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The uncertain journey

By Michael Keane

*Michael Keane is a Principal Research Fellow at the Australian Research Council Centre of Excellence for Creative Industries and Innovation (CCI) at Queensland University of Technology, Brisbane. Michael is author of several books including *Created in China: the Great New Leap Forward* (Routledge 2007). His research interests include innovation policy and creative clusters in China; audio-visual media in China, South Korea, and Taiwan; and television formats in Asia. He has worked at QUT since the establishment of the Creative Industries Faculty.*

In different ways many of the essays in this publication reflect the view that both the Creative Industries Precinct and the Kelvin Grove Urban Village are environments responsive to both *inside and outside*—to the people who work here and who have businesses here, and to those who live here. In adaptive environments people need to have a greater capacity to handle complexity, and this entails embracing uncertainty rather than retreating into the familiarity of repetitive activities and routines.

Soon after graduating with my Ph.D. in 1999, I was fortunate to be awarded a research fellowship at the new research centre (then called the Creative Industries Research and Applications Centre). Over the past decade I have been in the position of participant-observer of the many changes that have occurred. I have also presented the story of ‘The Queensland Model’ many times in China since then and have tried to articulate how this place is different from the hundreds of emerging creative clusters in East Asia. With so much interest in China in the notion of creative clustering, I am often prevailed upon to reveal the ‘secret ingredients’ that make this development successful.

I usually reply by saying that success is relative, and that it is still too early to know what success really entails. I also explain that ‘The Queensland Model’ is not a typical cluster, although it does have ‘cluster effects’ such as knowledge spillovers and co-location benefits. In order to explain this, I will make some general comments about knowledge and innovation.

I will then distil some of the key insights that have emerged while compiling this collection of papers.

Mixing the ideas

According to a leading European sociologist of innovation, Helga Nowotny, in these times of rapid and frequent change people are empowered to build economic and cultural niches, and to become the entrepreneurs of their own occupational biographies.¹ Moreover, research tells us that the innovation journey is often uncertain. With the design of technological systems responding to the architecture of computer systems, expectations of change are embedded into systems. Whereas in the past policy makers and corporations favoured hierarchical and centralised control mechanisms that rewarded standardisation, now the trend is towards loosely coupled and heterogeneous systems.

The ‘creative industries’, sometimes referred to generically as ‘the creative economy’ or the ‘experience economy’ has coincided with the desire to provide smarter learning environments together with a greater awareness of educational reform. The creative industries by definition embrace change: think of advertising, design, fashion and the Internet and you see powerful urges to generate new ideas. There is increasing demand for the creative industries to express innovation more successfully, to mix genres creatively, and to re-imagine a future fuelled by the inventive power of networked subcultures.

Creativity is a sought after ingredient in clusters, whether these be technology parks, cultural centres, business districts or educational precincts. In the Creative Industries Precinct and the Kelvin Grove Urban Village there is a mixing of disparate creative ingredients, which emerge from small business entrepreneurship, cutting-edge research and meetings of students, lecturers and industry professionals. This is far from a production line model. Indeed, the scale is small compared with industrial clusters and particularly cultural clusters in China where there might be over a hundred enterprises.

Whether large or small, however, success depends upon the ability to coordinate resources and actions. As several contributors to this publication have noted, in the beginning of the

¹ Helga Nowotny, *Insatiable Curiosity: Innovation in a Fragile Future* (Cambridge: MIT 2008)

Creative Industries Precinct story a vision was sold to the investors and stakeholders, namely the Queensland State Government and the Queensland University of Technology. As the contributions by John Hartley, Stephen Pincus, and the Hornery Institute note, extensive modelling and demographic analysis was conducted. As development proceeded, a process of re-thinking models took place. In my area, which is research, different experiences were evaluated and new personnel were recruited. Resources were exhausted in some projects and in turn new funding came from other sources, including the Australian Research Council and professional consultancies (these are noted in the appendix).

Divergent thinking

However, to see developments simply as trial and error is misleading. People have worked through changes while the physical infrastructure was being constructed. They had to undergo periods of frustration, euphoria and even scepticism as new practices were adopted and old practices discarded. In the innovation literature, continuous adaptation is a characteristic of projects governed by goals and plans. In contrast, projects governed by institutional rules—for instance, the traditional model of managing the educational sector—tend to follow a more conservative and unitary sequence of stages. We have taken the former journey.

The Creative Industries experience at QUT has at times taken multiple paths, which have encouraged divergent thinking, but this has in turn produced uncertainty. In the process there has been constant debate, often intense, about how to define the creative industries, about the development of human capital, about the effectiveness of our public programs, and the demands of commercialisation. In particular, the emphasis on inter-disciplinary collaboration has provided a distinctive set of challenges, which I think we are only part way to resolving despite a strong intent to become a world leading inter-disciplinary model.

While the probability of new insights increases with the permeability of boundaries across diverse sources, harnessing these opportunities requires willingness on the part of participants to listen to other viewpoints and to engage in purposeful dialogue. In any environment you will find people who are disinclined to engage across academic boundaries and who are unwilling to listen. There are large egos involved. The silo effect that is often associated with university faculties, departments and schools has been hard to eradicate even with the new

terminology of ‘disciplines’ and ‘portfolios’. It would be fair to say that while we have constructed a model of interdisciplinarity we are still hamstrung by ‘old university’ legacies.

As one person situated within the business side of the model suggested to me, if the ‘Queensland Model’ was an organisation or a corporation there would be more synergy. As it is, all the components retain autonomy and respond to specific goals and key performance indicators. Indeed, in compiling this publication this became obvious to me. Despite efforts to instil a sense of identification with the bigger picture, we are still a work-in-progress. In an organisation of this size and complexity it is hard for people to see where the connections are being made, especially when they are locked into the realities of workload pressure and competition for resources. Meanwhile, those that have chosen to connect with the networks of interdisciplinary collaboration have reaped rewards.

Creative space, thinking space

The issue of space is central when a large number of aspiring creative people, students and researchers are moved into a relatively small geographical location. The term ‘open plan’ is probably the last thing that senior academics want to hear. It is fair to say that space has been a major issue as demand has increased, particularly from international researchers. The article by Anna Rooke in particular addresses how enterprise development initiatives have creatively accommodated the demands for space.

Optimizing learning effects requires putting people in the best possible space and this has not always been possible. When I commenced working in the new research centre, The Centre of Excellence for Creative Industries and Innovation, I shared an office with a colleague. Similarly, most of our research higher degree students were presented with smart new cubicles to work in, a similar approach to what one might expect in an advertising agency or a newspaper editorial office.

The open plan model was adjusted over time: some of the researchers preferred quiet space. While not reverting to the closed door model typified by the traditional university, there were adjustments to maximize optimal knowledge-sharing; some were moved to the old campus because there simply was not room in the Precinct, although there are plans to overcome this

problem in the next stage of development. This experiment with openness is typical of many of the processes that we have put in place in working collectively and separately.

The pipeline effect

So what is different so far? Many universities are making similar progress in embedding inter-disciplinary processes; some are encountering similar challenges. In many institutions there are examples of intelligent design, cutting-edge spaces that are meant to allow creative juices to flow and to enable human interaction with new technologies.

The Creative Industries Precinct is one of many such global experiments. I believe we are much further down the road than most other educational institutions and are well placed to build on the human capital and infrastructure we have. To understand the real value of the Creative Industries Precinct and the Kelvin Grove Urban Village, we have to take into account their geographical situation in a large Australian city with a provincial ethos. Brisbane does not have the large cultural institutions that we see in Sydney and Melbourne. The creative industry occupations and opportunities in Queensland are therefore smaller in scale and qualitatively different from Sydney and Melbourne. The kinds of research conducted here is consequently more outward looking.

On the other hand, success across the whole model is not so much about scale as quality and local responsiveness. The 'model' allows the development of a pipeline, a virtuous circle rather than a linear input-output model. The researchers provide input and new ideas into teaching curricula; the teaching in turn nurtures human capital, which feeds into small and medium enterprise start-ups. In turn, these start-ups, and the policy makers responsible for the creative industries, need research data and the latest ideas. The loop is completed.

The process operates in a fluid and purposely interactive way. The small businesses located at the Precinct provide a connection for students with the real world. Creative entrepreneurs give lectures and in the process they identify emerging talent. The internship model and the work with local communities discussed by Lubi Thomas is evidence of how far the model has progressed. The role played by QUT Creative Enterprise Australia consolidates the pipeline effect between the university, with its special expertise and resources, and the emerging

creative business environment. The ongoing support for the creative industries from the Queensland State government is also a crucial link in the chain.

Education reform comes from inside the model as well from outside. As the article by Executive Dean Susan Street notes, QUT is changing the way 'creatives' are educated and trained. No student graduating from the Creative Industries Faculty is underprepared for the future. QUT's 'real world' commitment is evident through its attention to industry relevant courses, internships, public programs, community initiatives, and its utilisation of professionals in developing its courseware. It is a broad vision. As Chris Meakin has mentioned, QUT International is committed to making the university a more globally linked environment.

Contributors have all presented ideas that are at the forefront of how the creative industries are being redefined. As Stuart Cunningham has noted The QUT Creative Industries Experience, through its cutting-edge research, is contributing massively to the innovation agenda in Australia and internationally. The chapter by Jeff Jones has picked up on the topic of managing innovative partnerships. Phil Graham has outlined a viable template for interdisciplinary collaboration.

What can others do?

What then are the key lessons that others might learn from the QUT Creative Industries Experience? First, the process of mixing education, training and business is an ongoing challenge. Creative businesses are ultimately concerned about their bottom line; academics about reputations, awards, publications and workloads. Mentors are important to success in such an environment and this mentoring happens across the whole spectrum. Success also depends on leaders who broker communication and knowledge across boundaries. Such people are essential to maintaining the goodwill and trust necessary for knowledge sharing.

Second, and related to this, the communication of a common vision is crucial to maintaining cooperation and interactivity. This is more difficult to manage when highly motivated individuals come together from different backgrounds. While we talk about change in the creative industries not everyone is comfortable especially when change brings inconvenience.

As noted in the introduction, there is a tendency among academics to retreat into familiar routines and interests when under pressure.

Third, divergent thinking is essential to creativity: it produces novel ideas and needs to be encouraged. But divergent thinking also needs to be channelled into productive outcomes which reflect common goals: in the case of ‘the Queensland model’—educational renewal, innovation, clever communities and interdisciplinary collaboration.

This leads to the final point: the journey is a long-term one: resources have been invested strategically but expectations need to be realistic. These resources, which are fundamentally human capital resources, take a long time and sustained efforts to build. The journey we are all taking is one of discovery. While we may be aware of the processes and inputs, we are almost certain to be surprised by the outcomes.

