

# Transformative experience: knowledge exchange and impact in REACT projects (0322)

Jon Dovey, Simon Moreton  
UWE Bristol, UK

## Introduction

Knowledge exchange and impact have become distinctive terms in the Higher Education lexicon. The terms have joined the two roles traditionally understood as central to the work of Universities – teaching and researching – to become an important ‘third mission’ for HEIs<sup>1</sup>. For some commentators, these activities offer new forms of beneficial research activity<sup>2</sup> whilst as for others they represent a threat to academic autonomy through the commodification and entrepreneurialisation of research cultures<sup>3,4</sup>. This paper considers that, in practice, this third mission is not a monolithic discourse, but rather offers space for the development of approaches and methods for supporting knowledge production and performance.

The research is based on analysis of data drawn from the authors’ involvement (as Director and Research Fellow respectively) in REACT, one of four Knowledge Exchange Hubs funded by the Arts & Humanities Research Council (AHRC) in 2012. REACT represents a major intervention to mobilise arts and humanities research for the benefit of the creative and cultural economy<sup>5</sup>. These disciplines face an uncertain future in public policy and discourse<sup>6</sup>. Following the Browne Report<sup>7</sup> teaching grants to universities for STEM subjects were maintained whilst they were abolished for Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences. In Nov 2014 Education Minister Nicky Morgan was reported as advising young people not to study arts subjects but to look to STEM if they wanted to get ahead<sup>8</sup>. This ongoing distrust of arts and humanities is in contradiction with the calculation that the Creative Economy represented 9.7% of UK

---

1 Shore, C. & McLauchlan, L., 2012. 'Third Mission' activities, commercialisation and academic entrepreneurs *Social Anthropology*, 20 (3), 267 - 286.

2 Larner, W., 2012. Beyond Commercialisation. *Social Anthropology*, 20 (3), 287 - 289.

3 Kenway, J., Bullen, E. & Robb, S., 2004. The Knowledge Economy, the Techno-preneur and the Problematic Future of the University. *Policy Futures in Education*, 2 (2), 330 - 349.

4 Clegg, S., 2008. Academic identities under threat? *British Educational Research Journal*, 34 (3), 329 - 345.

5 Moreton, S forthcoming, Rethinking ‘knowledge exchange’ new approaches to collaborative work in the arts and humanities, *International Journal of Cultural Policy*

6 Bullen, E., Robb, S. & Kenway, J., 2004. 'Creative destruction': knowledge economy policy and the future of the arts and humanities in the academy. *Journal of Educational Policy*, 19 (1), 3 - 22.

7 Browne, J., 2010. *Securing a sustainable future for higher education: an independent review of higher education funding and student finance*. London.

gross value added, compared for example to Construction at 6.0% or Finance at 8.1%<sup>9</sup> and the role of AH graduates in those industries<sup>10,11</sup>.

The two interrelated scripts – of knowledge exchange and impact – come together in REACT, which represents a space in which different understandings and ambitions for KE are negotiated, and in which political discourse about ‘value’ is developed.

## **Methodology**

REACT’s process for supporting its collaborative work is led by Watershed. REACT has adapted the Watershed ‘Sandbox’ model of an intensive, cohort based, open innovation process that runs over three months and emphasises rapid prototyping, peer learning and user testing. To date REACT has connected over 600 participants, invested £1.9 in 53 collaborations between 73 academics and 55 creative companies, exploring Heritage, Books & Print, Future Documentary, Connected Objects and Play. REACT projects have generated over £1.5m in further investment and research funding bids.

This paper draws from extensive research into the role and nature of the work of the hub, via interviews, participant observation and on-going involvement in the running of the hub, and accounts of ‘impact stories’ provided by REACT alumni during a workshop hosted in April 2015 in which eight of our participating academics shared the changes they felt their projects had brought about.

## **Transformative practice**

The narratives provided by our funded academics suggested three characteristics of knowledge exchange led transformation from their work.

- a) The challenge of collaboration: all of our projects represent equal collaborations where the academics are not understood as servicing an industry need or vice versa. One respondent spoke of how the success of her collaboration could be understood through the way they mirrored one another’s subject positions of researcher and creative. Researchers are enabled to become creative and businesses are enabled to undertake a range of research methods. Collaborations were also characterised by their

---

<sup>8</sup> Paton, G 2004 Nicky Morgan: pupils 'held back' by overemphasis on arts, The Daily Telegraph, 10 Nov 2014 (<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/education/educationnews/11221081/Nicky-Morgan-pupils-held-back-by-overemphasis-on-arts.html>)

<sup>9</sup> ONS 2014 National Accounts Report, available online: [http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/dcp171776\\_381729.pdf](http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/dcp171776_381729.pdf)

<sup>10</sup> Comunian, R., Taylor, C. & Smith, D.N., 2013. The role of universities in the regional creative economies of the UK: hidden protagonists and the challenge of knowledge transfer. *European Planning Studies*, 22 (12), 1 - 21.

<sup>11</sup> Sapsed, J. & Nightingale, P., 2013. *The Brighton Fuse Report* Brighton: Brighton Fuse.

interdisciplinarity, with one project involving game design, history, narrative, music, programming, and product design.

- b) Criticality can produce innovation. The starting point for many of the stories we were told was a desire to change something, a process, product, service, marketplace, or experience. Researchers frequently began with the understanding that the current state of their sphere or market required change. This might be through social action, culture and heritage or as a commercial proposition. These starting points are all part of an analytic and critical transferable skillset that whilst commonly associated with the humanities is not usually understood as a driver of innovation.
- c) Practice-based research enacts change. All of our respondents were advocates for the process of actually making something, a prototype object, service or system. For academics from traditional arts and social science backgrounds the idea of production was frequently intimidating. However we have learnt that their desire to change things, their passion for the research and forging of new relationships can all be enacted in the production of a new object..

### **Towards a new form of Impact?**

Our initial analysis suggests that there are at least ten different sites of transformation active across the process:

- 1) Changes for business partners in their stability, ambition, and confidence where the impact is in proportion to the size of the enterprise. The range of investment available (£15 - £50k) can make a huge impact on a creative microbusiness or start-up, but a smaller impact on an established business.
- 2) The creation of new businesses
- 3) Changes in market sectors through the production of 50 new prototype products and services all of which have further development potential.
- 4) Developing new markets for businesses by bringing deep knowledge of human subjects as users of products and services to businesses.
- 5) Impact on users of products and services themselves
- 6) The creation of new networks through the collaborative process
- 7) Changes to academics' research profile, new presentation invitations, new research publications and the development of new funding bids for research.
- 8) Academic personal and career development.
- 9) Changes to academics' teaching practices and the development of new masters' programmes
- 10) Changes to Universities contracting and procurement processes.

These transformations are reported as overwhelmingly subjective and personal but become operative in commercial and social enterprises, (1 – 4) for the public (5 – 6) and for universities (7 – 10). Processes of change are frequently experienced simultaneously and result in very powerfully intense narratives of transformation that begin with what one researcher described as the 'rollercoaster' of REACT in the initial Sandbox phase which are then consolidated in continuing collaboration over a

two or three year post prototyping period. Furthermore, these accounts demonstrate that impact is a distinctively nonlinear process characterised by the emergence of unanticipated positive outcomes. These challenge normative understandings of 'doing research' and lead to a diverse range of impacts which suggest an implicit critique of the standardising HEFCE REF Impact Case Study formula.