Creative Collaborations: the role of networks, power and policy

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Abstract The article reflects on the emergence of creative collaboration between higher education and creative economy with emphasis on the role of networks, power and policy in their establishment and development. While many authors argue for the value of an organic, grassroots development of creative collaborations and networks, recently a lot of investment and attention has been placed by policy (both higher education and economic development policy) on the value of creating and expanding a range of mechanisms of interaction and collaboration across universities and the creative economy for the benefit of participation, cultural development and the economy. The chapter explores these dynamics and their importance to future developments in this field.

Creative collaborations: from the margins to the mainstream

Creative collaborations are not exactly new in the agenda of academics and the creative economy (CE)[i]. They have been part of the historical fabric of both academia and creative practices for many decades. It is easy to see how universities have historically engage with arts and cultural activities, themselves often patrons or commissioners of art pieces as well as hosts of artists - from poets and writers to architects and musicians – sharing their knowledge through teaching and practice (Garber 2008). Similarly, arts organisations and creatives have historically benefitted from the knowledge and research developed within academia, from academic articles in arts catalogues to architects benefitting from new materials technologies (Bullen, Robb, and Kenway 2004).

So why are collaborations - in this last decade - become so important and central both to higher education policy and practice and to the workings and functioning of the CE? Ironically, the new centrality of creative collaborations has not been actively promoted or campaigned for by the individuals involved in these collaborations – whether academics or artists. This is because while creative collaborations before where not supported or promoted, they were still always possible and accessible. The key promoters of creative

collaborations have been a range of policy bodies, both at the level of higher education policy as well as the level of economic policy and cultural policy. Their agendas seem to have met in the emergence of creative collaborations for three key reasons: funding cuts (both to higher education and the arts); the emergence of new relational and instrumental arguments of value; and the increase importance of justification and impact for funding and policy interventions.

The first reason needs to be reconnected to the (recent) economic crisis (2007-2008) and following recession. This saw also the transition from a decade of New Labour policy, which had been very supportive towards the CE as well as regional investment (Hesmondhalgh et al. 2015), to a Conservative age of austerity. The economic crisis had been the trigger to a wider range of funding cuts with the arts and creative activities being particularly affected (Bull 2015) but also re-shaped and changed the funding structure of higher education with particular impact for Arts & Humanities departments. Furthermore, the introduction of full-fees for English students to undertake their studies put particular pressure on departments to deliver 'value for money' and in particular for Arts & Humanities to demonstrate employability and opportunities for their graduates(Comunian, Faggian, and Jewell 2014). Overall, the funding cuts and austerity measures from both side of the creative collaboration spectrum highlighted the opportunity for each side to consider maximising funding via collaborations and in-kind exchanges, as well as thinking about what other (or new) funding opportunities could be accessed via the partner that was not thought as important before.

The second reason, which is certainly connected also to pressure of funding, is the increase importance for the CE and arts and humanities to articulate their value in society (DCMS 2004, Budge 2012). While arguments for the value of both have long been there and have centred on their intrinsic value in aesthetic and knowledge terms, funding increasingly became attached to a demonstration of wider impact and value of arts activities as well as university research in arts and humanities. In the field of arts and culture the debate had emerged earlier on, specifically with increased emphasis during the New Labour government on funding the arts for their instrumental value and the benefit they bring to places and people, improving social and economic conditions (Belfiore 2002). In a similar fashion, placing economic frameworks and measures usually applied to science and technology departments, arts and humanities were increasingly questioned about their value and impact in socio-economic terms (Belfiore 2014, Benneworth and Jongbloed 2010b). Similarly, it is argued increased emphasis was placed also on the instrumental value of teaching (Ramsey and White 2015) and the importance of employability and careers in connections to local labour markets (Comunian and Faggian 2011) . While both sides where similarly and independently pressurised towards showing wider impact and value – with also the influence of policy and advocacy bringing them closer (Arts Council England 2012, Dawson and Gilmore 2009, Taylor 2005) – what emerged, I would argue, is the importance of presenting value in a relational way and using creative collaborations as a way to show value reciprocally (Bartunek 2007, Antonacopoulou 2009) as well as place value in the social and cultural capital developed through connecting across academia and the creative sector, in many way value is articulated as social capital, i.e. because it involves so many and beyond the restrict sphere of either academia or the arts, then it must be valuable. From this consideration academia – specifically arts and humanities – and the CE emerge as

needing each other and being valuable to each other a priori (even before knowledge exchange actually happens).

Finally, connected to both the issue of funding cuts and limited availability of funding as well as an increased push for accountability and value for money in the public policy sphere (Humphrey, Miller, and Scapens 1993) we see an increased importance and centrality for public policy (here including cultural policy, economic policy and higher education policy) to invest in collaborations and build funding infrastructures around encouraging collaborations and partnerships (Innes and Booher 2010). It makes sense of course for example for the institutions who are training the next generation of creative workers to be talking with companies and individuals developing new products and ideas in the CE; it make sense that is funding are invested in academic research this research should not be left solely in inaccessible books but also disseminated and applied as much as possible by practitioners(Crossick 2006). It also make sense when funding are limited to use the funding rather than targeting one sector and activities – which might be hard to justify and might prove risky in reference to demonstrating value for money and impact – to target networks, collaboration, 'meeting points' of a range of activities (education, research, cultural expression, markets …) which will therefore have the potential to benefit more people (and be less criticisable) because of their nature of being already multi-stakeholders and placing value on their relational capital.

After this brief introduction to the emergence of creative collaborations, the chapter is structured in three parts. The first highlights the importance of networks and their nature but also dynamics of inclusion and exclusion they might generate. The second consider issues of power, which are connected to networks but also to institutional frameworks and the range of organisations which are called to collaborate in this new age of creativity. The third part concludes by reflecting on the role of policy – with specific emphasis on its importance in creating and facilitating networks as well as its impact on power relations and collaboration.

The importance of networks: connecting and disconnecting knowledge

Many academics, studying the CE have highlighted the importance that networks – from local connections (Comunian 2012, Crewe 1996) to global links play (Scott 2004, Solimano 2006) in the development of new knowledge, products and audiences. In reference to research, for many years the focus has been on the networks that develop amongst creative workers, industries and practitioners (Grabher 2002, van Heur 2009), whether in relation to supply chain, product innovations or to access to specific markets. From this, the attention has moved towards the role played by policy (local, national and international) in supporting and facilitating the development creative industries and their production system (Oakley 2006, Gollmitzer and Murray 2008) or in building an infrastructure around the CE (Comunian and Mould 2014). However, until very recently, the role of higher education had not come to the forefront. A recent literature review (Comunian, Gilmore, and Jacobi 2015) highlights the new centrality of higher education in academic research and policy reports. It is argued that universities – via academics and graduates or alumni – have long been present in local and regional creative networks, shaping often its direction and development (Comunian and Gilmore 2015). Nonetheless, more recently developing collaborative networks – which span

across the creative industries and academia, has been somewhat a new imperative and it is important to reflect on the nature of these networks as well as their potential in connecting but also disconnecting projects and opportunities.
Comunian (2012) using the case of Newcastle-Gateshead highlighted the strategic importance of networks for creative economy practitioners. While that paper does not consider the value of the same networks in relation to academia, it offers an opportunity or framework to allow us to reflect more broadly on how this might apply. The first element considers the ***interaction between networks and labour markets within the creative economy***. This is certainly very important from the employment perspective of creative practitioners. However, higher education certainly plays an important role in developing these networks too. Academia offers practitioners the first opportunity for students to both establish networks amongst themselves – that they will develop when graduates but also to exchange and collaborative with researchers, academics as well as other professionals who might involve in the courses(Ashton 2013). Comunian and Gilmore (2015) highlight how the connections amongst students and alumni create a strong bond and how alumni and graduates remain often connected to their courses, via talks, internships and other collaborative work. Higher education has an interest in developing networks which might facilitate the retention of students to the *locale* (Chatterton and Goddard 2000) but also that facilitate job and employment opportunities for incoming new cohorts(Comunian and Faggian 2014).
Networks developed with university but also transitioning towards graduation are really important to create **marketing and branding opportunity (access to market)** for graduates as well as institutions. Graduates use the opportunity of degree shows and portfolio of practice that they develop within academia to establish future opportunities and audience. Similarly, the success of certain alumni in developing and expanding brands and business opportunities is often used by universities in their own marketing materials as they have to compete for criteria like employability, business start-ups and in general successful alumni(Gembris 2004). Another important element of the networks that get established within and beyond the campus is their role in providing **knowledge support and professional development** (Fuller-Love 2009, MacLeod 2000); the presence of CE practitioners – whether alumni or not – in the locale or beyond can allow higher education institutions to bring in special forms of expertise and professional development support for their current students. Similarly, alumni who remain in the locale are often able to tap into the expertise of academic or knowledge infrastructure of the university to develop further their creative potential. While there is an informal permeability of networks on often informal basis, there are more formalised opportunities, such as residencies that can provide a framework for this knowledge to travel and develop. Finally, as mentioned in the introduction, more recently these networks have also become a new way to access a range of **new funding opportunities or bodies**. The AHRC' Knowledge Exchange Hubs for the Creative Economy' initiative (launched in 2011) can be considered an example of the kind of ***funding*** that practitioners have been able to access recently through collaborative work, which had not be present before.
All of these motivations make networks really important in this knowledge ecosystem both for the CE practitioners but also for the development of higher education. However – as we will discuss also in the following paragraph – while there is a tendency to see networks as something positive and inclusive which facilitate creative collaborations, this is not always the case (Vorley, Mould, and Courtney 2012). It is often the case that networks that might

be easily accessible to some – often via accumulated social or cultural capital – might not be accessible to all. Furthermore, gender, ethnicity and social class are still considered a strong barrier to creative work and creative careers (Comunian and Conor 2016 / forthcoming) progression and a better reflection of how this might reflect in access to knowledge and opportunities within higher education is needed (Banks and Oakley 2015).

Power relations: size and knowledge matters

So while it is easy to positive acknowledge the importance of networks and collaborations between CE and higher education (Comunian, Gilmore, and Jacobi 2015, Comunian and Gilmore 2015), it is also important to acknowledge the barrier that might hinder or block creative collaborations.
One of the key elements to consider is the balance of power which often characterise creative collaborations and also how power might also influence access and opportunities for further development. Power can be understood from a variety of perspective and can have different impact in the development of the process of collaboration(Comunian, Taylor, and Smith 2013).
At the first level, there is an element of power in relation to <u>size and financial operation</u>. On one side, universities then to be large structures, with access to space, knowledge and funding. On the other side, the creative economy is mostly comprised of small organisations which often lack of cash flow and space or infrastructure. While collaborations are established, it might seem obvious that academic institutions will lead the agenda and that they will be able to set the terms and conditions and framework for the collaboration. This is can become a source of contention or an obstacle for small creative economy organisations, which might not have the personnel or resources to commit or the experience to be able to frame conditions and objectives. Therefore, from the very initial steps, making sure there is a balance of voices and an equal playfield is important to development of genuine collaborations. Small creative companies or individuals might struggle to set the terms and research agenda because of the lack of time or resources to set aside for initial meetings and agreements. However, if universities are engaging in collaboration with larger cultural institution or multinational corporations in the creative economy, the power balance might be different, more equilibrated, or even see academic institutions able to bend their programmes or frameworks in order to be able to use key cultural partners within their teaching or research marketing materials. Here we can see that power at play does not only reflect the size or financial capacity of organisation but also their brand and institutional power. Larger cultural institutions and commercial partners might bring cultural capital or status to a course or institution and this might reflect in the kind of partnership that is established. Power relations are particularly relevant not only in setting the agenda and framework for collaboration but also allowing access to these opportunities and the importance of brokerage and networks (Comunian and Gilmore 2015)

The role of policy and HEIs in engineering (local) creativity

There are a wider range of roles that policy can play in supporting creative collaborations across the CE and HEIs (Clifton, Comunian, and Chapain 2015). Following the approach of Comunian, Chapain, and Clifton (2014) there are four key areas that have seen interventions

and investments and provide a framework for supporting collaborations: physical shared infrastructure; soft knowledge infrastructure; markets and governance.
If we focus **on physical infrastructure**, it is easy to see the role that policy can play in developing further interconnections between CE and higher education institutions. This is particularly important for small independent producers and sole traders as they often do not have access to infrastructure or space to develop their business ideas or projects. It is therefore easy to see how certain higher education institution – with policy investment and guidance – have focused in providing their graduates or associated companies with the availability of cheap or free space to work and create (Ashton, 2016). Whether space is created though local council direct investment or within higher education estate develop, there is a strong common agenda for local policy and higher education policy to work together to provide the right space, business advice and opportunities for the development of local creative companies or cultural initiatives. There opportunities that go beyond space, for example, in the case of academic subjects which require expensive and specialised equipment for their students and research – the – for example, recording studios or laser-cutting equipment – the chance of having outside companies to pay rent or share costs of some of the equipment might be a lifeline. In a period of funding cuts both to arts funding and local council budgets as well as to investment in arts and creative disciplines, the opportunity to think about shared infrastructures is an important policy framework that goes bridges across partners and opportunities.
While investment on physical infrastructure can be strategic, it requires usually a large amount of funding. Therefore, it is much more common to see investment by policy initiatives – both in higher education policy and local economic policy, towards the empowering or development of **soft infrastructure** opportunities. This covers a range of activities such as networking, knowledge sharing and training. These interventions are often bottom-up – by individuals in higher education or the CE sector and might benefit from small investment to enable greater engagement of partners and facilitate further exchanges. While many of these activities develop spontaneously, in the last decade, there has been also a push towards engineering collaboration and providing funding or frameworks (such as voucher schemes) to broker relationship and to empower collaborations that were not there before.
While less emphasis is placed on supporting **markets** for CE practitioners, universities and policy play an important role in engaging also with the distribution and access to cultural and creative products. However, local graduate retention and the ability to support the co-location of a range of creative activities in a locale, rely on the development of markets and a sophisticated demand. Universities have a role to play in educating audiences – via exhibitions, fairs, open days or degree shows, they are therefore important also to bring the gap between a creative product – developed with or across academia and the CE – who might not yet an audience or market and new opportunities (Potts et al. 2008). While higher education seems to have embrace this commercial agenda strongly with the science and technology field (Thursby, Jensen, and Thursby 2001, Gittelman and Kogut 2003), this has not yet been the case in the field of creativity.
Finally, policy seems to have often taken the lead in supporting creative collaborations via new funding framework but has been less active in thinking about governance interventions. If the financial climate and the reduced level of resources in public policy called for more collaborative actions – for example the emphasis is of Arts Council of England on 'grand partnerships'(Bazalgette 2013) – than more emphasis needs to be place

on **governance**. Universities often have capacity and ability to establish connections between local policy for industry and urban development as well as industry, local communities, and other third-sector players (for example, galleries, museums, festivals, etc.). Despite their recent neoliberal turn (Canaan and Shumar 2008), they are still considered by many local policy makers as neutral agents or intermediaries. They are not seen as being driven by private interest but the greater (local) good (Goddard and Vallance 2013) and, therefore, are considered the ideal intermediaries and brokers for local development. However, while academia can play such an important role, policy need to consider that often interventions might benefit certain part of the society and not all local stakeholders equally (Benneworth and Jongbloed 2010a). So while academia might be driving broader positive externalities for local contexts, it might still be disconnectedness to certain areas of society or specific communities of interests (Comunian and Mould 2014).

Conclusions

The chapter has tried to highlight the symbiosis between higher education and the CE but also the recent pressure and policy interventions that have placed creative collaborations high on the agenda of both academics and practitioners in the CE. While the investment of funding bodies – such as the AHRC – to support creative collaborations have provided incentives and opportunities for further engagement, issues of sustainability and the importance of considering barriers and shortcomings of creative collaborations is also important for a better understanding of their development and future. In particular, while the grassroots networks and intertwined activities across higher education and the CE are unlikely to disappear or stop, it is also important to make sure there is an equal and ethical approach towards these interactions. The pressure, coming from funding cuts and new funding sources might in fact push each side to use the other instrumentally and undervalue the motivations and intrinsic values of each other's' work in favour of the practicalities of the next grant and the next collaboration. Similarly, critical thinking - which is at the core of both academia and artist practice – should not be abounded in favour of feel-good reports and advocacy towards more creative collaborations.

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[i] I use the term creative economy (CE) throughout the chapter as Comunian and Gilmore (2015) define as an umbrella term that has two core components the ***creative industries*** and the (publically funded) ***arts and cultural sector (fig .1, p.8)***.