



Research Beyond Institutions

Boundary-spanning capability and the infrastructure the next generation of research will require.

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Contents

Executive Summary	3
1. The policy problem: research has changed faster than its systems	5
2. Independent researchers as connectors in a porous ecosystem	7
3. Participation, legitimacy and the boundaries of research	9
4. Where research value is created and where it disappears	10
5. Boundary-spanning and field-making	11
6. What the current system prevents or loses	12
7. What a future-facing research ecosystem might require	13
8. A proposed larger programme of work	15
Inquiry 1: Develop and challenge the concept	15
Inquiry 2: Explore boundary-spanning practice	15
Inquiry 3: Generate and test future research hypotheses	15
Why this work is important	15
9. Intended outcomes	15
10. Conclusion: a strategic opportunity	18
References	19

Executive summary

Independent researchers make visible the boundary-spanning capabilities on which contemporary research increasingly depends. They reflect shifts towards more varied research careers, greater recognition of practice-based and experiential knowledge, and the growing importance of collaboration and co-creation. Their experiences also expose persistent inequities in who can participate, whose knowledge is valued, and who is funded, credited and supported. Furthermore, the speed of current shifts in research careers suggests that without intervention, policymakers might only recognise the impact of disruption after important skills, key relationships, and established practices have already been lost.

This paper brings together evidence from the NCACE Collection and Independent Researchers Network (IRN), the Creative Industries Policy and Evidence Centre (Creative PEC), the British Academy and the Greater London Authority (GLA), alongside relevant academic literature. The evidence base is suggestive rather than complete: ‘independent researcher’ is not a consistently defined or measured category. The paper therefore identifies both a policy case and a programme of work needed to test it.

Within the arts and humanities, research is increasingly produced across universities, cultural organisations, charities, consultancies, public bodies, businesses, and communities. Yet many of the systems that confer research legitimacy, distribute resources and record value continue to be organised around a simpler institutional model: a researcher has a stable affiliation; a university or recognised research organisation holds the infrastructure; and research quality is demonstrated principally through established academic outputs.

Independent researchers are not the only people who exercise this capability, but their experience makes it unusually visible. They frequently work through portfolio and hybrid careers, carrying questions, methods, relationships and learning between organisations and sectors. In the arts and cultural field, artist-researchers, practitioner-researchers and ‘pracademics’ often connect academic, creative, professional and community knowledge. Their contribution is not limited to producing discrete findings: they translate between research cultures, convene partners, sustain trust, help ideas travel, and create the conditions in which collaborative inquiry can happen.

This boundary-spanning capability is strategically important. Complex social, cultural, economic and environmental challenges rarely conform to institutional or disciplinary boundaries. Research addressing them depends upon collaboration, co-production, interpretation and implementation. However, the people doing this connective work can be difficult for the system to see. Their activity may be recorded as freelancing, consultancy, engagement, facilitation or creative practice, rather than research; and much of its value emerges between projects or when formal funding has ended.

The resulting barriers are practical and epistemic. Independent researchers often lack access to journals, libraries, ethics support, software, and funding advice. Eligibility rules may prevent them from leading grants and procurement approaches may cast an intellectual or research partner as a “supplier”. Authorship, attribution and intellectual property often must be negotiated afresh, while the costs of relationship-building, dissemination and maintaining an independent research infrastructure remain unpaid. These arrangements also shape whose knowledge is recognised and who gets to participate in the research system. Additionally, the research findings from independent practice might be employed in or between the projects in which it was produced but is often not recorded for wider dissemination or can be misattributed to researchers in established roles.

NCACE’s early evidence indicates that these problems are particularly acute for arts-practice and community-based researchers, for whom routes to recognition and dissemination are less developed than for conventionally academic independent scholars (Adewole-Elliott, 2025). The NCACE Research Associates pilot suggests one promising principle: recognition itself can function as infrastructure when it is portable, proportionate, and decoupled from employment status (NCACE, 2026a). This is valuable learning, but not yet a robust evidence base.

NCACE therefore proposes an early-stage programme of exploratory research focused on an emerging question: what is boundary-spanning research capability, how and where is it exercised, and what does it reveal about the changing research ecosystem? Rather than beginning with a fixed workforce category or a predetermined infrastructure solution, the programme would use the IRN and selected cross-sector cases to develop and test concepts, methods and hypotheses. Its purpose would be to open a new research agenda and establish a credible foundation for subsequent research, policy development and experimentation aligned with evolving research culture.

1. The policy problem: research has changed faster than its systems

The central problem is not just that some researchers have insecure employment, it is that contemporary research is increasingly networked, interdisciplinary and cross-sector, while its enabling systems remain strongly institution-centered. This is important because a policy response focused only on moving individuals back into conventional academic employment would neither reflect the diversity of research careers, the current financial realities of the sector, nor address the structural dependence of collaborative research on people working across boundaries.

This mismatch is becoming more visible as the research system itself places greater emphasis on collaboration, interdisciplinarity, research culture, knowledge exchange and cross-sector working. UKRI's strategic direction and newer funding approaches increasingly value research that connects disciplines, sectors and forms of expertise. ESRC's applicant-led portfolio, *React, Connect, Grow, Explore and Challenge* similarly signals greater interest in agility, connection, experimentation and responsible risk-taking. These developments suggest that boundary-spanning capability is becoming more strategically important. The policy question is whether eligibility, recognition, and infrastructure are evolving at the same pace.

This trend is not entirely new. Accounts of 'Mode 2' knowledge production described research as socially distributed, application-oriented and shaped by multiple sites of expertise (Gibbons et al., 1994). Work on the 'third space' in higher education similarly identified professionals whose roles cross conventional academic and administrative boundaries (Whitchurch, 2013). More recent ecosystem approaches emphasise that cultural and creative value emerges through relations among people, organisations and places rather than through isolated institutions (Manfredi de Bernard, Comunian and Gross, 2022). What is newly urgent is the scale of the mismatch between these realities and the arrangements through which research is funded, governed and counted. Additionally, the current economic challenges the sector faces, and an increasingly precarious employment environment are swelling the number of independent researchers trying to navigate research culture.

The British Academy's consultation on SHAPE research careers found a landscape marked by multiple routes, insecure contracts, project-chasing and movement across academia and other sectors. It also found that researchers value the variety and meaning available through mixed activity, even while experiencing uncertainty and weak progression structures (British Academy, 2024). This complicates any simple opposition between a secure academic 'inside' and a deficient independent 'outside'. Careers move between the two, and independence may be chosen, imposed, temporary or combined with fractional institutional roles.

The arts and creative industries make these dynamics especially visible. Creative PEC reports that the share of self-employment in the creative workforce is twice the all-industry average and that the sector is dominated by microbusinesses (Giles et al., 2025). Earlier place-based research found creative freelancers to be highly skilled, networked collaborators whose economic and social

contribution was nevertheless poorly understood; it also warned against romanticising flexibility where working conditions amount to precarity or ‘flexploitation’ (Henry et al., 2021). These findings do not provide a proxy count of independent researchers, but they describe a labour market in which cross-sector, portfolio and project-based research practice can readily occur and indeed disappear from institutional datasets.

Technological change increases the urgency for more focused research. The GLA’s AI and Jobs Taskforce evidence summary reports emerging reductions in demand, commissions and fees for some freelance creative services, alongside potential gains for workers whose skills complement AI. It notes that gradual loss of freelance work may not appear as redundancy in headline employment statistics (GLA, 2026). The implication extends beyond AI: employment-based indicators are poorly equipped to register dispersed changes in the security, capability and availability of a freelance knowledge workforce. Policy may therefore recognise disruption only after important skills, relationships and practices have been lost.

Arts and cultural research is not presented here as representative of the whole research system. Rather, it is treated as a strategically revealing site in which portfolio careers, practice-based knowledge, cross-sector collaboration and non-traditional outputs are particularly visible. The wider applicability of the analysis is a question for the proposed research to test.

2. Independent researchers as connectors in a porous ecosystem

The term ‘independent researcher’ covers a heterogeneous set of positions: independent scholars; artists for whom research is embedded in practice; consultants and facilitators; community or citizen researchers; people employed by cultural, charitable or public organisations; and researchers combining freelance work with fractional academic roles. NCACE’s working definition is deliberately inclusive: research is a meaningful component of practice, but not necessarily a formal job title (Adewole-Elliott, 2025). A typology will eventually be useful, but premature standardisation risks excluding precisely the hybrid practices the paper seeks to understand.

What links many of these positions is not an employment category but a functional role in the research ecosystem. Independent researchers may connect universities with cultural organisations; formal institutions with communities; evidence with policy; inquiry with implementation; and short-term projects with longer-term relationships. Boundary-spanning involves more than moving between organisations. It includes translating languages and norms, brokering access, convening actors who do not usually meet, maintaining trust, and enabling knowledge to be adapted and used in new settings.

Drawing on the established concept of boundary spanning, this paper uses boundary-spanning research capability to mean the ability to create, sustain and translate knowledge across organisational, disciplinary, professional and community boundaries in ways that enable collaboration, innovation and knowledge mobilisation. It is a capability exercised by people in many roles and settings; independent researchers provide a particularly revealing vantage point because their work is so often located between institutional structures.

Our central question is: what happens when the ability to create, translate and sustain knowledge across boundaries becomes essential to research, but the infrastructure supporting research remains largely tied to institutions? Rather than viewing boundary spanners simply as intermediaries between established organisations, we understand boundary spanning as an increasingly important capability in how research itself is produced.

The literature describes boundary spanners as actors who develop relationships and mediate flows of information across organisational divides (Williams, 2002). In cultural knowledge exchange, this function is both intellectual and relational. Sigal’s systematic review for NCACE found considerable variation in how collaboration is defined and documented, including persistent opacity about who was involved and what they did (Sigal, 2021). NCACE’s action research on skills and capacity likewise identified the importance of communication, relationship-building, mutual understanding and brokerage in successful exchange (Rose, 2021). When these activities are uncredited, the system obscures part of the capability on which collaboration rests.

The same mobility that enables independent researchers to connect people, sectors and forms of knowledge also leaves them exposed to systems that do not know how to fund, contract, recognise or protect work undertaken across institutional boundaries. Policy change is required to enable independent research to be a viable position to occupy within the research ecology.

Within NCACE's field, practitioner-researchers, artist-researchers and pracademics are especially important. Creative practice can generate questions, methods and insight rather than simply illustrate or communicate findings produced elsewhere. Their work may move fluidly among performance, curation, facilitation, teaching, evaluation, policy and community partnership. This breadth creates translational capacity: an ability to make different research cultures and forms of knowledge intelligible to one another. However, it can also render the researcher illegible to systems that seek a single institutional address, occupational identity or conventional output.

Independence should not be treated as inherently virtuous. Universities, cultural organisations and independent research organisations provide essential infrastructures, standards and communities. People working within organisations are of course sometimes boundary spanners too. However, independent researchers often work across many organisational boundaries, their experience making their connective capabilities, and the costs of failing to support them, particularly visible.

3. Participation, legitimacy and the boundaries of research

The IRN's discussions repeatedly return to participation: who is permitted to contribute; whose knowledge is named as research; who may originate and lead a funded project; who receives authorship and attribution; who can access research resources; and who controls the subsequent use of collaboratively produced knowledge. These are significant concerns which determine the epistemic range and public legitimacy of the research system.

Institutional affiliation currently performs several functions at once. It signals credibility, provides access to infrastructure, enables eligibility for funding, and supplies ethical, legal and administrative assurance. The problem arises when organisational status becomes a proxy for research capability, or when proportionate assurance is available only through employment. In such cases, individuals can originate questions, build partnerships and develop methods but remain unable to lead an application or retain an equitable share of recognition and intellectual property.

The NCACE IRN scoping exercise identified differentiated barriers. Academically aligned independent researchers emphasised ethics pathways, conference access and peer review; arts-based and community researchers emphasised visibility, recognition, ownership and citation of practitioner-led research. Its mapping suggested that established independent scholars are better served by existing networks than practitioner-led independent research (Adewole-Elliott, 2025). This indicates that there is no “one size fits all” solution; infrastructure must respond to distinct practices and forms of accountability.

Equity underpins many of these issues. Portfolio work requires time, financial reserves, networks and confidence in navigating opaque systems. Unpaid project development, publication and relationship-maintenance transfer risk from institutions to individuals. This raises a further question: who can become and remain a boundary spanner? If the capability is valuable but exercising it independently requires people to absorb financial risk, unpaid labour and weak institutional protection, its development may itself be unequally distributed. Where researchers steward community-held knowledge, poor contracting or experiences of appropriation can damage trust and lead to justified reluctance to share. Treating partners as suppliers can compound the imbalance by recognising delivery but not intellectual contribution or the creation of new knowledge. A more open research system should therefore combine access with protections around consent, attribution, data, intellectual property and payment.

4. Where research value is created and where it disappears

Research value is still too readily associated with a completed output followed by dissemination and impact, cross-sector inquiry rarely follows this sequence so neatly. Questions may be generated in a workshop; methods tested through performance or prototyping; findings interpreted through curation; and knowledge applied through organisational development, policy engagement or community action. Relationship-building is not simply preliminary administration; it is essential infrastructure in boundary spanning research. It can be the means through which relevant questions are identified, tacit knowledge becomes shareable and change becomes possible.

NCACE's analysis of arts and culture-related impact illustrates the breadth of benefits produced through research collaboration, including changes in artistic practice, quality of life, policy and responses to societal challenges (Baines and Rossi, 2023). Yet REF-based evidence necessarily begins with research attributed to higher education institutions. Rossi, Wilson and Hopkins (2021) explicitly note that many HE-arts collaborations do not involve formal research processes and therefore sit outside their investigation. This creates a structural blind spot where activity becomes visible once it can be traced from institutionally submitted research, while inquiry initiated or held elsewhere may remain unrecorded.

There is also a temporal blind spot. Value may develop between projects, after a grant ends, or incrementally through repeated interactions. Independent researchers can preserve relationships and memory when institutional teams change, acting as stewards of knowledge across funding cycles. Conversely, when connective labour is not resourced, relationships dissipate and each project must rebuild trust from the beginning. Conventional output and employment data capture neither outcome well.

A proposed programme of further research should therefore examine a broader value chain: the creation, translation, mobilisation, application, and stewardship of knowledge. It should ask who performs each function, how it is resourced, where value accumulates, and where it is lost. This is not an argument for abandoning publications or standards of research quality, but an argument for making visible the full set of capabilities through which research becomes rigorous, relevant and usable.

5. Boundary-spanning and field-making

One hypothesis emerging from this analysis is that some boundary-spanning researchers may do more than connect established fields: they may participate in field-making itself. Working at disciplinary and sectoral edges, they may identify questions that do not yet have an institutional home; connect previously separate practices; develop language and conceptual frameworks; convene communities of inquiry; test methods; and circulate grey literature, archives and practical resources.

Communities of practice help explain how learning and identity forms through shared activity rather than formal organisational membership (Farnsworth, Kleanthous and Wenger-Trayner, 2016). Cultural and creative ecosystems similarly draw attention to interdependence and to the role of networks, intermediaries and place (Manfredi de Bernard, Comunian and Gross, 2022). Taken together, these perspectives suggest that research policy should attend not only to established disciplines and organisations but also to the social infrastructure through which new questions and communities become viable.

Arts and cultural practice offers a particularly fertile environment for this field-making. It can combine embodied, experiential, community and academic knowledge; create settings for experimentation; and make emerging issues perceptible before they are settled as formal research agendas. However, field-making is difficult to fund through output-led, short-term projects. Its products may initially look like networks, working vocabularies, exploratory events or repositories rather than mature disciplines. If we value genuinely new combinations of knowledge, we must become better at recognising and sustaining these formative stages.

Further research in this area is timely because UKRI and research-council priorities increasingly encourage experimentation, responsible risk-taking and novel forms of collaboration. The activities through which new fields begin, convening, exploratory making, combining knowledge traditions and testing language or methods, may therefore deserve closer study as research processes, not simply as preliminaries to a mature project.

6. What the current system prevents or loses

The barriers experienced by independent researchers generate system-level losses. They should therefore be considered as failures of research capacity, not merely individual disadvantage.

- Access and infrastructure: Loss of journals, libraries, software, institutional email, ethics advice, safeguarding support and funding intelligence can interrupt research continuity and raise the cost of participation.
- Funding and leadership: Eligibility rules may prevent the person who developed the idea or holds the key relationships from leading a grant, distorting intellectual ownership and decision-making.
- Authorship and recognition: Contributions must be renegotiated project by project; connective, creative and relational labour can disappear from outputs, communications and awards.
- Contracting and intellectual property: Procurement systems may frame a researcher as a supplier and fail to distinguish commissioned delivery from pre-existing methods, knowledge and relational assets.
- Financial sustainability: Independent researchers absorb unpaid development, publication, networking and infrastructure costs. This narrows participation to those able to carry risk.
- Institutional learning: Short contracts, restructuring and staff turnover can strand lessons in projects rather than embedding them in organisations or networks.
- Trust and stewardship: Inadequate consent, attribution and governance can damage relationships and restrict the future circulation of community-held or practice-based knowledge.

Together, these losses diminish the diversity, connectivity, resilience and public value of research.

Furthermore, it is important to recognise that access is not limited to tangible resources such as journals, libraries, software or institutional systems. Independent researchers may also lack access to the softer intellectual infrastructure of research: spaces for convening, peer-to-peer support, critical exchange and the informal development of ideas with people working across different settings. This is not just a matter of creating separate provision for those inside or outside institutions; new thinking often emerges through their interaction and hybridisation. Visiting Fellowships, non-stipendiary Fellowships and Artist-in-Residence schemes can provide valuable points of connection, but these opportunities are scarce. Moreover, they are generally time-limited and rarely offer the continuity needed to sustain an intellectual community or longer-term research practice.

This reveals the core structural mismatch connecting the analysis: the research system increasingly values capabilities exercised across organisational and disciplinary boundaries, while much of the infrastructure enabling research remains attached to institutional affiliation.

7. What a future-facing research ecosystem might require

The evidence does not yet justify a single predetermined solution. The possibilities below should be treated as hypotheses for investigation, not recommendations: each may benefit some groups while creating new questions about responsibility, assurance, cost and inclusion. An exploratory programme should examine what problem each option addresses, for whom it works, what unintended effects it may produce, and whether institutional, shared or federated provision is most appropriate.

Design Principle	Options to test	Purpose
Portable recognition	Cross-institutional associate status; research passports; verified profiles	Separate legitimacy and continuity from a single employment relationship
Shared access	Library and journal access; software; conferences; ethics, data and safeguarding services	Enable participation while maintaining proportionate assurance
Equitable funding	Routes for independent leads; fiscal hosts; infrastructure and overhead contributions	Align intellectual leadership, resources and accountability
Fair collaboration	Model agreements on payment, authorship, attribution, IP, data and pre-existing knowledge	Treat collaborators as intellectual partners and protect trust
Wider recognition	Multimodal outputs; grey-literature repositories; relational and longer-term impact evidence	Make a broader range of research processes and value visible
Connective infrastructure	Brokerage, communities of practice, federated networks and field-making funds	Sustain relationships and emerging inquiry across projects and sectors

NCACE's Research Associates pilot, alongside a range of individual HEI initiatives, offers one site from which to investigate portable recognition. Its emerging proposition is deliberately light-touch: recognises independent researchers as legitimate knowledge producers, decouples

recognition from employment, and provides proportionate institutional support (NCACE, 2026a). Further enquiry should test rather than assume its value: whose participation it enables; what practical access matters; what obligations attach to affiliation; how conflicts, ethics and safeguarding are managed; and whether the approach is transferable across institutions and practices.

AI makes shared capability-building more pressing, but should not narrow the agenda to technical training. The GLA (2026) identifies uneven exposure among freelancers and the difficulty of detecting gradual work loss. Future infrastructure should therefore combine access to tools and skills with collective intelligence, rights, responsible-use frameworks and routes through which independent workers can influence technology adoption. The question is not whether individuals can adapt, but whether the ecosystem retains diverse creative and research capability during transition.

8. A proposed larger programme of work

We are proposing an early-stage, ambitious and novel piece of research with the potential to open new research agendas. It would not attempt to map an entire national workforce, solve infrastructure questions or produce a settled policy package. Instead, we would aim to investigate the emerging concept of boundary-spanning research capability through a focused combination of conceptual development, collaborative enquiry and small-scale methodological experimentation.

The central research question would be: How is boundary-spanning research capability created and exercised across higher education and the arts and cultural sector, and what does it reveal about how employment, research fields, value and participation are changing?

The three inquiries form a deliberate progression: Inquiry 1 develops and challenges the concept; Inquiry 2 examines how it manifests in practice; and Inquiry 3 tests emerging explanations, counter-examples and possible infrastructure responses. Findings that challenge the concept would be valuable: boundary spanning may prove to comprise several distinct capabilities, or employment status may be less important than currently hypothesised.

Inquiry 1: Develop and challenge the concept

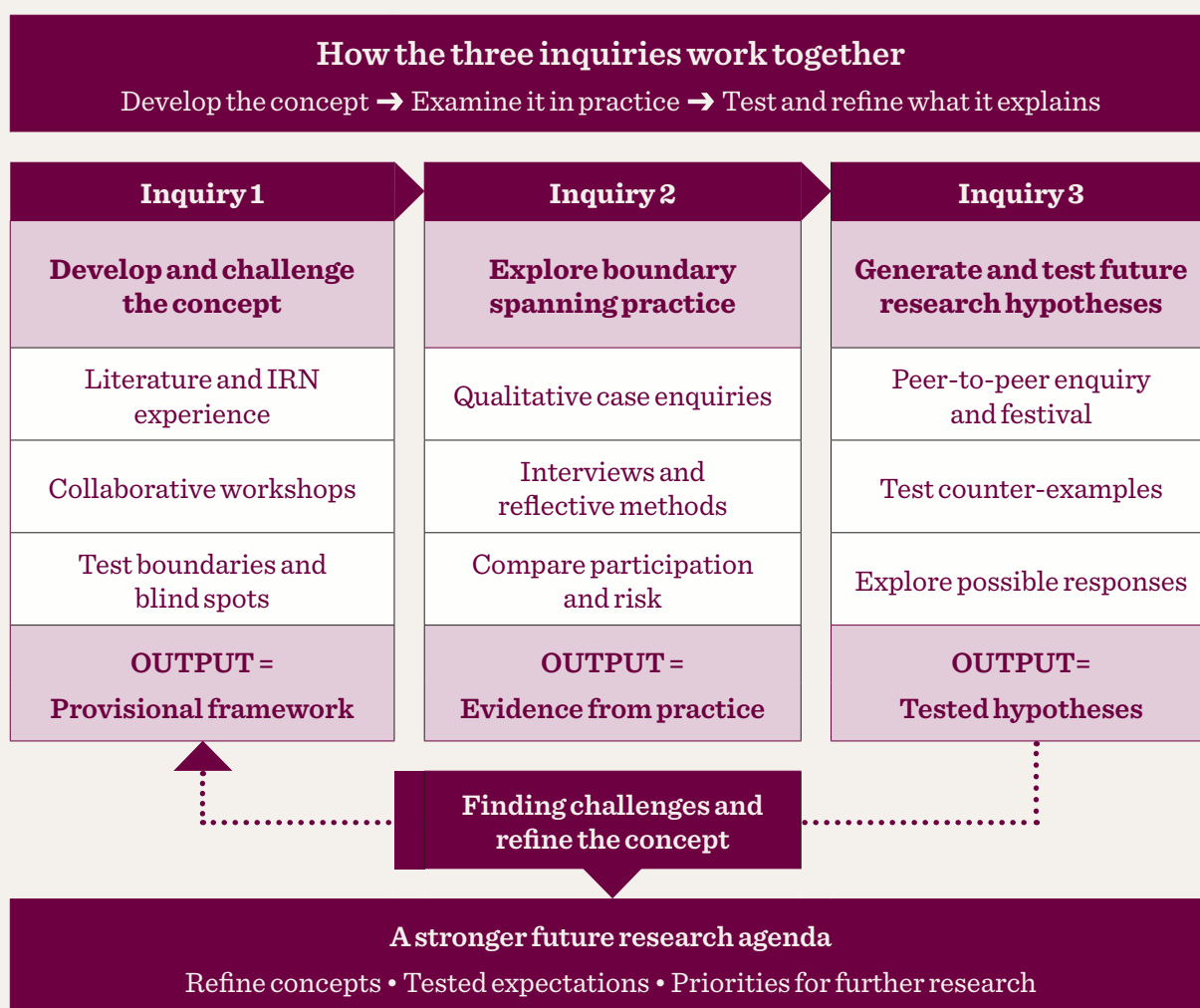
Bring literature on boundary spanning, cultural and creative ecosystems, research careers, communities of practice and knowledge mobilisation into dialogue with IRN experience. A small set of paid collaborative workshops with independent researchers, artist-researchers, pracademics and institutional partners would test the concept's explanatory value, boundaries and blind spots. The aim would be a provisional conceptual framework and a sharper set of questions rather than a fixed typology.

Inquiry 2: Explore boundary-spanning practice

Undertake a deliberately bounded set of qualitative case enquiries into how independent researchers connect organisations, translate between knowledge cultures, sustain relationships and contribute to field-making. Methods might combine interviews, reflective practice, career or relationship mapping, and analysis of non-traditional outputs. Cases would be selected for conceptual contrast rather than statistical representativeness, with particular attention to arts and cultural collaboration and differences in participation, recognition and risk.

Inquiry 3: Generate and test future research hypotheses

Use peer-to-peer enquiry and a Festival of Independent Research as research methods by using these spaces to surface counter-examples, compare experiences, make emerging work visible and test hypotheses with researchers, universities, cultural organisations and funders. The enquiry might examine whether portable recognition, shared access, federated networks or new partnership practices enable boundary-spanning capability, but it would not presume that any is the solution. A small proof-of-concept activity could be included.



Why this work is important

- It addresses an under-defined phenomenon and has potential to generate new knowledge and language across research-policy and arts-and-humanities fields.
- It is exploratory and potentially agenda-setting, rather than a delivery programme built around predetermined outputs.
- It combines conceptual enquiry with practice-based and participatory methods, equitable partnership and paid involvement.
- It uses a focused network and selected cases as a springboard towards a later, larger programme of comparative research, infrastructure testing and policy development.

9. Intended outcomes

Because this is exploratory research, the precise findings and next-stage priorities should remain open. The programme would aim to produce:

- a clearer, critically tested account of boundary-spanning research capability and its relationship to independent, practitioner and portfolio research;
- new qualitative evidence from selected cross-sector cases, including the contribution of artist-researchers, practitioner-researchers and pracademics to higher education–arts and cultural collaboration;
- a set of research hypotheses about participation, value, field-making, recognition and connective infrastructure, including tensions and counter-examples;
- a researcher-led agenda, shaped through the IRN and Festival of Independent Research, for further enquiry and experimentation; and
- accessible working papers, case accounts and a proposition for a larger comparative or developmental programme, if the findings warrant it.

10. Conclusion: a strategic opportunity

Independent researchers should not be understood only as people positioned outside established research systems, or as a workforce requiring support. Their experience offers a vantage point from which to see how those systems are already changing. Many of the capabilities required for collaborative, interdisciplinary and community-engaged research are exercised between organisations: connecting, translating, convening, interpreting and sustaining relationships. These functions are becoming more important, while remaining only partially visible to systems built around institutional affiliation.

Collaboration between higher education and the arts and cultural sector is not peripheral to research. It is one of the environments in which new questions, methods, fields and forms of public value are created. The people who work across those boundaries should therefore be central to the design of research policy and infrastructure, not added after institutional arrangements have been settled.

Our desired outcome is not to grant unqualified access to every institutional resource, create a rigid category of researcher or specify a complete alternative infrastructure. It is to investigate an emerging capability with sufficient openness to discover where the proposition holds, where it does not, and which questions merit larger-scale research.

Can a research system credibly claim to value collaboration, co-production and diverse forms of knowledge while restricting legitimacy, resources and recognition according to institutional status?

We believe that the question is not how independent researchers can gain access to the existing research system; it is what kind of research system we need in the 21st century.

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