic impact. It was clear at the time that we needed to dispel some of the misconceptions of craft as traditional and outmoded in a burgeoning

digital age. We wanted to showcase craft as the dynamic sector it is; how it contributes social, economic and cultural value to society as a whole; and how knowledge creation could help grow and develop the sector. This evidence would be used to showcase and promote craft but also to inform our work and that of the sector more widely.

The result has been a tally of significant reports and research projects.¹ These have included the first economic estimates using government SIC and SOC data, a survey of participation in craft education; and most recently the first research report into the market for craft in a decade.

The Crafts Council research strategy has had three broad aims: to provide an evidence base about the sector and its role; to enable the organisation to formulate policy positions; provide leadership and a voice for the sector; and finally to focus its programmes of support to makers, audiences and organisations in ways that are based on need and enable them to thrive.

For the Crafts Council, co-produced research is a means to provide new pathways to impact; of which knowledge exchange and collaborations with higher education have been an important element. Current studies include partnerships with Kingston University; Northumbria University, Royal College of Art and University of Arts, London.² These collaborations have enabled Crafts Council to supplement its small internal capacity, of one part-time member of staff, with a wider range of knowledge and expertise and importantly given us access to funding. Crafts Council now has a significant reputation for its robust research and policy making.

Along this journey we have undertaken many different collaborations. I will highlight four to illustrate both the challenges and benefits of co-research in relation to the academic, the organisation and the creative practitioner. It is important to acknowledge that audiences and communities are also involved in research projects. However, in this essay, I focus on examples of working with HE aimed at supporting makers in extending their creative practice; and on creating an evidence base and informing Crafts Council policy.

¹ <https://www.craftscouncil.org.uk/about/research-and-policy>

² Creative Europe Crafting Europe to build capacity through toolkits and workshops within the crafts sector
Kingston University PhD studentship on inclusion and relevance From Visibility to Mattering
Kingston University PhD studentship on sustainability in craft makerspaces
Northumbria University Crafting a healthier internet of things with the Mozilla Foundation
Royal College of Art Ecological citizens: network to investigate and promote tech interventions to create sustainable citizens
University of the Arts, London, framework for bioinspired textile design

The first of two examples of supporting makers is a HERA (Humanities in the European Research Area) funded project *Creativity and Craft Production in Late and Middle Bronze Age Europe* (CinBa).³ Led by University of Southampton it involved eight HEIs, museums and non-academic partners including the Crafts Council. It was the first academic project to explore the creative potential of interdisciplinary collaboration between the humanities and contemporary craft.

This was the Crafts Council's first and unexpected foray into a HE collaboration and was somewhat ambitious. We joined quite late in the day with the project already well scoped. Our involvement was to explore the links between ancient and modern creativity through engagement with bronze age objects by facilitating access to contemporary makers. This consisted of two elements: a Live Project with early career makers studying contemporary craft subjects in FE and HE institutions; and a Maker Engagement project with established makers.

These established makers all brought a long and distinguished record of haptic and material knowledge coupled with a research-based approach to their work. They contributed not simply to replicate prehistoric craft objects and processes but as investigators and interpreters of meanings in objects. This enabled the academics to '*analyse different kinds of 'hard' and 'soft' (technical vs emotional) physical engagements with archaeological materials, and to assess the potential of these for developing different kinds of understandings of the past within heritage environment.*' What became apparent was that the makers were indeed co-researchers. Knowledge exchange was not applied but embedded in the makers' contemporary practice through which the inherent creativity of the Bronze Age could be explored.

This process of enquiry also informed the makers' ongoing practice. Makers often work in isolation but here, interaction with academics – both the people and expertise – as well as the unique opportunity to engage with the materials and objects themselves provided a variety of intellectual experiences. This was highly valued by them, serving as a starting point in their continuing research and exploration, through the production of new work, a touring exhibition; and, in the case of one maker, studying for a PhD.

For the Crafts Council this project was an important start to our research collaborations with higher education. Firstly, we enabled the research partners to access the makers with whom the actual knowledge exchange was taking place. This gave us an appreciation of the value of research collaboration in supporting makers' own professional development and career progression but also our role as a facilitator and interlocutor.

³ <https://cinba.net>

Secondly, it enabled us to evidence and demonstrate the wider role of craft and making in enhancing academic research. Over the course of the project the expectations of the researchers and the makers had had to evolve and adapt to each other. This created an open and sharing environment that placed primacy on both intellectual content and practice-based research. Most significantly was the recognition that the makers' approach was a *'provocation to traditional academic practice in challenging the primacy of text-based research proposing new avenues for research and knowledge creation'*.

CinBA foregrounded a subsequent series of HE collaborative projects focussed on creating opportunities for makers to develop their work in new contexts and establishing this principle of makers as co-researchers through their practice.

One such – and my second - example is Parallel Practices which formed part of a wider programme of work exploring the value of knowledge creation, beyond the humanities, to STEM subjects. Parallel Practices was devised by the Crafts Council and the Cultural Institute, King's College London, in 2014, to explore innovation through a series of residencies pairing makers with bio-medical professionals.⁴ The project aimed to *'stimulate learning and innovation through a focus on the body, materials and processes that inform clinical outcomes and artistic practice'*.

In the first cohort one of the four residencies paired Dr Richard Wingate, Principal Investigator at the MRC Centre for Developmental Neurobiology at King's, with textile maker Celia Pym. They explored their different but parallel approaches to mending and its value in understanding the 'emotional'. Both activities require working by hand: one in the care of textiles through repair and the other in teaching students anatomy; and they both engage in how clothing and the body convey a sense of the person. Significantly Pym and Wingate agreed at the start of the residency that they didn't know what the outcomes of the project would be. Celia Pym describes how there was no research question: '[we] didn't want to prescribe what we would make or produce. Instead, we were both excited about the prospect of seeing what might develop – ideas, objects, experiences for students and staff in the dissecting room through the process.' That is not to say that there was no structure. They created a framework for how they would conduct the residency whereby Celia Pym would work at her mending desk in the dissecting room and they would meet regularly to discuss progress. Despite the open-ended nature of the project there were some important, tangible and conceptual outcomes.

⁴ <https://www.kcl.ac.uk/cultural/projects/archive/2014/parallel-practices>

Pym and Wingate developed a course module, 'Synthetic Anatomy', along with one of the other resident makers, Les Bicknell and KCL Researcher, Leigh Chambers, which was co-taught to KCL undergraduates for a number of years. Conceptual outcomes are more difficult to measure but Celia Pym describes how she regularly returns to the experiences and conversations about care, grief and end of life that took place in the dissecting room and how it focused her interest in hand skills and the power of touch. For Dr Wingate it was the unique contribution of the creative practitioners and how these collaborations created 'a route into understanding science and medical education in a way which we can't do ourselves.'

Both CinBA and Parallel Practices were conceived as providing professional practice for makers through partnership between the sector and HE. These projects have enabled makers to engage intellectually and practically in research; and this has continued to influence them beyond the initial activity. The projects brought partners together in an exploratory, open-ended approach with an emphasis on process and with less defined metrics and impact evaluation.

This was an appropriate strategy for working with creative practitioners delivering Crafts Council's research strategy aim to focus the support it provides on need. However, collaboration with higher education has also delivered its other two research aims. It has brought rigour and tangible outcomes to the Crafts Council's work providing both an evidence base and informing its policy and programmes. There are two examples I will share.

First, is one of the Crafts Council's most important pieces of research '*Innovation through Craft: Opportunities for Growth*' published in 2016. This study investigated the processes and impact of innovation through craft and its spill over effects into other industries most specifically STEM.

In this project the collaboration was not simply between a higher education institution and arts organisation but a group of partners: the Crafts Council; the University of Brighton; the Knowledge Transfer Network for Creative, Digital and Design and consultants, KPMG. In this case each institution brought its own expertise and unique knowledge to the partnership. Furthermore, the university partner – University of Brighton - was not there to deliver the research but because of its track record in the concept of fusion which was an important underlying concept in the research proposition. It was KPMG who conducted the actual research.

This collaboration delivered a series of case studies that provide an evidence base and a methodology for the way in which makers bring unique material knowledge and skills to

innovation in science and technology. It also enabled us to formulate a visual schematic to describe this complex process with the help of Daniel Charny, Professor of Design at Kingston University and Creative Strategist, Dee Halligan, from We Go Forth.⁵

The project has also led to further research exchange partnerships including participating in a Creative Europe funded programme Fusion⁶ and a partnership with the Centre for Fine Print Research at University West England.⁷ It developed an evidence base for our advocacy work which has informed our engagement with policy bodies and decision makers such as NESTA, Innovate UK; it supported our contribution to the Creative Industry Council's sector deal with government; and led to a number of international opportunities.

My second example is diversity in craft practice and the sector. In 2019 we started to collaborate with Dr Karen Patel of Birmingham City University, initially, on a 12-month research project funded by the AHRC Creative Economy Engagement Fund. '*Diversity in craft practice through digital technology skills development*' explored the experiences of Global Majority women and how social media expertise could help improve their online visibility. It was clear from the initial findings that the issues facing makers of colour required further research to extend the reach and impact of the project. This subsequently led to a further two-year research project '*Craft Expertise*': an AHRC funded project exploring diversity and expertise development in the contemporary craft economy.⁸

Dr Patel's research would provide rigorous evidence and intelligence to help develop the Crafts Council's equality and diversity work and, in turn, would inform its overall business planning and programming. The Crafts Council's contribution would be extending the reach and profile of the research and its findings through social media channels; helping to recruit workshop participants; and delivering continuing professional development support through free surgeries for craft businesses. Finally, Crafts Council staff contributed to the development of policy recommendations to address the lack of diversity in craft through three workshops hosted by Birmingham City University and STEAMhouse.

⁵ <https://wegoforth.org>

⁶ FUSION (Fashion Up-Skilling: Innovation Open Network) an international partnership project, funded by Creative Europe, that offers designers/makers training in digital fabrication skills and co-designing methodologies towards the development of bespoke products, across fashion, textiles and wearables for active ageing citizens.

⁷ The Centre for Fine Print Research (CFPR) at UWE Bristol has been granted a Research England Expanding Excellence in England award to increase its internationally acclaimed investigation into the artistic, historical and industrial significance of creative print practices, processes and technologies.

⁸ <https://craftexpertise.com>

For Dr Patel the project enabled her to build a greater understanding and appreciation of the professional craft sector. She was able to develop relationships with other members of Crafts Council staff; to learn about the process of exhibition curation; and how the research findings could be packaged and communicated to a general audience. Furthermore, she also joined Crafts Council's Global Majority Advisory Group, established in 2021, to work with staff on its anti-racism and equity work and which continues to be a critical friend to the organisation.

This collaboration has given the research a much wider audience and impact. Following the murder of George Floyd and the Black Lives Matter protests in 2020 it was both timely and crucial in determining a path of action both for the Crafts Council and the sector in addressing racism and inequity. The initial findings *Making Changes in Crafts: Craft Expertise Phase One Report*⁹ were launched in a joint online event in 2021 to over 100 attendees. The report evidenced, in uncompromising terms, the challenges and racism faced by makers of colour working in the craft sector but it also identified what needed to be actioned through five key recommendations.

It has provided invaluable insight and knowledge giving the Crafts Council access to makers and audiences who might not have otherwise engaged with it and a confidence that its actions are based on robust evidence. This is borne out in what was an unplanned consequence of the research. Dr Patel was able to commission five Black and Asian women makers to produce new work which resulted in 'We Gather' an exhibition in the Crafts Council new gallery.¹⁰ By tracking gallery visitor data Crafts Council was able to see a significant change in demographic profile with a 20% and 10% increase in visitors of Black and Asian heritage, respectively, compared with the previous exhibition.

Promoted by the Crafts Council to its networks '*Craft Expertise*' has enabled the whole sector to benefit and learn the hard lessons of the research and it has been a forceful tool in prompting positive change and other opportunities. AHRC follow-on funding is being sought to build on phase 1 of '*Making Changes*' to look at the impact of the research and report. Phase two of Dr Patel's work will focus on craft social enterprises in the UK and Australia; and the research findings from all this work will be brought together in a book Dr Patel is writing to be published by Routledge in 2023/2024.

Furthermore, drawing on the policy recommendations in the report, Crafts Council worked with Dr Patel and the Global Majority Advisory Group to make a successful proposal to the

⁹ <https://www.craftscouncil.org.uk/about/research-and-policy/making-changes-in-craft>

¹⁰ <https://www.craftscouncil.org.uk/whats-on/we-gather-exhibition>

Centre for Cultural Value's first Collaborate funding programme.¹¹ *'Disrupting the Craft Canon – the Cultural Value of Craft'* is an interdisciplinary partnership with Glasgow Caledonian University, London which will engage with racially minoritized communities through a Living Lab Model to explore, develop and test measures of the cultural value and wellbeing attached to craft.

This research, which started with a single narrowly defined, one year project, has acted as a catalyst to a series of wider activities with multiple benefits for the academic Dr Karen Patel and her institution Birmingham City University; for the arts organisation, the Crafts Council, and for the makers and sector. This is the best of knowledge exchange and collaboration with higher education.

The Crafts Council's work in this field over the last ten years has seen it develop a more sophisticated and confident approach to working with higher education. Each of the projects mentioned here has been scoped and adapted to need, building on the learning from previous initiatives and has provided a multiplicity of impacts and outcomes – some anticipated others not. Some projects might not be defined as knowledge exchange, in the strict sense, but nevertheless have delivered knowledge through partnership with higher education. Those most successful have built on or grown a body of knowledge through numerous initiatives rather than a single project. Extending the reach of academic research in this way is surely a key benefit of knowledge exchange and collaboration. But there continue to be challenges to knowledge exchange and working with higher education and these have not changed significantly over that decade. Underpinning this is the need for a more equitable relationship.

First, the ongoing question of impact. Whilst it is possible to determine economic impact through clear and measurable outcomes, how to create non-financial metrics for social and cultural impact continues to evade us. For the creative it is often the process that is formative. Therefore identifying, at the outset, the explicit and implicit outcomes for the makers involved in both the CinBA and Parallel Practices projects would have been challenging. In the case of CinBA the potential of makers as valuable co-researchers making their own distinctive contribution was not foreseen but is identified in the final report as a significant outcome in demonstrating the potential of knowledge exchange in the cultural sector.

It would be interesting to see if shared metrics could be retrospectively drawn from a comparison of these two very different projects. Whilst Parallel Practices was a simple partnership matching an academic with a maker in an open and less defined initiative;

¹¹ <https://www.culturalvalue.org.uk/collaborate-fund/collaborate-projects/>

CinBA was a multi partnership on a scale that required a more formal and prescriptive approach. However, to undertake such an exercise would require tracking the impact through longitudinal research and that is not necessarily, or rarely, achievable within the terms or means of a project. With the experience Crafts Council now has, it could be possible to shape some predicted outcomes and impact for such research but even then there is not necessarily the same tangible and causal link between the project's aims and the impact on the makers as there is for the academics.

I am not making a case for exceptionalism, more a need to find a different framework that appreciates the unique role and contribution of creatives. In the case of Parallel Practices, it was the acceptance and confidence, by both parties, in an open-ended process that led to deep impactful knowledge exchange. However, that appreciation may not always be there. For example, the makers participating in one early knowledge exchange project were not offered payment for their contribution: it was assumed that the exploratory nature of their role would be sufficient reward. More recently a researcher described the creatives (who were paid) involved in their knowledge exchange project as being 'allowed' to develop their creative practice.

The act of making, as a form of practice-based research, may not be aimed at answering a research question rather it may be focussed more on the process. However, that should not necessarily mean it has no significance in a research question led endeavour. Crafts Council's innovation research is informative in this context. What makers bring to innovation (research) is an alternative approach based on a different form of thinking style and approach. Sociologist Richard Sennett describes craft thinking as 'reflection-in-action'. Makers work with, rather than against, the restrictions of a given situation and by doing so 'stretch the competencies of others within reasonable parameters'.¹² Whilst an open ended form of enquiry might not fit a research based enquiry confidence in the creative practitioner to do what they do best is needed to ensure the full potential of their contribution.

Secondly, access to funding. Funding dictates form and content and it is inevitable then that the higher education institution is the driving partner for knowledge exchange. Knowledge Exchange funding is only through the higher education institution or via a small number of AHRC directly funded 'Independent Research Organisations'. With the exception of large institutions, such as the Tate and RSC, that excludes most of the cultural sector. It is understandable given AHRC and other research funders are there to serve the needs of Higher Education. However, if the point of knowledge exchange and research is to provide impact beyond the higher education institution then access to funding should be equitable.

¹² Crafting Capital, Dr Karen Yair, 2011

Either party should be able to apply and size should not matter. At the very least both parties need to share the aims and plan from the outset. For example, crucially, Crafts Council Head of Research and Policy, Julia Bennett, worked with Dr Patel in shaping her application to the AHRC UKRI/RCUK Innovation Fellowships Scheme (a programme which requires research and activities to have an impact on the creative economy) making this a genuine collaboration.

In this respect the Centre for Cultural Value's Collaborate fund is a positive development because it allows for cultural organisations to both initiate research projects and apply for research funding; albeit modest amounts. However, given the paucity of initiatives accessible to smaller cultural organisations it is a shame that one cultural organisation, of only five funded in the first year of the Collaborate programme, is also listed on the AHRC website as an Independent Research Organisation and therefore already in receipt of funding.

Third, knowledge exchange and research can be resource intensive. For the Crafts Council partnering with higher education has been driven by a desire for expertise, capacity, finance and knowledge creation. Its higher education research prospectus, launched to encourage research collaboration, has contributed to generating 18 new research projects/partnerships since 2018. However, a further 16 applications were unsuccessful, along with four partnership bids to the AHRC's Creative Clusters Programme.

Of course, participating in competitive bids requires an acceptance that some will fail. Yet, the work to develop these relationships and funding proposals and the many other conversations with higher education institutions takes up a significant amount of time, money and capacity which many organisations don't have. To mitigate against this Crafts Council has been very clear on what it can offer higher education partners: a track record in building a research and evidence base; access to an extensive range of contacts and assets; and pathways to impact working with craft practitioners and professionals in higher education.

Finally, there is a gap between academia and the sector in relation to language and scale. Not all research projects are relevant. A research topic familiar to the cultural sector can be unrecognisable in the hands of an academic: it being focused on theoretical rather than practical outcomes. That is not to diminish the value of that research but it is hard to see how it could be applied in a cultural context.

The term knowledge exchange and, indeed, the language of higher education in general is not used by those working in the cultural sector. Whilst I have referred to knowledge exchange, we never used that term at the Crafts Council; other than in a formal context

when working with higher education. However, a shared language does matter if we are to avoid knowledge exchange being driven only by higher education and if we want to create positive, effective collaborations.

The differing scale of large academic institutions working with a cultural sector dominated by small organisations and freelancers can also create barriers. Higher education institutions can work at glacial speed whilst cultural organisations can be more agile. Knowledge exchange projects are often multi-year and slow burn; whilst other funders demand to see tangible material evidence more quickly. The processes of higher education can prohibit arts and cultural organisations, for example, benefiting directly from the project funding because of the strictures imposed by the institution's administrative systems.

In both these cases, devising projects whereby the level and terms of engagement can be scaled or facilitated via a single body helps in alleviating the burden on the arts organisation or creative. Firstly, networking has been a clear benefit to us in this respect. Bringing interested parties together at an early stage to develop a shared language and build relationships is key. This has allowed us to identify partners and to have conversations with higher education institutions we were not familiar with and to build our contacts. In the case of our innovation work, having the University of Brighton, who we already knew, onboard undoubtedly gave confidence to the Knowledge Transfer Network that this was a project worth investing in. Secondly facilitation. In the case of Parallel Practices and other similar projects Crafts Council has acted as a facilitator holding 'dating workshops' creating a space for networking, engagement and pairing creatives with academics. In the case of the Collaborate programme Crafts Council is the beneficiary and CCV is the facilitator matching it with higher education institutions and researchers it had not worked with before.

The drive to ensure higher education research demonstrates economic and social impact has created more opportunity for knowledge exchange. What was a 'nice to have' is now an important part of higher education and its funding. However, there is still a sense that higher education is the dominant partner – at least at the institutional level even if not on a one-to-one basis. This is expressed through the funding mechanisms, language, resources and process. So, the priority must be that creative and arts organisations are involved in research at the design stage so we can add value that is relevant and builds on our strengths.

Knowledge Exchange can only fulfil its potential when there is an equitable approach with mutually beneficial collaborations. That is not to say this doesn't happen. There are many academics who are genuinely engaged in meaningful research collaborations. These recognise that knowledge exchange can mean different things to the academic, the arts

organisation or the creative practitioner; and that success is relative depending on the partner and their expectations.

Crafts Council has certainly benefited from such initiatives but it has taken time and experience and has been helped by being a relatively large arts organisation with at least some research capacity. Over the course of the decade Crafts Council has undertaken collaborations with higher education in research partnerships and we have seen the outcomes become increasingly more tangible and impactful. The collaboration with Dr Patel on '*Craft Expertise*' is, I think, a case in point. It has had multiple impacts both in reach: rippling out beyond the initial partners to the wider ecology of the craft sector; and in progression: seeding subsequent new initiatives.

The journey to create an evidence base for the arts and cultural sector is an ongoing one. The need for hard facts and measures will continue to be a requirement but research collaborations have helped develop a more nuanced approach which recognises the complexity of the sector. Through the Crafts Council's research strategy, it set out to create an evidence base for the sector; formulate policy and advocacy work; and provide the relevant support to makers and the sector. It has a growing wealth of knowledge which demonstrates the value of craft; and collaboration with higher education has made this a much richer story.



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