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Curators of Cultural Enterprise
A Critical Analysis of a Creative Business Intermediary

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Chapter 1: Researching Cultural Enterprise Office

Why this book matters

This book is about a cultural agency – Cultural Enterprise Office (CEO) – set up to help individuals and very small enterprises working in the ‘creative economy’. CEO’s central purpose is to make such ‘creatives’ become more business-like and thereby improve their chances of making a living over the longer term.

CEO is based in Glasgow, a city richly endowed with a wide range of cultural life and a key location for those engaged in creative work in Scotland. In what follows, we have set out to analyse the web of relationships that CEO has with those it advises and assists – its ‘clients’ – as well as the wider world of government and support bodies – its ‘stakeholders’. For the first time, to the best of our knowledge, we have provided a detailed account of the inside workings of this kind of cultural intermediary.

While the Scottish location is undoubtedly significant, how CEO works, the challenges it has faced as an organisation, and how it has been shaped by its wider environment, are of general interest. Other such bodies operate in other places with comparable constraints and with similar purposes. That is because the creative economy has become a centrepiece of public policy in many countries, now being seen by numerous governments as a major engine of contemporary economic growth. So, while we do not argue that CEO is a model for others, there are some general issues that emerge from this case study. We shall discuss these in our conclusions.

Intervention in the creative economy in pursuit of the national economic interest has become ubiquitous, even being adopted as a global model. The quest to reshape the creative base has made use of a wide variety of agencies, bringing a range of different specialisms to bear. Along with the sought-after economic benefits pursued by each particular nation has been the parallel chase for the special prestige that comes with the success of cultural works that achieve attention and esteem. More commonly, though, most official attention is lavished on products that are box-office successes and contributors to GNP. What can be learned from the analysis that follows, therefore, ought certainly to be of direct interest to the various protagonists of the creative economy - governments, cultural and creative industries policy communities, cultural agencies engaged in analogous activities to those of CEO, creative enterprises, and of course, the ‘creatives’ themselves. What makes this study unique is that it focuses on a largely neglected matter: how intervention in the creative field actually takes

place, exposing the conditions that underlie a practice that now bears the burden of such high expectations.

In official accounts of the creative economy, which are marked, more often than not, by an unrestrained boosterism, it is normally insufficiently recognised that most creative work is precarious and the livelihoods of those who practice it are often poised on the very knife-edge of viability. This means that ‘portfolio’ work – the combination over time of diverse ways of making an income – is commonplace in all cultural fields. The consequent fragility of much of the creative economy entails that government’s key interest is centred on making creative work more robust. This focus requires setting various measures in train that are seen as suited to the task. Commonly, these interventionist practices include making creatives more business-minded by, for instance, enhancing their savvy about how to organise their finances, helping them to develop new skills, or telling them how they might exploit the intellectual property (IP) inherent in their output.

This is where agencies such as CEO come into the picture because they are integral parts of how governments try to incentivise, manage, and sustain cultural enterprises and entrepreneurs in their quest for global competitiveness, as well as other goals. But little has been written about how they work and are shaped by ruling ideas and practices. A key issue for all concerned is just how well such intervention might be judged to work and how the policy landscape is continually rearranged in pursuit of effective leverage and value for money.

Cultural agencies are purposeful intermediaries: on the one hand, they are aligned with the big picture aspirations of national policy-makers intent on increasing the economic value of cultural businesses, and on the other, they are required to meet the highly specific, complex and variegated needs of practitioners. Thus, they are caught between top-down imperatives that aim to enhance performance and bottom-up demands for services by those seeking a route to survival or better, by making a career through their talents. If the role of such cultural intermediaries is really as important as is regularly trumpeted by the retailers of received ideas, then agencies such as CEO ought themselves to escape the fate of precariousness. But intriguingly, it ain’t necessarily so, as our account will show.

Knowledge exchange

Aside from the inherent policy and practical interest of this work, there is a further, more directly academic, context to be noted. Written by British academics working in the UK’s research framework, this book has been deeply marked by its own conditions of production. The study

undertaken here is an example not only of fundamental research into the role of an intermediary organisation in the creative economy but also of a considered exercise in ‘knowledge exchange’ between us as researchers and those that we have been researching.

Lately, such an approach has become *de rigueur* in the UK. It has impacted deeply on academic norms. British academics are also currently enjoined to ensure that their research has a non-academic ‘impact’, a distinct but related imperative embedded in the UK’s Research Excellence Framework, the latest official requirement of British academic life.¹ Couple these distinct but convergent demands for demonstrating relevance with the present desire to exploit the creative economy, which looms so large in the British government’s thinking, and we have a convergence and combination of two discourses perfectly epitomising the contemporary utilitarian drive in pragmatic planning by the UK Research Councils. A typical definition, offered by the UK Economic and Social Research Council, states that ‘knowledge exchange is a two-way process where social scientists and individuals or organisations share learning, ideas and experiences’.² Over the past 30 years, knowledge exchange has been increasingly institutionalised in the higher education sectors of North America and Europe, becoming a key mechanism for connecting the business and education sectors; it is also seen as a driver for innovation and economic growth.³ This raises fundamental questions about super- and subordination in the development of research.⁴ To put it bluntly: to what extent can academics pursue their own autonomously generated agendas? To what extent are they problem makers or problem takers?

These concerns are epitomised by our study, which is a ‘creative economy knowledge exchange’ project, commissioned by the UK Arts and Humanities Research Council for a wider programme of work on that topic.⁵ Critical distance needs to be taken from the wider concerns that have shaped the agenda leading to our work. We have needed to steer an unaccustomed path between our own wish to undertake fundamental research into how a cultural intermediary actually works and learning how to engage in knowledge exchange with that body and numerous others besides. It is not the idea of knowledge exchange itself that has been the challenge but rather the pace and intensity required and how this has affected the priorities of the research process. We have also, when it is most obviously pertinent, reflected on our roles in the research.

¹ ‘The Research Excellence Framework 2014’, The Research Excellence Framework, accessed 9 March, 2015, <http://www.ref.ac.uk/>

² ‘The benefits of collaboration’, The Economic and Social Research Council, accessed 9 March, 2015, <http://www.esrc.ac.uk/collaboration/knowledge-exchange/>

³ Fumi Kitigawa and Claire Lightowler, ‘Knowledge exchange: a comparison of policies, strategies, and funding incentives in English and Scottish higher education’, *Research Evaluation* 22 (2013): 1-2.

⁴ As space does not permit us to take the matter further here, we simply note this point.

⁵ ‘Creative Economy Knowledge Exchange Projects’, Arts and Humanities Research Council, accessed 9 March, 2015, <http://www.ahrc.ac.uk/What-We-Do/Strengthen-research-impact/Knowledge-Exchange-and-Partnerships/Pages/Creative-Economy-Knowledge-Exchange-Projects.aspx>

In this study, we are committed to the idea that our research should be accessible and enlightening to those we are studying and indeed, consider that it might have a wider public interest. We have adopted this stance in line with our own autonomous academic norms and values.

The knowledge exchange agenda, when applied to the creative sector, now mobilises quite significant numbers of researchers – within a range of public, private and third-sector organisations – with the aim of ensuring that they foster its resilience and competitiveness in a volatile global economy. The programmatic approach to knowledge exchange promoted by the UK Research Councils – the carapace within which this study was devised – aligns directly with this goal.⁶

Knowledge exchange certainly does not take an imagined linear form, where the arrow of knowledge might be thought to move symmetrically in opposite directions between the researcher and the researched. The drive to have academics undertake knowledge exchange is coupled with a striking lack of curiosity about what the real experience of applying this requirement might actually reveal.⁷ For instance, our unsurprising experience in this present study is that somewhat raw findings are not invariably welcomed and understood as intended by the recipient at the moment at which they are delivered. Moreover, there is no doubt that practising knowledge exchange in a research project affects the frequency and intensity of researchers' dealings with those who are being researched. Such complexity means that the new normative emphasis has a major impact on how research needs to be planned, managed and executed.

Our aim throughout our project was to inform CEO's own practice and ideas by regularly imparting to the staff, as nearly as possible in real time, what we were learning about them while we were in the process of finding things out. While the added effort of organising knowledge exchange events competes directly with the time available for research, the pursuit of dialogue in this form certainly does not entail telling those whom we are researching what they want to hear – nor should it. Rather, it means keeping a critical distance, while at the same time creating spaces in which we can present our analyses for relatively dispassionate debate and, at times and quite rightly so, disagreement by those who do not recognise the picture that is being painted of them, or see it as an unflattering likeness.

⁶ Philip Schlesinger, 'Expertise, the academy and the governance of cultural policy', *Media, Culture and Society* 35 (2013): 27-35.

⁷ Philip Schlesinger, Melanie Selfe, and Ealasaid Munro, 'The Supporting Creative Business project and the politics of managing ethnographic teamwork' (paper presented at the International Conference on Cultural Policy Research, Hildesheim, 9-12 September, 2014).

Having an AHRC grant permitted the research team to make ‘a gift’ of our funded time to CEO in exchange for access. However, although finding the door fully open to fieldwork offers exceptional advantages, it also requires very careful management of expectations throughout the life of the project.⁸

The far-reaching challenge of doing this kind of work has not yet been fully addressed by research funders, universities or indeed, by academics themselves. Given our immersion in this approach, we see the present work as a contribution to what is increasingly shaping up as a crucial debate about the autonomy of academic life, not just in the UK but wherever the knowledge exchange agenda is being embraced.

About this book

As will be clear, this short book is concerned with the process of organised intermediation between those engaged in creative work and the wider policy and institutional framework in which that occurs. We are interested in the kind of specialised knowledge that is mobilised by those working in an agency such as CEO. Surprisingly, as discussed in Chapter 2, the operations of such bodies as CEO have been largely neglected by academic research.⁹ Although there is a small body of related work, thus far nothing has combined research into this kind of cultural intermediary with the pressure of managing knowledge exchange as part of the research process itself.

To that end, we have set out to anatomise the system of beliefs and working practices of one exemplary case to which we have had exceptional access. While our example is undeniably Scottish, Scotland’s particular cultural policy discourse and the country’s home-grown agencies’ approach to the creative economy have been deeply shaped by British ideas and practices, as well as influenced by the movement of key personnel across the border. If some highly specific features characterise our chosen case, we are confident that it is not untypical of what can be found elsewhere in the UK.

⁸ Our AHRC Creative Economy Knowledge Exchange Project was initially a one-year project, but because of the knowledge exchange component in practice we found it impossible to complete the work in twelve months and had to find the resources to keep it going, beyond the grant awarded.

⁹ For exceptions, see: Justin O’Connor, ‘Intermediaries and imaginaries in the cultural and creative industries’, *Regional Studies* 49 (2013); Justin O’Connor and Xin Gu, ‘Developing a creative cluster in a postindustrial city: CIDS and Manchester’, *The Information Society: An International Journal* 26 (2010); Doreen Jakob and Bas van Heur, ‘Editorial: Taking matters into third hands: Intermediaries and the organization of the creative economy’, *Regional Studies* 49 (2015); Keith Negus, ‘The work of cultural intermediaries and the enduring distance between production and consumption’, *Cultural Studies* 16 (2002); Sean Nixon and Paul du Gay, ‘Who needs cultural intermediaries?’ *Cultural Studies* 16 (2002): 498.

Moreover, in various ways CEO may also be compared to bodies of similar scale and purpose at work in other national contexts.

The rest of this book

In Chapter 2, we show how the ‘creative economy’ became a central plank of UK cultural policy, from the New Labour government (1997-2010) to the Con-Lib Dem Coalition government (2010-2015). Both the globalisation of this discourse and its localisation in Scotland are described. The centrality of the creative economy for Scottish cultural policy under both the Lab-Lib coalitions (1999-2007) and the Scottish National Party (2007 to date) is analysed, with particular attention paid to the common political ground regarding the present institutional landscape. CEO is situated in the context of a discussion of current analyses of cultural intermediaries and of cultural entrepreneurship.

Chapter 3 outlines the evolution of Cultural Enterprise Office over fifteen years, tracing its development from the initial feasibility study in 1999, through its launch and four phases of operation. We describe the shape of the organisation and its main business support activities during our fieldwork (2013-2014). We address the role of institutional narrative, CEO’s changing geographic remit, the way the organisation has drawn on and modified operational models from elsewhere and how it has intersected with and adapted to the existing local and national business support infrastructure. We argue that the quest for survival has required CEO to continually adapt, re-orientating towards different sources of funding and responding to current policy trends.

Chapter 4 takes a close look at CEO’s business support practices, examining how the central ethos of the organisation is expressed through day-to-day client interactions and the language in which business advice is delivered and discussed. We identify three core values underpinning the delivery of advice and support to clients: being bespoke, being non-judgemental and taking a coaching-centred approach to supporting clients. We next consider how staff have used the idea of ‘client journeys’ to conceptualise trajectories through CEO’s service and the business world. Finally, we consider the impact on organisational values of the introduction of structured programmes, arguing that these have introduced new languages and different styles of interaction to CEO, reshaping the idea of ‘being bespoke’.

In Chapter 5, we address CEO’s strategic development during 2013-2014, aided in part by funding devoted to capacity building. In a bid to future-proof the organisation and remain relevant within an increasingly competitive business support landscape, CEO’s leadership restructured the organisation,

began to develop critical independent research into the sector, and sought to reimagine models of digital and physical service delivery. Ultimately, the bid for further Creative Scotland funding to enable more ambitious plans to be pursued was unsuccessful, resulting in the resignation of CEO's Director. This chapter explores the development of new goals when their realisation was actually considered to be feasible, considers the internal transformations we observed CEO undergo as it attempted to ready itself for this next planned phase, and finally reflects on the continuing tension between serving and attempting to shape the top-down policy agenda.

Chapter 6 concludes this book. We argue that support for the creative economy operates within a largely unchallenged set of assumptions, including the need for intervention. However, given that policy makers evidently think that bodies such as CEO are important for pursuing national goals, too little attention has been paid to cultural agencies' often precarious conditions of existence. Our study has shown that, irrespective of contemporary political change, Scottish creative economy policy has remained highly dependent on UK initiatives and ideas. Moreover, the cross-border transfer of people and practices has also been important in establishing commonalities of approach. These, however, should not obscure the continuing importance, specificity and impact of place for the functioning of cultural business support, and not least the role of the local funding regime in shaping and reshaping its periodically changing mission.

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