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Firing up craft capital: the renaissance of craft and craft policy in the United Kingdom

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Crafts have recently been experiencing a renaissance. This revitalization sees craft increasingly recognised as a growing industrial sector with benefits linked to educational, cultural and economic development policy agendas. This paper engages with policy debates around the place of craft in the United Kingdom from 2010. Drawing on craft sector perspectives and UK government policy initiatives it situates the disciplines and practices of craft within their institutional support networks, organizational contexts and draws attention to the role of individuals in driving agendas. The paper focuses on the national facing crafts development organizations, the UK Crafts Council and the UK Heritage Crafts Association, alongside recent policy discussion emerging from the UK Department for Business, Innovation and Skills. Recognizing that the legacies of past practice often inform contemporary agendas, the paper explores how the advocacy of craft in the recent past has shaped the place and positioning of craft in contemporary UK politics.

Keywords: craft; creative industries; skill; policy; United Kingdom

Introduction

In recent years craft and craft practices have apparently experienced a renaissance within the UK public imagination, government policies and in the value placed on craft in the creative sphere. The emerging discourse of craft appears increasingly distanced from the twentieth century associations of an outmoded form of manufacturing, a lesser cousin to fine/contemporary art, or as a sequestered domestic leisure activity. Indeed, Howard Ritassi's proposal, more than a decade ago, that 'the role and identity of craft in modern and postmodern society are probably the most important issues facing the field [crafts] today' (Risatti 1998, p. 34) certainly bears witness to the contemporary discussions around the importance of craft in society. As craft regains its position with professional and amateur makers exploring new modes of production and consumption and the fusion of digital and handmade technologies (cf. Jakob 2013, Luckman 2015), the practices of craft are increasingly associated with progressive agendas of emancipation, individualization, environmental sustainability and locally rooted ethical production and consumption (cf. Levine and Heimerl 2008). This revitalization has seen craft re-emerging in the UK

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as a valued industry with associated cultural, educational and economic development policy agendas. Within this paper, we identify and analyse the emergence of UK policies from 2010 that highlighted the role of craft within UK creative industries and skills training policy discourse.

This paper addresses the practices through which this apparent revival in craft policy has emerged, paying attention to the individuals, organisations and networks that have shaped recent debates around the place of craft in UK creative industries policy and associated economic development agendas. The paper attends to the advocacy work of national facing crafts development organizations, the UK Crafts Council and the UK Heritage Crafts Association (HCA), alongside policy discussion emerging from the UK Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS) and Creative and Cultural Skills (CCSkills). Overall the paper unpicks some of the knotty entanglements of craft and policy that have been pursued in the UK public arena since 2010.

Frayling notes that ‘in the boom times of the early 2000s, the public talk was all of design and the creative industries; now it is as much of craft and productive industry’ (Frayling 2011b, p. 24). In other words, ‘craft labour [...] *appears* to be becoming more, rather than less, significant to creative industries production and policy making’ (Banks 2010, p. 306, italic in original). As Banks pointed out in 2010, UK emerging political agendas were starting to connect to a revival of craft skills noting:

in the UK, recent economic policy focused on the creative industries has shifted toward a skills and employability agenda that recognises the vital nature of nurturing craft and technical skills [...] In keeping with the prevailing skills and innovation agenda then, it is entirely likely that craft labour will come under close scrutiny by government and employers in the forthcoming period, if only to ensure its organisations and practices are tailored to the demands of what is now optimistically termed the ‘creative economy’. (Banks 2010, p. 306)

Moreover, today’s political interest in craft is no longer limited to a creative industries agenda and the ‘demands’ specific to the creative economy. Instead, craft and skill schemes are geared towards broader economic and educational goals. The emerging UK crafts policy direction signals a broader a revival of manufacturing, the development of non-outsourcable, ‘sticky’ (Markusen 1996) jobs; for higher education and skill training reform; for national pride and ‘made in’ product marketing, alongside personal identification and the pride in ones labour during economic austerity. This paper takes Banks’ observations forward and demonstrates the mechanics through which craft skills policy (including attention to apprenticeships and bench training) has materialised since 2010. The paper pays attention to the practices, discussions, advocacy and interventions that has resulted in a deeper policy commitment to a craft skill agenda.

This shift in engagement has gone hand in hand with various redefinitions of what craft means and stands for, that limits as well as broadens, the scope of craft (for example the inclusion of engineering and IT skills). Long marginalised, the diverse roles of craft and skills have recently re-entered creative industries, social wellbeing, education, and economic development agendas. This has not solely resulted from within creative industries development debates (cf. Banks 2010), but primarily from an outside position with the long-term lobbying by crafts development organisations, crafts advocates and practitioners finding a policy audience

within the congested space of the creative economy policy agendas. Emerging policies cement craft not simply as a form of heritage and culture, but particularly as tools for the revitalization of local economies and as training mechanisms that embrace a return to using peoples' hands skills and creativity.

Researching the making of craft policy

The research for this paper stems from a larger project interrogating the contemporary relevance of craft development organizations in the wider development of the UK creative economy through an analysis of policy and practice.¹ Focusing primarily on craft guilds as examples of craft development organisations, the work reviews the activities that such guilds have traditionally organized, recognizing that such are precisely those now being aspired to in support of the 'new' creative economy: networking, apprenticeships, skill training, mentoring, supporting micro-businesses, promoting new markets and fostering innovation. The research employs a mixed methods research methodology to explore the diverse landscape of craft practice and policy, including policy discourse analysis; 42 qualitative interviews with policy makers, craft representing organizations and makers; a survey of maker characteristics, practices and concerns; archival research of the craft organisations in the context of twentieth century craft policy and delivery; participant observation of UK craft sector workshops, conferences; and the events and exhibition activities of two UK geographically based craft guilds: the Devon Guild of Craftsmen and the Gloucestershire Guild of Craftsmen. The interviews and archival research provide evidence that throughout their history, craft and craft organizations have – in various forms – consistently been bound up with national economic development policies (Thomas *et al.* 2013). In this context it is not surprising that the most recent articulation of craft therefore, reconnects craft to the national political agendas of economic development and skill training. Yet, while a relationship between craft and economic development policy is not new, there is an observable shift in the engagement of policy makers with craft, from attracting and protecting craft production and skills, to an active involvement in the structural setup of the craft sector, via, for instance, new training and apprenticeship models.

This paper draws on a series of interviews that sought opinion from key expert personnel within the sector identified from a desk based review of the craft policy, alongside participant observation of the sector. Discourse analysis of interviews, field notes and policy documents highlighted the importance of these specific personnel, their relationships within organisations and wider networks, and the cut and thrust of organisational politics as they advocated for their sector. The findings resonated with Jones (2007) argument for an analysis of the 'peopled state' in which the role of individuals, their disposition and social relations with others are taken seriously (see also Harvey *et al.* 2012). The mixed methodology of observation, interviews and policy analysis on which this paper is based has revealed the contested development of craft policy from 2010 to 2014. This paper therefore illuminates the *practice* of policy: the importance of the personal investment of advocates and government personnel; the role of organisations and their response to changes in political opportunity; the working through of competing interests of crafts sector advocates; the importance of an 'open ear' at government level, and the rapid change that can occur within a sector when opportunities emerge and people are in place to take advantage of them. The paper introduces a number of key

organisations and individuals to remind us that behind changes in policy are sets of social relationships that shape policy and have on-going material effects.

UK craft in ‘the moment’: organisational responses to advocacy

According to Greenhalgh (1997) there are many partially-formed definitions of craft whereby the word means whatever is convenient for the moment. Such definitional boundaries often have ramifications as a normative understanding of craft becomes entrenched over time and directly impacts the way in which policy audiences engage with a sector of the creative economy. For instance, the tensions associated with such disciplinary mappings are visible in the ways in which the UK Crafts Council has been shaped over time to support specific elements of the sector, drawing boundaries around its core interests, excluding allied, but less central constituents. As Harrod (1999, pp. 409, 412–414) identifies, the resulting boundaries around the UK Crafts Council’s remit of support has led to long standing, and heated debates, around their role, remit and authority to speak for craft’ per se. The research outlined in this paper sought to understand the contemporary articulation of how the discourse of ‘craft’ was being pursued and the outcomes of this in policy terms and the role of dominant actors who are shaping the policy landscape that craft is configured within.

Founded in 1971, the UK Crafts Council is the national organization set up under Royal Charter to ‘advance and encourage the creation of works of fine craftsmanship and to foster, promote and increase the interest of the public in the work of craftspeople and in the accessibility of those works to the public’ (Crafts Council 2005). Defined by its Royal Charter, the UK Crafts Council’s remit, and therefore the words ‘fine craftsmanship’, have come to hold a particular value: that of the designer maker, where the nexus between the craftsperson as an artist and designer whose manual dexterity and artistic skill defines the quality of their work matters (for further discussion on the politics of such definitions see Greenhalgh 2003). However, over time, the Crafts Council’s definition of ‘fine craftsmanship’ has shifted to respond to the creative industries remit of the day. For instance, in their 2009 publication of the ‘Craft Blueprint’, the Crafts Council, in collaboration with CCSkills, sees the craft sector as comprised by individuals and businesses operating within eleven craft disciplines: ceramics, glass, graphic crafts, heritage and traditional crafts, iron and stone, jewellery and silversmithing, musical instrument making, taxidermy, textiles and leather, toys and automata, wood (Creative & Cultural Skills & Crafts Council 2009, p. 14). More recent reports by the Crafts Council, public speeches as well as within our personal interviews point towards a shift in focus towards ‘cutting-edge contemporary craft’ that has a broader contribution to make in market terms. Here, the maker’s knowledge of materials and skills and their transformation towards conceptual work, product innovation, materials innovation and systems innovation particularly for biotechnology, manufacturing, engineering, material science and digital and communication technology are at the centre of the recent rhetoric. As the executive director of the Crafts Council notes, redefining craft around innovation is driven by an agenda of making craft relevant to the contemporary economy and politics:

you focus and support the cutting edge because that’s what then drives the rest of the sector because it feeds it and keeps the sector renewing and evolving. I think also for

us we felt very strongly that we all know about some of the perceptions of what craft is, and therefore, to present a different, a more challenging view of what that might be [...] that's absolutely what we should be doing, sitting at the very front end of that, trying to pave the way and show what the possibilities are and how makers are using that stuff and developing because if you can do that, then you're driving the sector forward and you're sustaining it and making it relevant to now, as opposed to where some people's perceptions were, which was it was back there rather than up at the front here. (personal interview, 24 Apr 2012)

Within this discussion UK Crafts Council repeatedly pointed out the need to 'position' craft within a 'broader context' that gives it 'weight' and 'profile' and to focus on 'growth manufacturing'. When asked to reflect on why these ideas have formed the basis of their strategy, the Crafts Council's response was tied to economic development agendas: 'we picked up on those messages because they came through policy' (ibid.). The strategic objective to reposition the Crafts Council to strategically engage with the new UK creative industries policy audiences was taken with the change in personnel at the Crafts Council in 2006. The development of the research division of the Crafts Council, included the strategic commissioning of reports and briefings to build an evidence base that would be recognised within the creative industries agenda. The effects of this evidence base acted as further method to define the remit of the UK Crafts Council and the limits of its sphere of activity. The work of this boundary acted pragmatically to ensure the limited financial resources of the organisation were directed in a strategic manner. For those outside the direct interests of the UK Crafts Council, receiving no direct support for advocacy, this boundary acted as a cause of frustration, and energised a call to arms.

For those craft practitioners whose work may have the hallmarks of fine craftsmanship but sits outside the Crafts Council vision of design- and innovation-led contemporary craft, it is perhaps inevitable that issues around exclusion arise. Harrod's identification of the exclusions felt by some crafts practitioners and groups in previous decades (1999, p. 413) were also part of the landscape of craft discourse during the period of the research undertaken. For the crafts community that works with heritage and traditional craft practices, there was a sense of being outside the Crafts Council's remit. Although the Crafts Council Royal Warrant determines the Crafts Council's agenda, the emergence of a new craft based organization to advocate for heritage and traditional crafts is revealing of the energy that craft practitioners and advocates will expend in defending their interest group.

The Heritage Crafts Association (HCA) was established in 2009 to 'to support and promote heritage crafts as a fundamental part of our living heritage' (The Heritage Crafts Association 2012). Thinking back to the early development of the HCA, the vice-chair reported the response to the reception of traditional and heritage crafts within the broader craft sector had been a motivating force. According to its vice chair, the conceptualization of craft represented in the early draft of the CCSkills document 'Craft Blueprint', (2009) appeared to polarize the crafts sector 'very much into heritage and contemporary, cutting edge' with 'design led craft' dominating the early discussion (personal interview, 16 May 2012). Although as the Craft Blueprint discussions developed their concerns around represented were alleviated, the future founders of the HCA felt that the Crafts Council's focus on innovative aesthetic disregarded heritage craft skills, which had a direct impact on the support the sector could activate. Thus, when those with a heritage crafts interest 'went to a whole range of people and at every stage the door was shut,

they just weren't interested in heritage craft', the future founders of the HCA come to the conclusion that 'at some point we're going to have to put our money where our mouth is and if there isn't anywhere that will take on heritage craft I think we're going to have to do something ourselves' (ibid.). Since then, HCA has established itself as 'the advocacy body for traditional heritage crafts' (The Heritage Crafts Association 2012) and has worked hard to forge close ties with government, particularly the UK Department for Business, Innovation and Skills as well as well as securing the Prince of Wales as its President.

The organizational separation between what counts as 'contemporary' and 'innovative' and 'traditional' and 'heritage' craft points to the contested politics that have often been associated with definitional, disciplinary conventions of what craft means at the moment. As the UK Crafts Council and the HCA aim to strengthen their political influence, the contemporary discourse of craft emerges, establishing new normative understandings of craft; new relations between craft practices and policy and new relationships of power, which define and set future political agendas. 'Craft' is made in the moment of the exchanges and interactions of these advocates, and the embrace of highly skilled 'making' enables both organizations to enter the debates around skill training within UK economic and higher education development policy.

As advocates for the craft sector, both organisations offer a progressive vision of a multifaceted and dynamic sector, that moves beyond the narrowly defined body of craft definitions stemming from art and design history (e.g. Dormer 1997, Greenhalgh 2003, Buszek 2011). Both organisations aimed to extend what craft means through their strategic incorporation of interests that speak the language of the policy world, and progress the interest of their stakeholders: 'skills', 'apprenticeships', and 'innovation' were of the moment as agenda setting themes. To them, crafts were not at a crossroad due to the need to reposition themselves within the art world, but within the overall UK economic development policies whose agendas have opened up opportunities for engagement.

Since the introduction of New Labour Creative Industries policies from 1997 craft has been included as one of the 13 creative industries defined by the UK Department of Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS). This designation enabled both the Crafts Council and HCA to enter the policy arena. It is notable however, that while craft has routinely engaged over many decades with economic development, cultural and more recently creative industries and education policy, there is very limited academic discussions that locate crafts within the creative industries, creative industries policies and creative economies frameworks (Bailey 1996 and Banks 2010 being few exceptions). Yet, positioning and analysing craft with regard to the rebranding schemes from 'cultural industries' to 'creative industries' and how 'creative industries' and the 'creative economy' policies move away from cultural towards innovation, social and economic development agendas (cf. O'Connor 2009) provides a reference point from which to understand the contemporary discourse of craft. Craft also offers a lens through which to explore the negotiated nature of the creative industries policy.

The UK craft zeitgeist

The terminological shift from 'cultural industries' to 'creative industries' to 'creative economy' went hand in hand with a UK government strategy that decoupled

the mobilization of creativity from the 13 sub-sectors initially designated as creative industries to encompass economy and society more generally. Oakley shows that the language of ‘cultural industries’ has ‘all but disappeared’ and has been displaced with the concept of a ‘creative economy’ in which ‘the cultural sectors themselves were no longer the sole focus, but their links to other businesses’ (Oakley 2012, p. 23). Garnham (2005) argues that this shift needs to be understood in the context of information society policy. UK creative industries policies draw their ‘political and ideological power from the prestige and economic importance attached to concepts of innovation, information, information workers and the impact of information and communication technologies [...] this sustains the unjustified claim of the cultural sector as a key economic growth sector within the global economy’ (Garnham 2005, p. 15).

While much of this debate centres on the role and impact of the creative industries on the new, digital and service based economy – indeed, the term ‘creative’ was chosen to include the computer software sector and thus boost the size and growth of the creative industries sector (cf. Garnham 2005) – recent craft related politics have been driven by an interest to foster trade and manufacturing. Spurred by the global financial crisis supporting skills development as a pre-requisite for trade and manufacturing growth has re-emerged as a key political theme. As the information economy globalizes and information sector jobs are outsourced, manual labour provides a ‘stickiness’ (Markusen 1996) in a footloose global production system. Crafts theorists have observed that craft has tendencies to re-enter the political debate at times of economic insecurity. Frayling (2011a) notes the link between craft revival and financial recession. Greenhalgh points to a reactive tendency where,

‘whenever the industrial society appears to tip into an especially consumerist phase, real or imagined, and particularly when respected thinkers identify the age as decadent and greedy, craft and design are wont to reveal themselves as the forces of anti-Mammon’ (Greenhalgh 2003, p. 9).

The more technology, mass-production and mass-consumption takes people away from tangible experiences, the more craft and crafts communities are galvanized due to their physical and psychological comforts. The craft’s ethos lies in its ‘long history of resistance to both the industrial revolution and the general tendency of technology and capitalism to replace the more genuine and authentic forms of human production, namely, the things made by hand’ (Stevens 2011, p. 53).

This combination of economy and experience is taken up by Crawford when he argues that ‘while manufacturing jobs have certainly left our shores to a disturbing degree, the manual trades have not’ and stresses the significance of manual labour as ‘meaningful work’ and ‘self-reliance’ over job creation (Crawford 2009, p. 3). Similarly, Sennett (2008) vows for the value of skilled manual labour and the connection between ‘head and hand’. Both authors see in craftsmanship ‘the desire to do something well, for its own sake’ and ‘the desire to do a job well for its own sake’ and have taken this discussion of craft, previously the perview of craft, art and design theoreticians, to an interdisciplinary audience (Sennett 2008, p. 9, Crawford 2009, p. 14). The crafts community, craft representing organizations and policy makers have heavily embraced Sennett’s and Crawford’s scholarship. Their theses especially strike a cord with policy makers wanting to revive workbench based apprenticeship schemes (cf. Hayes 2010).

Hence, while the economic impact of craft and craftsmanship are certainly central in these debates, the discussion is also fuelled by ideological questions around the general value and meaning of work. As Crawford notes, ‘the question of what a good job looks like – of what sort of work is both secure and worthy of being honoured – is more open now than it has been for a long time’ (Crawford 2009, p. 9). The resurgence in the political interest in craft and crafting is furthered by the political powers of conservative governments and a retraction towards national and historical identities amidst global capitalism. Thus, the 2010 resurgence of craft policy emerged from the context of a struggling economy and shift in the UK government from Labour Party to a Conservative-Liberal Democrat Party coalition leadership. While previous creative industries policies argued for the transformative and liberating force of creativity (cf. O’Connor 2015), the discourse of craft policy has also emphasised tradition and dignity of labour. However, there are also particularities, including strong differences, amongst the UK craft representing organizations and craft interested government bodies that opened up additional opportunities for an enhanced craft policy agenda.

Under the direction of its most recent Executive Director, Rosy Greenlees, the UK Crafts Council has been actively advocating for craft through a series of evidence based research reports, briefings and policy briefs that are used starting points to engage into dialogs with policy makers. Working with policy advisors, the organization refined its messages in such a way that they speak directly to contemporary policy concerns. According to the Crafts Council, ‘there’s no point in going to government unless you’ve got something to say to them, very specific’ (personal interview, 24 April 2012) pertaining to direct issues of legislation. Having spent a number of years amassing the evidence base and defining its message, the change in Government in 2010 presented a window of opportunity for the Crafts Council to pass on their messages and connect with policymakers:

We had a bit of luck in as much as our messages becoming very clear pretty much coincided with the change of government and the reason that that was lucky was because actually suddenly, everybody was back at square one in all honesty and it suddenly didn’t matter that we hadn’t been cultivating people relentlessly for the last 10 years because all those people had now gone and it was a completely new set of people to play with and that was that. (personal interview, 24 April 2012)

Secondly, the appointment of John Hayes as UK Minister of State for Further Education, Skills and Lifelong Learning (2010–2012) as one of the eight ministers within the UK Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS) and the Department for Education, introduced a personal agenda to crafts policy reflecting his own individual investment and passion for the crafts sector. Under his supervision BIS introduced a five-point plan to revitalize craft as an economic sector (see below) while also engaging and shaping the discourse around craft and hand skills.

As the executive director of the Crafts Council reflected in *Crafts Magazine*, such political interest marked a new engagement between politics and craft: ‘In many ways this is remarkable. After all, how often is it that a senior government minister talks cogently about craft? It also marks a huge shift in government priorities’ (Greenlees 2011, p. 85). But she also revealed the contested discourse at the heart of the debate observing:

Interestingly, Hayes's sentiments sat more comfortably at the HCA than at our own gathering. This was, it seems to me, because, broad as it is, the minister's understanding of craft is also paradoxically narrow. So that by his definition 'craft' apparently includes a panoply of manual skills many will not recognize as craft. He is also wedded to a romantic notion of beauty that has not yet made its peace with the Industrial Revolution or the emergence of modernism, never mind the rise of the service economy. (personal interview, 24 April 2012)

For the Crafts Council, Hayes vision suggested a potential narrowing of the debate, excluding the innovative contemporary craft and design that the Crafts Council has done so much to support over the last decades. Greenlees rightly identified that the return to skills and the value of heritage has provided the opportunity for the then newly founded Heritage Crafts Association (HCA) to open the door to government and capitalize on an ideological connection. However, just like the Crafts Council, HCA's efforts were also influenced by the notion to 'seize the moment' (Foster 2012). As the HCA official explained of their interaction with the Minister:

My view was you've got a government minister that knows how to spell craft, wow. He's interested in it, fantastic. Let's exploit it. Let's support him. Let's do everything we possibly can to say, 'Make the most of this moment.' ... [A]t least he's willing to commit £90,000 on a mapping project and however much it is they're having to spend on the Craft Skills Awards. Go for it, it's not going to happen again. (personal interview, 16 May 2012)

On many levels, the views of the HCA and the Crafts Council were aligned: a pragmatic use of an agenda, despite some aesthetic reservations around the Minister's conceptualization of what counts as craft. O'Connor notes that such a 'complex mixture of scepticism and pragmatism' (O'Connor 2015, p. 8) is not unique to crafts but can be found throughout the debates on creative industries agendas. Moreover, like the Crafts Council, the establishment and activities of the HCA had a lineage, which can be traced through the development of crafts policy over the last decade. All of its founding members have long been involved in crafts policy and served on the boards and committees of discipline specific organisation and have served on committees of CCSkills and participated in the design of the 'Crafts Blueprint'. However, despite such engagement, the craft practitioners who founded the HCA and embrace heritage and traditional skills had felt excluded from policy and funding opportunities owing to the priority given to design-led, 'cutting-edge' craft within the existing funding regimes. Therefore, the change in national government and subsequent appointment of John Hayes, opened up a window of opportunity for the HCA to be included in, and shape crafts policy debates like heritage skills training, business support, and research that would accurately understand the dimensions of the sector.

Reviewing the impact that the change in national government has made for craft advocacy in political circles suggests that craft had needed a reconfiguration of the political agenda to be heard. Through the period spanning the late 1990's and first decade of the twenty-first century, craft, whether contemporary or heritage, appears to have been marginalised amidst the 'Cool Britannia' hype associated with film, fashion, music & new media and the rebranding of creative industries. The political emphasis was focused on the potential of growth within the new media and computer software industries as economic 'engines' of the twenty-first century (cf. Garnham 2005). Instead, the political interest in craft arises at a time of economic

stagnation and instability. Recent evidence finds that the contemporary craft sector is worth £3.4 billion to the UK economy (Crafts Council 2014) and the heritage craft sector contributes £4.4 billion to England's economy (Creative & Cultural Skills 2012) with further opportunities to expand the export market for both.

Therefore, the shifting UK craft policy zeitgeist represented a seizing of the political opportunity opened up by the electoral change and by a set of advocates across varied craft disciplines who were experienced, well networked and were able to draw on an evidence base to make the connection between craft and the UK innovation and economic growth agenda. According to one of CCSkills CEOs this shift in contemporary craft policy was driven by a convergence of interests:

... it was down to his [Hayes'] personal interest [...] the work [by CCSkills] had been done [and] could be put into his hands very easily [...] we've done the work with the sector to think through what the needs are and what the solutions might be to those needs ... The change in politics means that there's a minister that's interested, and suddenly you've got an agenda that's driving things forward [...] I would say absolutely, that the sort of increase in interest from the skills minister has obviously enabled us, and certainly in some instances funded us, to deliver the [Craft] Blueprint more quickly. (personal interview, 14 Sept 2012)

Within the discourse of craft emerging in the public sphere there are undoubtedly tensions between the prioritization of different crafts disciplines, approaches and audiences. Organisations such as the Crafts Council and Heritage Crafts Association are responding to the newfound enthusiasm within BIS, and using their knowledge, networks, financial resources and research base to leverage advantage for their stakeholders. Both the HCA and the Crafts Council wish to foreground skilled craft practices and the work of their constituencies with the identified needs of the sector. To achieve this, both organizations engage with the ideological discourses of economic and educational values alongside individual and national identity that are being promoted by BIS.

Policy in the making

During his appointment as Minister of State for Further Education, Skills and Lifelong Learning,² John Hayes made numerous public speeches that draw attention to craft. Citing Crawford's (2009) ideas on the value of manual work, these speeches have, in various ways, called for a rejuvenation of the 'dignity' of labour and practical skills. At a time when public debates in the UK were concerned with questions of political and educational elitism, Hayes' pushed for an admiration of manual skills meets conservative agendas with statements like: 'The village blacksmith did not develop arms like iron bands by reading about how hard it is to swing a hammer' (Hayes 2010). Speaking at the UK Royal Society of Arts about the value of crafts and skills, the Minister ended his speech with the words: 'Craft to feed the common good. Skills to serve the national interest. Ours will be – must be – the age of the craftsman' (Hayes 2010).

The craft and skills that Hayes referred to are not limited to the making of furniture, pottery or textiles but also include growth sectors like advanced engineering, IT and financial services. As a BIS official explained:

it's a very broadly based concept of craft. The Minister would clearly see a small IT company, a small computer gaming company as a craft organization. In an economic sense they own the design, the construction and the distribution of their product, they have that personal ownership, they're not part of a bigger distribution or assembling system, so there's a sort of economic descriptor as well. (personal interview, 3 May 2012)

On the other hand, in his speech announcing the Prince's Foundation Apprenticeship Awards, Hayes proclaimed,

'I thank God that even in the twenty-first century, British culture is about more than computer-games. Now, the UK's craft sector is among the richest and most diverse of our creative and cultural industries, comprising a real diversity of practice and consistently demonstrating the real excellence that we have come to expect' (Hayes 2012).

This statement shows the shifting understanding about the practices and definitions that are being enrolled through the term 'craft' at Ministry level – some speeches refer to Sennett's (2008) thesis, others to the Arts and Crafts Movement tradition.

According to an official in Hayes' administration, there were five different sets of craft policy in the implementation and development phase. BIS's first action was to commission a traditional and heritage craft sector-mapping document published by CCSkills in 2012 (Creative & Cultural Skills 2012). As the BIS official explained, 'for contemporary crafts, the Crafts Council have a legal mandate to do this [...] but it did leave a large gap in our knowledge around traditional hand crafts' (personal interview, 3 May 2012) echoing HCA's concerns.

Secondly, BIS asked CCSkills to extend its training program and develop a new set of Apprenticeship standards for the crafts sector enabling apprentices to choose to specialize in a specific craft discipline while also learning generic skills. According to one of its joint CEOs, CCSkills was well placed to undertake this work, understanding

how the education and skills system works and I think that sort of emphasis on a vocational craft, in the broadest sense, is very interesting in our current economic times [...] We're living in times when it is very expensive to go to university and it's very expensive for the government to put people through university and they're trying to shift that at the moment, the introduction of tuition fees and so on is important. And how the UK views its vocational skills system I think is important as well in this mix, in terms of how craft is viewed because I think that's where John Hayes is coming from, in terms of you've got to have a proportion of the population who can make and do, not just those who can think. (personal interview, 14 Sept 2012)

At the time of writing the new 'Trailblazer apprenticeship standards for a Craftsperson' had been developed by employers within the craft sector and were awaiting formal approval.³

Thirdly, the minister introduced a new set of national Craft Skills Awards that, unlike Crafts Council and HCA awards that are focused on craft practice, will reward individuals and groups for 'excellence in teaching, maintaining and developing the craft skills of the craftsperson as well as those of others' (Creative & Cultural Skills 2013). This decision is explained by pointing to BIS's task of fostering Further Education and skills. Fourthly, BIS's £210 million per year budget of Community Learning that supports non-accredited learning that is, personal and community development learning, family literacy, language and numeracy, and

neighbourhood learning in deprived communities, will be accessible to craft practitioners aiming to teach community workshops.

Finally, for John Hayes, ‘as a legacy from this project, the biggest one is to enable the craft sector to have a strategic dialogue with government’ (personal interview BIS official, 3 May 2012). The minister’s proposal was to support the development of guilds – referred to in policy related documents as ‘twenty-first century guilds’ (Hayes 2010) – that would speak for the wider craft community and include other guilds like the Merchant Company of Goldsmith’s as well as the ICT sector. According to BIS, such an organization would not only provide better government access due to its sheer size but should also be designed in such a way that it could bid for government funds. And, as the official in Hayes’ administration explained, establishing an overarching organization is also a practical matter for the government as it tries to streamline its conversations with crafts representing organizations:

The craft economy is probably worth the best part of £3bn a year to the UK economy. It’s not small fish and yet they don’t have a strategic dialogue with an incoming minister in the way that other sectors would. So from a personal perspective, trying to bottom out and develop this five point plan and talk to the sector is incredibly time consuming because you’re not having a strategic dialogue with a body. You’re talking with, I think I had correspondence from four separate potters groups last week. (personal interview, 3 May 2012)

This comments points to the problem for the sector that does not have an overarching umbrella body that has a remit to support the entire sector to government. Moreover, the government’s plan also incorporates thinking beyond the next election.

Representation is I think the biggest issue going forward because if there is a reshuffle or when there’s a general election, which is an inevitability, who would seek with ‘what minister a strategic dialogue on behalf of the sector? That is a real challenge for the sector and it’s somebody who can speak for heritage craft and I think contemporary craft as well and you know, join it up because actually if you speak to the Crafts Council, many of the problems their members and interests have, are identical to those institutional crafts and if you actually add the two constituencies together, you have a huge economic value to UK PLC and a huge audience for whom you’re speaking’. (personal interview, 3 May 2012)

Indeed, the UK government reshuffle in September 2012 appointed John Hayes to the Department of Energy and Climate Change and the sector experienced the impact of a change of personnel as of Matthew Hancock was appointed Minister of State for Further Education, Skills and Lifelong Learning. The uncertainty of the impact on policy direction with the change in Minister was clear in interview with one of the joint CCSkills CEOs:

given what we know about him [Hancock], he’s very much an economist and very much in line with Treasury view, my guess is that he will be seeking to get the most out of the skills system, the most economic return for the Treasury and therefore won’t have the same, much more colourful and textured approach to it all that John Hayes had, I think he’ll be much more looking to the skills system for some sort of return to the economy and I think that’s fair enough on some level, in these times, but I think John Hayes is definitely a loss to the sector in terms of being a real champion and just being personally so interested and such a keen advocate. (personal interview, 14 Sept 2012)

The Crafts Council and HCA have, individually, acknowledged that their main concern – promoting craft – is essentially the same although their focus differs. Both have been concerned about past sentiments, with the HCA's efforts in particular rooted in its experience of being ignored and by-passed in previous discussions. The Crafts Council fears a return to mere skills and reversal of its fight for a design-led strategy. According to the executive director of the Crafts Council, 'what we don't want is a pendulum-swing back to craft as solely about practical skill and technique' (Greenlees 2011, p. 85). The negotiation of the HCA remit and Crafts Council's preferred presentation of craft was made visible within editorials and commentaries in the Crafts Council's publication 'Crafts'. In the meantime, the HCA leveraging the vigour and enthusiasm of volunteer labour of their committee, raised income, grants, put of events, utilised social media, gathered members, and cemented their new organisation. They worked to open doors in government and understood the political system, and value of high profile markers of distinction such as crafts practitioners being nominated and receiving awards within the UK Honours system. All these activities designed to raise the profile and maintain future sustainability of Heritage Craft. The activities of the organisations indicate that the crafts sector has actors who are able to demonstrate political acumen, strategic development, leverage financial resources, successfully achieve makers of distinction and provide material benefits to the broader sector. What remains to be seen, is how the crafts advocacy sector as a whole will come together to maximise political representation and cement the breadth of crafts sector within government policy.

Conclusions: firing up craft capital?

In 2012 Joanna Foster, chair of the board of trustees of the UK Crafts Council argued that the craft community needed to 'seize the moment of craft riding high' (Foster 2012). This paper has charted the ways in which participants within the sector negotiated the politics and practice of policy-making to 'make the case for craft' (Foster 2012) in the contemporary creative economy. Similar to the Crafts Council's own 'Firing Up' programme that fosters craft (ceramics) education not only to train future makers but also future generations of craft consumers, crafts more generally have re-entered mainstream education and economic policy debates, bringing forward a public discussion of the place of craft in society, and enhancing the representation of those who are advocating for the sector. Indeed, in the 2014 Create UK Creative Industries Strategy document for 2020, craft is identified as 'a core component of the UK's thriving creative industries' (Create UK, 2014, p. 8). However, unlike previous creative industries policies within the UK that were channelled through the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS), the centre of the policy delivery has been at the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS). With a focus on the value of craft to the UK economy, the economic debates are central to the agenda being put forward. The advocacy organizations that have been described in this paper have been complicit in the development of an economic discourse associated with craft. Time and again, both the Crafts Council and the HCA underline the economic importance of the craft sector to give their causes relevance and to make their voices heard. This was a politically pragmatic response given the open door that the Ministerial support of John Hayes offered to the sector.

Banks and O'Connor (2009), Garnham (2005) and many others have analysed the UK policy shift from providing support for the “traditional” high arts’ centred on cultural values towards ‘creatively new’ and ‘cool’ activities with prime economic value. Such authors point to the DCMS as a driving force of such a transformation, also signalling a shift from marginality towards the ‘serious concern with the central business of economic policy’ (Garnham 2005, p. 27) or, as Garnham writes, from ‘circuses to bread’ (Garnham 2005, p. 27). Yet, the DCMS was largely absent within the 2010–2012 crafts policy debates. The HCA found their audience with UK Department for Business, Innovation and Skills not with DCMS during this period which moved crafts even further into the remit of economic value and growth. This development corresponds to O’Connor’s findings that the political appeal of the creative industries agenda is ‘as a driver of economic growth and that it was economic agencies which must be charged with its pursuit’ (O’Connor 2015, p. 8). Overall, BIS’s purpose is ‘making a difference by supporting sustained growth and higher skills across the economy. BIS: working together for growth’ (Department for Business Innovation and Skills 2012). Its website explains: ‘growth is the Government’s top priority and every part of Government is focused on it. But we need to grow differently’ (Department for Business Innovation and Skills 2012). In the time of the research we saw the launch of the national Craft Skills Awards and establishment of The Craft Industries Board (2013), and existing programs like Community Learning were opened to the crafts community. A key development for the craft sector was the Richard Review of Apprenticeships (Richard 2012) and subsequent launch of the Trailblazer apprenticeship programme (Department for Business Innovation and Skills 2014) which aims to deliver bench based training, notoriously expensive for sole practitioners and micro-enterprises, to the crafts sector. The alliance of craft within the BIS agenda of training and skills and the difficulties of valuing the sector may have contributed to the rational for the 2013 policy revision of the craft as a creative industry. DCMS certainly opened the debate around the rightful place of craft within the creative industries in April 2013 with their consultation exercise which indicated that craft would be declassified as a ‘creative industry’ (DCMS 2013a). After fierce advocacy to clarify their position regarding the crafts sector, DCMS backtracked and opened a review to improve the way in which the craft sector was recorded (cf. Bennett 2013; DCMS 2013b). The reporting of the economic value of the craft sector as a result of this exercise in January 2014 was much heralded by crafts advocacy organisations as the broader value of the sector became more visible. While overall arts and cultural public funding was heavily reduced in the 2010 UK Public Spending Review, the UK Crafts Council survived major cuts, and continued to receive the requested funding from the Arts Council as a National Portfolio Organisation in 2014.

According to BIS, its interest in crafts was determined by the work of John Hayes forging a new relationship between the UK government and the crafts community and the crafts sector taking advantage of the mobilising impact of ‘seeing a minister stand up in public and say something which resonated for them as a community’ (personal interview BIS official, 3 May 2012). Hayes public speeches and behind the scenes meetings chimed with a sector eager to make the most of the moment, and connected with Hayes personal understanding of benefits of craft: ‘acquiring skills make our lives, not necessarily wealthier, but definitely fuller. It raises our self-esteem and often also the esteem in which others hold us’ (Hayes 2010). More broadly the insecurities of the global financial crisis paired with a UK

Conservative-led government, fuelled ideologies of the ‘good old times’ and ‘made in Britain’ manufacturing that elevate tradition, crafts and local manual skills. Conversations which in 2010 appeared to be more based on a sentiment of promoting idealistic notions of manual labour and skills, have slowly being realised through actual policy programs that have the potential to make a tangible different through supporting bench based training.

A challenge for the crafts sector remains in maintaining the diverse opportunities for practitioners who are working at very different scales, speeds and with different aims and ambition. As the creative industries are seeking to understand the diversity of craft, so the need to value of the multiplicity of craft skills within different elements of the creative industries is also coming to the fore. It remains to be seen if the revival of craft within the recent UK creative industries agenda has the danger of being not so much a ‘firing up’ of crafts and craft capital but rather hot air and a repetitive yet new version of ‘feel-good’ (cf. Peck 2007) policy which will not deliver tangible benefits across the crafts sector.

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Supplemental data

The underlying research materials for this article can be accessed through Dr Nicola Thomas, University of Exeter.

Notes

1. ‘Situating Craft Guilds in the Creative Economy: Histories, Politics and Practices’ was funded by the UK Arts and Humanities Research Council grant number AH/I001778/1
2. John Hayes was appointed Minister of State for Further Education, Skills and Lifelong Learning in 2010 and served at the Department for Business Innovation and Skills until September 2012 when he was moved to the Department of Energy and Climate Change. All empirical material presented in this paper regarding BIS stems from this period.

3. For details of the UK Trailblazer Apprenticeship standards for a Craftsperson see <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/apprenticeship-standard-craftsperson> [Accessed 24/05/2015].

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