

Creative
Industries
Report

Aspect

Beyond the Academy: Engaging with the Creative Industries

(Yorkshire & Humber Report)

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xR StOries

XR Stories - Innovation in Screen Storytelling in the Age of Interactivity and Immersion

XR Stories supports research and development for companies working in cutting-edge digital technologies in the Yorkshire and Humber region. We do this through a programme of funding, research collaboration and connection. We work across film, TV, games, media arts, heritage, advertising and technology to champion a new future in storytelling.

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Contents



1. Introduction	4
1.1 Background	4
1.2 Summary	4
1.3 Method	4
2. Defining Research Engagement	6
2.1 Three Models of Research Engagement	7
3. Establishing Partnerships	8
3.1 Key findings: Establishing Partnerships	8
3.2 Relationship Building and Networking	8
3.3 Institutional Support	9
4 Partnership and Engagement Infrastructure	11
4.1 Key findings: University Engagement Infrastructure	11
4.2 Institutional Engagement Models	11
5 Language and Outputs	13
5.1 Key findings: Language and Outputs	13
5.2 Writing Styles and Audience	13
5.3 Dissemination Beyond Publications	14
6 Value Added	16
6.1 Key findings: Value Added	16
6.2 Adding Tangible Value	16
6.3 Prospective Value and Entrepreneurial Engagement	17
6.4 Enhancing Academic Careers	18
7. Conclusions	20
7.1 Overview and Key Findings	20
7.2 Limitations and Further Study	20

1. Introduction

1.1 Background

Social sciences researchers and organisations across the Cultural and Creative Industries (CCIs) engage in various ways. Interested in best practice for business engagement in these sectors, this Aspect Creative Industries Deep-Dive project includes a suite of distinct but interrelated reports that explore and evidence various aspects of researcher engagement with the CCIs.

This suite of “Beyond the Academy” reports include the following: “Engaging with the Creative Industries” (Yorkshire and Humber and Greater Manchester regions), “Models and Dynamics of Sector-Engaged Research”, Best practice guide aimed at HEI Business Engagement staff, Best practice guide aimed at Creative Industry companies, & Social Media Content to disseminate highlights from the above.

This report speaks to multiple dynamics of such partnerships, including: establishing engagement; engagement infrastructure; language and output; and value added. The report further engages with the notion of engagement itself, and defines different models of research partnership beyond the academy. Through gathering insights from social sciences researchers based at universities across Yorkshire and Humber, this report forwards CCI sector engagement insights inclusive of and sensitive to any regional particularities.

Certain dynamics of business engagement may be altered by the wider context of the CCIs and of universities (e.g. issues of economic geography and clustering). The ways in which location may affect engagement is explored as part of this suite of reports, namely by a further region-specific study focusing on the Greater Manchester area. Whilst the headline foci across this project relate to multiple dynamics of engagement at the interpersonal level, wider structural and geographic concerns are implicit in both the findings and the analysis thereof.

1.2 Summary

This report is structured around four key issues as previously outlined. Each section opens with a series of ‘Key Findings’ summarising and distilling the insights in that section’s discussion. The following discussions

include anonymised quotations from both academic and industry informants, who are identified only by their institution and their CCI subsector respectively.

The report first evidences the role of an academic’s personal and professional networks for building partnerships with the CCIs, and demonstrates multiple related issues of inequity for certain individuals as a result. Secondly, the report finds that direct relationships between researchers and organisations are crucial even where institutional infrastructure exists, but that engagement support may be beneficial for larger and more sustained partnerships. Thirdly, issues relating to the complexity of academic writing conventions and the potential for different types of dissemination were explored. And finally, the report finds that academics add value to CCI partners through evidence gathering, and also in less explicit and longer-term ways through critical and entrepreneurial thinking. The report also details some of the ways in which sector engagement adds value to academic careers, enhancing job prospects and improving career progression opportunities.

1.3 Method

In total, a combined 15 in-depth interviews were completed with academics and workers from CCI organisations. Academic informants were identified through university faculty, department, and/or school websites, with staff profiles used to deduce relevant CCI sector engagement experience. Likewise, CCI organisations were contacted where their websites detailed evidence of engagement with academics and universities. Snowballing techniques were also used, with both academic and industry informants recommending further individuals or organisations with whom they had engaged who were in turn approached for interview. The interviews were conducted online or via telephone, in February and March 2021.

In total, 8 academics contributed to this report. At the time of interview, the academic informants were employed at the University of Leeds (n=1), the University of York (n=3), the University of Sheffield (n=3), and Leeds Beckett University (n=1). Combined, the academics interviewed have engaged or partnered with organisations across the breadth of the CCIs, including:

Theatre & Performance; Gaming; Film & TV; Museums & Galleries; Architecture; Visual Arts; Publishing; and Heritage.

University	Region	Number
The University of Leeds	Yorkshire and Humber	1
The University of York	Yorkshire and Humber	3
The University of Sheffield	Yorkshire and Humber	3
Leeds Beckett University	Yorkshire and Humber	1
Total		8

In addition, 7 workers from across the CCI were interviewed. These include professionals currently employed in Gaming (n=1), Theatre & Performance (n=2), Visual Arts (n=2), Film & TV (n=1), and Museums (n=1). These industry informants represent a mix of large companies and National Portfolio Organisations (NPOs), as well as micro-companies and SMEs. Geographically, these sector participants were working at organisations based in Yorkshire and North East (n=4), the South East (n=2), and the Midlands (n=1).

CCI Subsector	Frequency
Gaming	1
Theatre, Performance & Music	2
Visual Arts	2
Film and TV	1
Museums and Galleries	1
Total	7

2. Defining Research Engagement

Research engagement is complex and happens in a variety of different ways, and academic informants were keen to draw distinctions between different models of research engagement with the CCIs. A fuller exploration of research engagement, including an extended discussion of its scope and definitions, can be found in the “Models and Dynamics of Sector-Engaged Research” report. For the purposes of this report, however, a brief introduction to the various understandings of research engagement from academic informants across the Yorkshire and Humber region is useful.

Defining research engagement in this space involved reflecting upon various relational dynamics, such as funding, impact, and knowledge transfer:

“Business engagement for me is a bit of an unknown entity. Is it research that’s more obviously monetized? Is it more of a consultancy style thing? Is it knowledge exchange? Is it impact? Is it all of those things?”
(Academic Informant, University of Sheffield)

Similar comparisons between academic ‘research’ as opposed to ‘consultancy’ were often highlighted, with distinctions being drawn between the structure and tempo of each:

“The project was basically to offer a kind of consultancy, but the kind of consultancy that the university might be able to offer. So rather than parachuting in and having an immediate effect, universities are very good at longer-term relationships and longer-term activities.”
(Academic Informant, University of Leeds)

Further reflecting upon the differences between what university-based researchers offer as compared to consultancy firms, an industry participant agreed that:

“Who we commission really depends on what we’re commissioning. Sometimes we have quite short turnaround times, and that can prohibit universities from bidding because of the processes they need to go through internally.”
(Industry Informant, Film & TV Sector)

The capacity for academics to be responsive to research opportunities with short turnaround times was positioned as being particularly detrimental to research regarding emergent issues. The impacts of COVID-19 on the CCIs

and the need for more responsive insights was used as an exemplar of an issue requiring research engagement with more urgency than universities are often able to facilitate. According to both academic and industry informants, university-level research engagement is characterised as better suited to longer-term and more sustained partnerships, although smaller-scale engagement with individual academics is less constrained.

For some researchers, industry-engaged research is a key part of their academic work:

“It makes sense to me to do research ‘on practice’ ‘in practice’, with people and organisations, rather than through a kind of slightly detached ‘ivory tower’ approach.”
(Academic Informant, University of Sheffield)

Research engagement is considered a key means by which social sciences researchers ‘keep in touch’ with what’s happening in the CCIs. The reciprocal exchange of value that takes place between researcher and industry is further considered later in this report, but in terms of defining research engagement, this notion of remaining abreast of issues impacting upon the sectors is important. Research engagement for academics functions beyond a means by which to write articles or win funding, for example, and is instead considered a key mechanism for maintaining and updating their knowledge and sectoral expertise.

Three distinct models of research engagement emerge, each one having particular dynamics, as suggested by an academic informant:

“I’ve been involved in various projects which have included research ‘about’ the creative industries. There were other projects which were researching ‘with’ or ‘for’ creative companies which involved a lot more interaction and engagement, because they would partner throughout, rather than just allowing access.”
(University Informant, University of York)

2.1 Three Models of Research Engagement

2.4.1. Research Engagement about:

An academic-led model of research engagement wherein a researcher explores a topic of interest concerning but not involving a non-academic partner or partners. Although industrial partners may provide access (e.g to staff for interviews), they do not shape the underlying research project. Outputs tend to be publications for academic audiences.

2.4.2. Research Engagement for:

A model of applied academic research, usually in response to a company-led brief or commission. Often focussed on understanding a specific problem or area of interest, outputs and deliverables are tailored to the needs of the partner organisation(s) and its audience(s) first and foremost.

2.4.3. Research Engagement with:

Collaborative throughout, academic and industry partners are mutually involved in some or all of the design, development, and delivery. The aims and objectives will be negotiated and co-produced, and close contact will be kept throughout by stakeholders who co-manage the engagement. Deliverables may be diverse, including outputs for both academic and non-academic audiences.

3. Establishing Partnerships

3.1 Key findings: Establishing Partnerships

1. Forming new partnerships almost always involved pre-existing personal and/or professional networks of individual social sciences researchers.
2. The relationship building which underpins engagement was often taking place outside of partners' workplaces, during industry events or social occasions.
3. The capacity to engage with CCIs is particularly challenging for academics who: have precarious contracts; have heavy teaching loads; or might more broadly be or feel excluded for any number of reasons from the events, spaces, or occasions where partnership relationships are often formed.

3.2 Relationship Building and Networking

Research engagement first depends upon establishing working relationships. In almost all cases for the academic informants, forming new partnerships involved tapping into pre-existing personal and/or professional networks:

"It was informal, through somebody who knows somebody. It's always like that. It always starts very small, through informal things."

(Academic Informant, Leeds Beckett University)

"From the partnered research I've conducted, there's a consistent theme, and that is that you're drawing on the people you know."

(Academic Informant, University of York)

The breadth of an academic's professional network clearly impacts positively upon their capacity to broker new research engagements with industry. Researchers with prior experience of engagement with the sector, or those embedded within departments which have pre-existing CCI relationships, are more likely to build connections beyond the academy, and thereafter more likely to take part in sector-engaged research.

The enhanced capacity to draw on industry networks and contacts is one of the reasons why hiring academic staff from industry is valued by CCI-related university departments:

"I'm pulling my contacts into the department. Those personal relationships are added value, and one of the reasons why people from industry are accepted into the academy in the Creative Industries' sector is because there is added value that it's hard for academics to access without those industry contacts."
(Academic Informant, University of York)

In departments where collaborating with industry professionals is deemed valuable, employing individuals into academic roles who have prior experience of working in the sector is in part a strategic means by which to build new CCI connections. Beyond operating merely as personnel bridges, however, prior sector experience meant that those academics were able to code-switch and translate across the academic and industry divide, well-placed to understand and adjust their modes of communication for example. A wider account of the dynamics of communication and language during engaged research follows later in this report.

Beyond pre-existing industry connections, and before the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, the relationship building which underpins business engagement with the CCIs took place during certain types of events:

"It did take a little while to warm them up. I'd originally come into contact with them via the CEO who I had met at a conference, and we got chatting."

(Academic Informant, University of Sheffield)

"I've worked very hard to construct my networks. I'll suggest that we can go to the pub or for coffee, and that I can talk them through the research in a bit more detail."

(Academic Informant, University of Sheffield)

Networking during academic conferences or similar industry events was a common mechanism for establishing new contacts for both academic and industry informants. In particular, giving talks at such events was considered a useful profile-raising strategy, with post-presentation introductions and questions a common 'in', leading to more detailed future conversations.

Less formally, frequenting semi-regular 'meet-ups' was cited by academics as being a key way in which to introduce themselves to the professional community. Whilst such efforts to get to know professionals working

in the CCIs were driven mainly by interest in the subject and as a way of maintaining and updating academic knowledge and expertise, networking with a view to potential engagement also factored. Interestingly, there was limited evidence of industry informants regularly attending academic events for the same or similar purposes.

Much has been published about the socio-cultural dynamics of the CCIs, how they are embedded within cities, and the relational bonds between individuals and firms across the sectors within a region. Academic informants suggested that establishing working relationships with the sectors often involved awareness of such dynamics, and efforts to meet potential partners included traversal into the social and cultural milieu of the CCIs:

“A lot has been down to proximity, and being able to arrange a brief meeting that would only take up half an hour of someone’s time. This is the whole ‘Creative City’ rhetoric in action really isn’t it...somewhere that you can meet somebody for a coffee, that is five minutes away from their office, and from that builds a relationship.” (Academic Informant, University of York)

Although establishing working relationships with the sector(s) by such means is commonplace, it’s not necessarily considered the most effective, equitable, or sustainable approach. Academic informants tended to agree that the reliance on social capital and networking represented an extension and exacerbation of wider structural inequalities and inequities within academia:

“I think it’s really important to highlight that I don’t have caring responsibilities, for example. And neither did my colleague who I did a lot of engaged research with. My colleague would go to the opening nights and meet people, but that approach is only available for certain people who have the social capital, and who don’t look out of place in the sorts of venues where you can make these sorts of networks.”
(Academic Informant, University of York)

3.3 Institutional Support

Whilst researchers were cognisant of the various benefits of working beyond the academy in partnership with CCI organisations, they often felt that at the institutional level support for such work was lacking:

“There’s no money or time or other resources to build relationships, so that feels not as good as it could be.”
(Academic Informant, University of York)

“Academics know that building relationships externally can be useful and beneficial, but it’s challenging to create a relationship when really you haven’t got time to service that relationship.”
(Academic Informant, University of Leeds)

In particular, establishing relationships which may eventually develop into research partnerships was especially challenging for academics with heavier teaching workloads:

“This can lead to inequalities within academia. I work at Russell Group university, I’ve had quite a lot of research money, and I’ve been able to use the money to travel to places where there are other people that might go to events where networking is going to be possible and so on. Whereas for colleagues with heavy teaching loads and limited research funding, that isn’t possible.”
(Academic Informant, University of Sheffield)

Whilst resources for engagement beyond the academy were broadly deemed to be insufficient, there was evidence of more formalised institutional support for such activity. For academics with prior industry experience, and for whom research with CCIs was particularly important to their research, specific time for engagement was negotiated and built into their contract:

“What I had done in order to make the partnership work possible is that I had negotiated with the Head of Department that I could consult for 30 days a year, and that I could do what I wanted with that as part of my contract.”
(Academic Informant, University of York)

Whilst in this case a model of employment was negotiated which specifically allowed for sector engagement, in the main and for the bulk of researchers, especially those earlier in their academic careers, this wasn’t a possibility. Structural issues regarding temporary short-term contracts and precarity are detrimental to the length of time often required to establish and nurture

research engagement. Informants from both academia and industry report that partnerships require sustained engagement:

"We have a long-standing relationship with the University that probably predates me working here. Particularly with one researcher, a professor, who's been the key person. They've been working with us for five years or more, and know us so well. Because all partnerships are based on relationships, aren't they?"
(Industry Informant, Dance)

"It started as a conversation, then the researcher came into the office and met with me and my colleagues to talk about the research in proper detail, and it kind of escalated from there. It ebbed and flowed for a bit while everyone found the right way of talking about the project. Once we eventually got everything in motion, then it sort of grew into a proper research project. It took some time."
(Industry Informant, Gaming)

Where precarious contracts are commonplace, in particular for early career academics, sustained engagement with an industry partner and relationship building over time is problematic. For some industry informants, there is clear evidence that such partnerships are formed over many years:

"We've got five partnerships with different universities. Our longest running one is about 12 - 13 years old now."
(Industry Informant, Theatre & Performance)

The necessity to build research partnerships over time is in part predicated upon the need to actively develop and deepen working relationships. In some cases, informants suggested that certain judgements negatively impacted upon and hinder relationship building:

"There's no question there are differences. Basically, academics think that they know better than practitioners because they know what the practitioners should be doing. And practitioners think they're better than the academics because they're actually doing stuff, whereas academics only talk about it. Each has that ego, but as there are more sustained partnerships, the differences become a bit less."
(Academic Informant, University of York)

As a result, the importance of developing trust over time was frequently cited as being crucial to building partnerships between social sciences researchers and CCI organisations:

"It takes a long time to build up the trust required to research with organisations. It is a relationship, and relationships can be soured if you do things badly or you don't have that level of trust."
(Academic Informant, University of York).

"If I want to develop trust to such an extent that I can write collaborative grant proposals for example, then I want to have a good working relationship with the organisation and individually with the workers that's been built up over a little bit of time. Personal contact is quite important. If you really want to work 'with' as opposed to 'alongside', then there needs to be that degree of trust."
(Academic Informant, University of York).

Trust was an important aspect of research engagement for industry informants too. Where access to their organisation for interviews or observation is being requested, multiple industry informants reflected upon the importance of developing trust with the academic partner:

"Trust for us is really fundamentally important. There's something about having other people in the room that are not participating that can feel really uncomfortable...So there is a trust that's built up first."
(Industry Informant, Dance)

"It's really important for us to develop our partnerships, and to acknowledge that it takes time to know who's who, and to build up trust. I've been in some meetings at a university where people have just kind of said things like, "Oh, yeah, we need another partner, Who should we have?", And then they just write some random company down without having really spoken to them."
(Industry Informant, Museum & Galleries)

As has already been evidenced, the time it takes to develop such trust in the first instance is not always supported by universities, and in addition, time-limited academic contracts further undermine the capacity for researchers to build effective and sustained partnerships beyond the academy.

4. Partnership and Engagement Infrastructure

4.1 Key findings: University Engagement Infrastructure

1. As high levels of trust are often necessary for effective research engagement, personal relationships between the researcher and the CCI organisation remain crucial even where more formal resources or infrastructure exist.
2. Institutional intermediation may have a more prominent role to play when larger-scale partnerships are being formed with larger CCI organisations. Whilst individual relationships between stakeholders remain important for the research itself, sustained engagement often requires wider support and resources.

4.2 Institutional Engagement Models

Universities across Yorkshire and Humber have resources in place for expanding and strengthening connections with businesses, including the CCIs. As the previous section demonstrated, much of the research engagement taking place is happening independent of formal or institutional infrastructure, which academic informants suggested might not be particularly strategic:

“A lot of the partners that I’ve worked with I’ve met at events, but that’s not really a strategy for building partnerships.”

(Academic Informant, University of York)

Various models of institutional relationship brokering exist across universities in the region, including dedicated business development or partnership staff, knowledge exchange hubs, and other such facilities and infrastructure in place specifically for business engagement purposes. One academic informant reflected upon their positive experience of such an entity at the University of Leeds:

“There is an entity at the University that does a brilliant job, called The Cultural Institute. They’ve got this much more ‘pracademic’ persona, and they provide that bridge really successfully. It’s the first time that

I’ve worked at a university that has an entity where people have got one foot in each camp.”

(Academic Informant, University of Leeds)

As the previous section demonstrated, the commonplace reliance on happenstance connections or networking can be problematic for a multitude of reasons. It is therefore important that the resources and facilities designed to establish and sustain links between researchers and industry are effective. However, of the multiple partnerships explored across the academic and industry informants in the region, none had been first brokered by a formal industry-facing engagement or partnership mechanism within a university of any kind.

The potential reasons for this are various. As has already been made clear, the common model of research engagement with the CCIs is through the personal connections and networks of individual academics. In addition, whilst researchers are often aware that resources exist at the institutional level to support sector engagement activity, academics are somewhat apprehensive of making use of such resource:

“The point at which the university says “Okay, you have to work through our enterprise arm, and all of your contacts have to go through this person who is the industry officer”, I’m just going to stop and become a theorist! The motivation for me is that I’m working with people I like on stuff that I think is interesting. If it goes through a series of university intermediaries, I think it will just suck all of the joy out of it.”

(Academic Informant, University of Sheffield)

There is a concern that formalising the relationship building process will be to the detriment of the personal connections and notions of trust which have been reflected upon as being crucial elements of engagement by both CCI and academic partners. Whilst wider institutional support may be deemed useful for larger research projects, in general, academics are wary of the intermediary role a university may play:

“I obviously would appreciate the kind of help and support of administrative departments in terms of locating people, but I’d still need to do relationship building work and invest that time myself in order

to really make sure that we have the right person. Personal contact is important."

(Academic Informant, University of York)

"It's no different to how we invite external partners to give talks to our students. There's an alumni office, for example, that will have lots of contacts, but I'm more likely to find somebody who either I know already or who I consider to be a perfect match. I'll contact them directly. I'm not sure how much I'd want to formalise those kinds of mechanisms of getting people engaged."

(Academic Informant, University of York)

Academic informants suggested that the mechanism by which sector partnerships are formed may be contingent upon issues relating to organisational scale:

"I think if you want to engage with a large organisation, it makes sense that it's the university who's doing the engagement. If it's a smaller organisation, it makes sense if it's a school or department or an individual."

(Academic Informant, University of York)

Some of the CCI industry informants working within larger organisations had job roles or even entire teams which included staff focussed on education, outreach, and research activity:

"We have a research and statistics fund. The idea is that we produce data and research that is of industry and public benefit. We work with an external advisory group who recommend research priorities, and then we arrange research commissions."

(Industry Informant, Film & TV)

In such cases, engaging with researchers from across the arts, humanities, and social sciences was reflected upon as being a key part of larger-scale CCI organisations:

"It seems to me obvious that a self respecting national organisation would want to have research partners to help frame and deliver their core work. When I talk to peers at other large organisations, they're always really surprised that we have this wing of our organisation that's bothered with higher education research."

(Industry Informant, Theatre & Performance)

Two scales of engagement activity emerge. On the one hand, larger CCI organisations, sometimes with dedicated and specific partnership staff, are building longer-term and larger-scale partnerships with universities at the institutional level. In these instances, it

is common that such partnerships might be multifaceted, including co-funded and co-mentored PhD students, regular forums or workshops, and other research activities as part of a programme of engagement over a number of years. In these cases, HEI partnership and engagement infrastructure is well-placed to oversee, manage, and administer the various stakeholders. On the other hand, and in the main, individual or small teams of academics are directly establishing research partnerships with CCI organisations, and are themselves managing the many aspects of such an engagement in collaboration with their CCI partner(s).

Whilst these different scales of engagement exist, it's potentially important that all partnerships are recorded and monitored. Both academic and industry informants expressed some concern about the sheer volume of engagement and access sought, particularly for research about the CCI partner:

"There is research exhaustion in CCI organisations. A lot of people want to do research, and there's only so many CCI organisations to be researched. There are so many CCI courses where students are offered some kind of placement, which essentially means that they all go off and do interviews, and the organisations get research fatigue before academics even get to them."

(Academic Informant, University of Sheffield)

Keeping track of how frequently individual CCI organisations are being approached for engagement is a complex task, even at the faculty or school level. This is because of the breadth of engagement activity, the prominent model of sector outreach independent of institutional infrastructure, and also perhaps because of a discrepancy between the volume of researchers interested in the CCIs and the number of companies available to research. Whilst larger CCI organisations have greater capacity and resources to field enquiries, for SMEs and micro-companies, a high frequency of requests for researcher or student access is likely to be less manageable. Particularly for CCI sector partners then, a more-joined up strategy for engagement is likely to be beneficial in this respect.

5. Language and Outputs

5.1 Key findings: Language and Outputs

1. Regardless of the CCI subsector, industry informants repeatedly articulated shared issues with the differences between the communication styles of academics and industry. These issues were sometimes alleviated by greater CCI involvement in the writing or editing of outputs.
2. Academics feel that time spent on industry-facing reports is less valued by their employers than time spent on peer-reviewed articles, despite their potential for more immediate and tangible impact.
3. Whilst formal written outputs are most common, both academic and industry informants recognise the value of different models of dissemination (e.g. presentations, blogs).

“It’s important for academics to understand that language can really be a barrier for a lot of people. They have all of this complex language and terminology, and because they’re mainly talking to their colleagues, it just becomes second nature for them.”
(Industry Informant, Visual Arts)

Academics with experience of working in industry previously agreed that academic writing conventions can sometimes function as a barrier to engagement beyond the academy. With the benefit of having had professional CCI sector experience, those academics recognised and reflected upon issues from the industry perspective:

“I don’t know a single person in industry who I’ve worked with who has read all of one traditional academic publication, be it a journal article or book. There’s no time. Industry relies on clarity, and there are many papers which obfuscate the meaning of what they’re really trying to say. They could say things in five words, but they’ve said it in fifty.”
(Academic Informant, University of York)

Industry informants, and most notably those working within larger CCI organisations, described the ways in which they helped to shape the language used in outputs or deliverables through collaboration with the researcher:

“It’s got to be really accessibly written. We often end up jumping in and helping with the writing to make sure that the language is clear and understandable.”
(Industry Informant, Film & TV)

“I don’t know the answer to specific technical things because I’m not an expert, but I’ve had a quick look at the drafts before and said “this bit is weird, and change this, and don’t use that language there.”
(Industry Informant, Gaming)

5.2 Writing Styles and Audience

Academic informants, notably those with extensive experience of research engagement beyond the academy or those with previous CCI work experience, reflected upon the importance of language and communication throughout partnerships:

“I’ve been around industry and around the academic research environment. I understand how they talk and how they relate to each other. I think what’s happened is that I can translate in both directions.”
(Academic Informant, University of York)

The importance of language, and this issue of translating between different styles of communication, was mainly reflected upon by industry informants. Regardless of the CCI subsector, industry informants repeatedly articulated shared challenges with academic conventions regarding both written and verbal communication:

“When we first started, I think we were quite astounded at the number of meetings and the language that was used. We were coming out of meetings going “Oh my God, my head’s gonna explode. What did that mean? What was that? What were they talking about there?”
(Industry Informant, Dance)

In the instances where the research project’s deliverables are sector-facing reports of some variety, industry informants repeatedly expressed the benefits of more collaborative and co-produced approaches to writing. Whilst logistically such a process may be more time-consuming than a solo-authored researcher-led output, allowing for engagement which extends to final reporting may be beneficial for audiences and stakeholders

beyond the academy.

As described earlier in the report, the three models of research engagement (about, for, or with) impact upon the probable types of outputs delivered, which in turn, has an impact upon the style of written language used. Although academic informants overall reflected less upon how styles of communication change when working beyond the academy, some researchers did consider the different audiences for their outputs:

“We have produced final research reports that have been disseminated and made freely available, which have been written for a general audience or with the industry more in mind. So the academic outputs are one thing, but the research reports are another. I certainly don’t feel the need to ‘dumb down’ arguments, but I write with slightly less academic convention.”

(Academic Informant, University of York)

Academic informants suggested that where research engaged with a CCI organisation is more likely to deliver industry-facing reports rather than peer-reviewed articles for example, these types of engagements and outputs are regarded as less valuable:

“The way I think about engagement is more about working with organisations rather than thinking, ‘Well if we do that work together, I can get something out of it for the REF.’ Certainly the way impact is implemented in a lot of academic contexts privileges demonstrating the efficacy of academic work in quite narrow ways.”

(Academic Informant, University of York)

“It’s much easier for us to be able to sell internally why we’re involved if there’s a very definite research output. Unfortunately, the problem with working with local Cultural and Creative organisations is that it’s really difficult to envisage how that will result in a substantial piece of research output or a journal article.”

(Academic Informant, University of Leeds)

5.3 Dissemination Beyond Publications

Whilst researchers across the social sciences often recognised the value of more traditional forms of academic scholarship and writing, many also identified and recognised the value of other forms of output and knowledge dissemination:

“If I write something for one of the four star journals, it might take years to even be accepted, if it was accepted at all, and maybe twenty people might read it. Whereas when I use blogs and other informal ways of sharing what I’ve been up to, it hits a much wider number of people, and is much more effective at engaging with industry.”

(Academic Informant, University of Sheffield)

Beyond discussions of the distinctions between writing for industry or academic audiences, the value of different models and approaches to insight dissemination beyond publications altogether was reflected upon variously by industry informants:

“We decided that what we wanted to do was create these kind of events where we could invite professionals to come together, present the research, and have it as a kind of a networking type event as well. I’ve run a couple of those over the years that have been relatively successful.”

(Industry Informant, Dance)

The potential for partnered events is perhaps impacted upon more by available resources than willing on either side, with specific allocation for this kind of dissemination activity likely needing early consideration in any engagement. Whilst universities are well-placed and practiced at delivering such events for academic audiences, academic informants suggested that when it comes to communication and dissemination, universities could learn from CCI professionals and practitioners:

“Creative Industries are better at engagement than universities. Engaging with audiences for example is what they do, and they do it a lot better than we do.”

(Academic Informant, University of Sheffield)

Whilst academics recognise the value and potential of engaging audiences and stakeholders in different ways, they reflected that their capacity and agency to do so is not always as straightforward as it might be:

“How we communicate is crucial. Even the way that you present a PowerPoint presentation, for example.”

But there's this template in my school which we have to use, and it's the most tedious, awful PowerPoint template I've ever seen...I want to present something a bit more exciting!"

(Academic Informant, University of Sheffield)

Beyond outputs and deliverables, and in terms of how successfully academics engage CCI partners in the research process itself, industry informants articulated feeling detached or even excluded from the research being conducted, both during and after the project:

"I've been at the end of totally random academic projects, where people have swung in to do this and that, and didn't really talk to us at all about what they would do. They just sort of swanned in and out. And that was the end of it. And we never really found out what they discovered or where it's got to or anything."

(Industry Informant, Museum & Galleries)

Whilst other factors may be at play here, as noted, academic time and resources for business engagement is limited by other work commitments which often takes precedence. In terms of how such resource limitations negatively impact communication and deliverables, industry informants feel that engagement is sometimes rushed and detached, with lower levels of transparency and personal connection than would be preferable. This feeling extends to engagement after the conclusion of a partnership project, where industry informants are sometimes left without update regarding the outcomes or findings.

6. Value Added

6.1 Key findings: Value Added

1. Academic research can provide CCI organisations with evidence and data which is useful in a variety of tangible ways (e.g. funding applications, organisational change).
2. Researchers add value in ways which are both current (e.g. workplace diversity data) and longer term (e.g. scoping future commercial opportunities).
3. Sector engagement adds value to academic careers by enhancing researcher profiles and demonstrating impactful working, potentially leading to career progression opportunities.

6.2 Adding Tangible Value

The diversity of informants was reflected in a similar diversity of research projects, and whilst engagement with CCI organisations was always central, a variety of engagements delivered and added value in a multitude of ways. Academic informants often suggested that their research addressed specific institutional needs of the partner organisation(s) with which they engaged. Where an academic's research expertise aligns with a particular area of interest for the CCI organisation, the line between the 'research about' and 'research for' models of engagement can be less distinct:

"I tend to do research on big policy problems that people want to solve. So, for example, looking at inequality in Creative Industries. Most organisations want to learn how to do better. They can see genuine value in it."

(Academic Informant, University of Sheffield)

In this case, although the research project wasn't explicitly funded by or designed with the organisation, the topic of the research spoke to ongoing organisational conversations about the issue of inequality. There was a clear correlation of focus, and an alignment between the 'big policy problems' of interest to both the academic and industry partners. Where such an alignment takes place, the added value of engagement is often explicit:

"I did actually make an impact, and I changed their practices and policies, and they said so on social media right across their channels."

(Academic Informant, University of Sheffield)

Industry informants often reflected upon the valuable role that academics play as experts providing evidence to support or extend their work. For instance, CCI informants tasked social sciences researchers with demonstrating through data collection and analysis the efficacy of specific programmes:

"We do a lot of work with refugees and asylum seekers, but we didn't have any evidence or data to show how it's a good thing for society. Increasingly, arts organisations are having to show that they've got a value beyond their arts activities, and so that kind of evidence is really good for us."

(Industry Informant, Performing Arts)

Industry often recognised academic research as being robust, and therefore as providing a sound evidential basis for things like funding applications or organisational change. For those CCI organisations who often commission research, the reputation of academic research as being comprehensive and considered underpins the knowledge created:

"The research might have gone to a consultancy, but I don't think it would have been anywhere near as robust or as watertight. And I don't think it would have had the same response from some of the bigger companies in the industry who require that level of certainty."

(Industry Informant, Games Sector)

However, academic informants also experienced some issues regarding elevated expectations in terms of what they were able to deliver and the impact that they were able to have:

"I felt as if we couldn't provide them with what they needed. There was a bit of a disconnect in terms of how they felt that we as researchers could come in and, almost like a silver bullet, provide evidence into why doing something in a particular way would be more efficacious."

(Academic Informant, University of Sheffield)

Whilst social sciences researchers were keen to express some level of caution in terms of the promises made to CCI sector partners around added value and deliverables, industry organisations widely suggested that engaging with universities provides them with a sense of sectoral authority and repute both within and beyond the region:

“I’ve worked in other regional organisations which serve their region well, but don’t have much of a relationship nationally or internationally. But here, there’s always been a drive to engage with research because it places us in a unique position within the sector. It’s opened a lot of doors in terms of being part of bigger projects at the European level.”

(Industry Informant, Performing Arts)

The value of engaging with researchers from an industry perspective therefore extends beyond the remit of any individual research engagement, and is further useful for positioning the organisation within a wider sectoral context. Where funding and opportunities can be competitive for certain subsectors of the CCIs, the kind of visibility and recognition that university partnership can bring is deemed valuable.

The necessity for research engagement to deliver obviously and tangibly valuable outcomes in this way is perhaps linked to the structure of the CCI partner:

“There is quite a big difference between the more commercially oriented bits of the CCIs, and the more publicly funded bits of the CCIs. The more publicly funded bits are more nervous about engaging, and need things that are more immediately tangibly valuable to them.”

(Academic Informant, University of Sheffield)

The market and funding structures of CCI organisations, and notably the dynamic between ‘public’ and/or ‘private’ stakeholders or audiences, impacts upon the ways in which the notion of added value is considered. The majority of industry informants represent the publicly funded and facing sub-sectors of the CCIs, and, according to academic informants, it therefore follows that researcher engagement is mostly valued for its capacity to provide evidence that speaks to present-day concerns for the organisation.

6.3 Prospective Value and Entrepreneurial Engagement

Beyond a model of engagement whereby social sciences researchers provide readily applicable insights, academics also add value by offering more entrepreneurial ideas with longer-term trajectories. Reflecting upon the ways in which researchers can add value to private-sector CCI organisations, academic informants consider their impact beyond specific deliverables:

“Engagement is not just about leveraging traditional research to make widgets. It’s about leveraging ways of thinking around new opportunities and more entrepreneurial points of view. Our outlook is often about leveraging ideas in new ways, and to my mind, that is what industry needs me to do.”

(Academic Informant, University of York)

Whilst in the main academics researching with and for sector partners were addressing specific organisational needs, the ways in which industry benefits from a social sciences researcher’s capacity for critical thinking were often cited:

“If you’re talking about specific process improvements, the university isn’t necessarily the best place to go. However, if you’re wanting to improve your innovation capacity, if you need a body of people that will challenge you to think differently, then we’re good at that.”

(Academic Informant, University of Leeds)

Academic informants were keen to clarify that engaging with CCI organisations is sometimes not about explicitly identified outputs in the short term, but where enabled through resource allocation, longer-term business engagement can be ongoing without specific objectives or goals in mind:

“Some partnerships are invaluable for all sorts of reasons beyond a paper or two. I tend to be entrepreneurial. I tend to think that whilst I don’t know what the immediate benefits will be, I’m sure there will be something that will come out of it.”

(Academic Informant, University of Leeds)

This more entrepreneurial model of engagement focuses less on designated projects and more on developing relationships with organisations. Such a dynamic demonstrates one way in which researchers and CCI partners can engage with each other, with an emphasis on relationship building and scoping the potential for future value adding activities. Evidence of researchers adding value in ways which address both current issues and longer-term entrepreneurial goals was provided by industry informants:

"I asked an academic to come and talk to us about decolonizing the canon, and they were able to pick examples and talk about why they were problematic. That kind of understanding is totally invaluable for us. Our audience is ageing, and part of the reason for that is that we haven't changed up the stories we're telling. The 'win win' would be increasing demand for our work whilst also being more responsible with the stories we're telling."

(Industry Informant, Performing Arts)

In this instance, the academic partner added tangible value by elucidating the ways in which the organisation's repertoire was racially problematic, and provided the critical evidential basis for change in this regard. In so doing, the research engagement also catalysed entrepreneurial thinking about opportunities for reaching new and more diverse audiences in future. Facilitated by a long-standing partnership between the CCI organisation and the academic institution, it is clear that engagement doesn't have to be either 'shorter-term and output driven' or 'longer-term and entrepreneurial', but that a balance can be struck between both when sufficient institutional support exists.

Following on earlier sections of this report about how meaningful partnership relationships are established, it's clear that this more entrepreneurial mode of CCI engagement requires a level of institutional support for which there isn't much evidence across HEIs in Yorkshire and Humber. Whilst the impact agenda has shifted research towards industry, policy, and external stakeholders beyond the academy more widely, academic informants were keen to assert that engagement is not and indeed should not only be about specific deliverables and tangible impact:

"One of the reasons why I do it is because it's useful to understand the sector. As a researcher, understanding the sector that you're working on is part of your job. It makes your articles better and makes your funding bids better."

(Academic Informant, University of York)

This more exploratory engagement activity requires that both researchers and CCI partners are able to invest their scant time and energies into building social capital for a potential future collaboration, without a clear return on that resource investment. Ultimately, such an engagement likely requires entrepreneurial mindsets and resource allocation across both the individual and institutional stakeholders on either side of the partnership.

6.4 Enhancing Academic Careers

There are a multitude of ways in which engaging with CCI organisations adds value to academic careers. Most straightforwardly, certain models of research engagement beyond the academy were deemed valuable because they often resulted in opportunities for research publication:

"Partnership work is great for your CV, because these projects often lead to academic outputs of some kind. That's not the only reason I do it, but in terms of my career development it's been really useful."

(Academic Informant, University of York)

As explored previously, academic informants felt that industry-focussed research reports were deemed lesser than traditional peer-reviewed scholarship. Regardless, the opportunities brought about by CCI sector partnerships to produce research outputs of various types and for different audiences were regarded positively overall. Even when research outputs weren't the explicit focus or intention of the engagement activity, academic informants suggested that sector partnerships often lead to publishing opportunities indirectly:

"When the finished project was released, I wove traditional research into it, and it became the basis of more traditional research. I've had at least two journal articles on the back of that project."

(Academic Informant, University of York)

Where academic time is often limited or otherwise committed, clear routes to publishable knowledge were considered by informants to be important in terms of institutional buy-in:

"We were often able to get papers out of work like that, and it's much easier for us to be able to sell internally why we were involved when there was a very definite research output."

(Academic Informant, University of Leeds)

In addition to the value of CV enhancement through new publishing opportunities, academic informants across the Yorkshire and Humber region suggested that their personal research profiles were enhanced through business engagement activities. The value of this profile enhancement was considered useful in the competitive academic job market:

"In terms of my research profile, I definitely think that it accelerated me getting a lectureship."

(Academic Informant, University of Sheffield)

Business engagement activity was considered beneficial throughout academic careers, and beyond initial or early career opportunities, sector-engagement research was cited as being important for more senior level promotion also:

"It's just kind of expected now, of someone who wants to be more senior as an academic. You've got to be showing that you're doing some sector-engaged work in order to get promoted."

(Academic Informant, Leeds Beckett University)

The impact agenda and the increasing institutional interest in impact beyond the academy have shaped multiple aspects of academic work in recent years. That institutions deem valuable academics with a track-record of bridging the gap between 'research' and 'research users' through business engagement and partnership is but one example. The relationship between evidence of successful sector engagement and improved employment prospects is not therefore specific to social sciences, the CCIs, or of course universities in the Yorkshire and Humber region.

7. Conclusions

7.1 Overview and Key Findings

This report explores various ways in which academics based in universities across Yorkshire and Humber and CCI organisations engage in research. Interested in best practice for business engagement with these sectors, the report details multiple dynamics of such partnerships, and is informed by qualitative data captured through interviews with researchers and CCI sector professionals.

The first area of focus, 'Establishing Partnerships', evidences the crucial role of an academic's personal and professional networks for building CCI sector relationships. Additionally, multiple issues relating to the social arenas of networking and various related problems and challenges which emerge have been demonstrated. Crucially, the predominant model for establishing CCI industry engagement relies largely upon various privileges of capacity and access that are problematic for many academics.

Secondly, the report discovers that in the main direct relationships between social sciences researchers and CCI organisations remain crucial even where more formal institutional mechanisms, resources, or infrastructure exist. The report does however find that partnership and engagement infrastructure at the university or faculty level may have a more prominent intermediary role to play in larger scale and more sustained partnerships with CCI organisations.

The third key area evidences issues relating to communication and language, and finds that CCI sector partners had shared issues and concerns with the complexity of academic writing conventions. Relatedly, both academic and industry partners value types of dissemination beyond formal written outputs, with blogs and presentations, for example, recognised as valuable project deliverables. This section also revealed that social sciences researchers feel that industry-facing publications are less valued by their employers than more traditional peer-reviewed scholarship, despite the potential for tangible sector impact.

Finally, the report finds that academic research adds tangible value to CCI organisations by gathering and analysing evidence and data across a range of issues. Academic expertise and repute were often utilised to support organisational change or to evaluate

performance, with the CCI partner's own external stakeholders or funders often being the audience for such work. Beyond this, social sciences researchers also add value in less explicit ways through critical or entrepreneurial thinking, with prospective longer-term gains. The report evidences some of the ways in which CCI sector engagement adds value to academic careers, by keeping academics up to date with the sector(s), by enhancing job prospects and employability, and also by improving opportunities for promotion and career progression.

7.2 Limitations and Further Study

Whilst the evidence that underpins this report originates from projects and partnerships across the breadth of CCIs, it's important to resist conclusions which reduce the sectors to being homogenous. The CCIs are a diverse constellation of subsectors, and although often spoken about here in more collective terms, this is less reflective of the need for nuanced exploration and understanding than of the resource constraints on this report.

Further nuance could also be explored in relation to the geography of the CCIs, and the ways in which that potentially impacts upon which organisations and universities engage in which regions. Relatedly, with no standardised model of university engagement infrastructure, academic experiences of business engagement will also likely be uneven and similarly impacted upon by geographic and institutional contexts.

Whilst it is true that the academic informants who contributed to this report were based at universities across the Yorkshire and Humber region, no specific regional dimensions in terms of engagement have emerged. With the data available, it appears that the institutional context appears to factor more prominently than any regional one. A more geographically extensive exploration of academic and CCI sector engagement may indeed expose such regional dynamics.

About Aspect

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

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

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