

Research Reflections: The role of the knowledge agent and the effectiveness of voucher schemes in the Creative/Cultural Economy

As part of CWL's place, work, knowledge strand's research outputs, we have been analysing the creative voucher scheme (as put in place by Creativeworks London, details of which can be found [here](#)) through the use of qualitative interview data that has been obtained by the post-doctoral researchers assigned to each of our research strands (see the [Creativeworks London website](#) for more information on the research strands). For anyone who is not sure about what a voucher scheme is please see [here](#). The decision to use light-touch, ethnographic methods in order to analyse the voucher process as case studies comes from results yielded by other schemes regarding more quantitative-based approaches to evaluations (see: Cornet, Vroomen, van der Steeg, 2006); although important to note, we are not conducting an evaluation in the way voucher evaluations have been understood traditionally. In fact NESTA have recently suggested that the evaluation process regarding these schemes is somewhat lacking (see [here](#) for the full article). By approaching the process of 'partnership' as it is 'nudged-on' by these vouchers, as opposed to only looking at how the vouchers have fared with respect to outputs, we are in essence looking at what these vouchers are supposed to do; namely, not only nudge innovation, but allow for the sustaining of longer standing relationships between partners that have been allocated them. The adopted evaluation/case study methodology has yielded much information regarding the voucher scheme, with possible policy ramifications for how these schemes are run in the future, as it specifically applies to the creative economy. One of the most important findings regarding the scheme involves the role of what we call knowledge agents who facilitate the partnership between HEI and the Creative SME.

As past voucher schemes have shown, random allocation of vouchers to facilitate partnerships between HEIs and SMEs may work in the short term, allowing for a 'nudge' in innovative practices. However this is not always the case and importantly, longer established relationships between the SME and HEI is not guaranteed. A strong finding that has been coming out of the research points to the importance of almost bespoke voucher partnerships involving a three-way partnership: the SME, the academic, and the knowledge agent. In other words, an outside organisation/individual that tailors who could be partnered up based on the knowledge that they have of both the desires of the SME and HEI/academic. In part this comes through an application process, but more importantly it is the individualised and often tailored as well as in-depth knowledge that these agents have that allow for the partnerships to be facilitated in a way that goes beyond project-specific goals and performance indicators.

Although the research being carried out in this arena is still relatively young, and the findings are yet to be analysed in detail, these initial findings reiterate the importance of the individual in this entire process. Discussions too are starting to open up around how individuals working in this field self-define, given the diversity of approaches being taken in the delivery of such activity. What do I mean by the individual? That the allocated intervention's 'success' (whether it is a voucher scheme or anything else) rests not on the end result of the actual project or product being developed, but on the individuals that are working in partnership. Moreover, the partnering up of these individuals takes another type of individual to make it

work, namely; the agent and their bespoke knowledge of both the academic and the SME involved in the scheme; this involves deep knowledge/experience of developing collaborations in cultural contexts. Thus, it becomes vital that the infrastructure (universities, finance offices, provision of broadband etc) that have been set up to facilitate these types of schemes are adequately prepared to carry out these activities. So, just as the success of the project primarily rests on the shoulders of the individuals involved, it becomes vital that the infrastructure that underpins what they do quickly expedites their responsibilities so that these partnerships are not hindered by external circumstances.

These findings, and others, will be disseminated as soon as they are completed. Importantly, the approach being used here seems to be allowing access into the inner workings of these partnerships, which provides us with rich insights into what the process (and practice) of collaboration within the creative economy may look like. Importantly, this process is highlighted by the individuals that make up the network, and it is at the intersection of knowledge production and facilitation where many interesting elements start to become apparent regarding what we can learn about the process of innovation in the plethora of sub-sectors that make up the creative/cultural economy.

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