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Outside the voucher: Evaluating the Creative Voucher Scheme

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This chapter seeks to elaborate on what one might have expected to be the straightforward task of delivering and evaluating Creativeworks London's (CWL) Creative Voucher scheme.¹ What made the project difficult was that the notion of the "creative" voucher has not been used before; it was not a policy developed from a direct evidence base. Moreover, the Creativeworks London project was premised on the delivery of three funding streams of which the vouchers were one; indeed something approaching half of these funds were targeted to resource creative vouchers.

This chapter offers a discussion of how we implemented the creative vouchers, the product of which makes up most of this volume. It also raises the question of what and how one might evaluate vouchers; something, we argue, that does not gain from a reduction to a limited set of quantitative indicators. Indeed, our reflections on the process projected us into a far more exploratory and nuanced narrative account of the vouchers; hence the chapters of this book which represent a range of different facets and experiences of the creative voucher scheme.

Traditional evaluations of innovation and knowledge transfer are based upon simplistic mono-causal models whereby the dominant notion is that knowledge will naturally diffuse from high concentrations to low concentrations: like a gas; this of course is a social physics model. The failure to diffuse evenly, it is normally hypothesized, must be due to some "blockage" or "barrier." In keeping with mechanical analogies, much policy action is focused on "fixing the plumbing" that is the leaky knowledge pipelines. The challenge is that the logic behind knowledge transfer, let alone policies such as vouchers, are seldom explicitly stated, but rather assumed as common sense.

As we experience the transformation from mass production economies to those based on what are variously termed service economies, knowledge economies, or even cultural economies the physical movement of goods, innovation and ideas materialized as “solutions” (as “technology” has commonly been) has been replaced by weightless or virtual goods: ideas. Physicalist analogies might have been helpful in an old manufacturing economy; it is clear that they are less helpful in either dematerialized production, or the realm of ideas exclusively.

Moreover, the Creativeworks London project was explicitly funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) with a view to demonstrating the role of what the arts and humanities can contribute to the processes of knowledge transfer between universities and the creative economy (see Chapter One). It is obvious that the arts and humanities favor different approaches to knowledge than that of the sciences; in particular the humanities focus on the nature of human experience and ideas—one might argue that it is the ideal type of knowledge transfer. The humanities has a rather more nuanced and relational perspective on knowledge and human experience than the sciences, focused as they often are on physical processes and outcomes. We saw it as our task to explore and reflect on creative vouchers and meanings.

Whereas the individual voucher stories provide a rich narrative of what the knowledge exchange process “looks like” and at times what it might “feel like,” and what meanings it produces for those involved, this chapter attempts to examine a linked story across the voucher process. It is not seeking to generalize or summarize, rather it explores the voucher process. In this sense we resist the traditional notion of evaluation, arguing that it is necessary to understand the process before we can possibly evaluate it against objectives, personal, institutional or political.

Unpicking and Interpreting the Idea

The notion of knowledge transfer, and/or knowledge exchange, has become a fashionable one in policy circles of late. It is based on the paradigm suggesting that “knowledge intensive” industries will replace manufacturing, and be driven by a highly educated workforce, with high wages, producing high value and high return products. This notion has been expressed by many, but Peter Drucker and Daniel Bell have sketched out the social and well as economic dimensions of the “knowledge society.” UK government policy has been redirected to this aim since the 1980s, such that it has become part of the common sense of industrial and education policy. However, how to turn big ideas and brave prescriptions into concrete actions has been a challenge. On one hand we have had many analyses showing that industry has been less innovative due to a lack of investment in research and development. On the other we have had the expansion of higher education and more skilled workers. However, somehow the boosting of investment, and training—or universities cross-subsidizing employers’ training—has not had the desired effect.

Other approaches have noted the outsourcing, or disinvestment in research and development, and encouraged universities to take up the slack. The notion that physical proximity to universities to science and innovation hungry industries, or that universities could generate their own “spin offs” was a strong idea underpinning the policy of science parks, in effect sharing the research scientists, their laboratories and their seminars would diffuse ideas and generate growth. Related ideas of the benefits of co-location in competitive and collaborative skills and part finished products was the lesson taken from the Italian New Industrial Districts, and given significant support by the UK Government in the Business Clusters idea—all of this is well documented in the literature. Interestingly, the same notion was applied to high-tech clusters as to cultural or creative clusters: culture was just another industry that would benefit from co-location and seed knowledge transfer via diffusion (although giving it a little help).

A third wave of knowledge policies has emerged through a number of initiatives in the EU, and these are based less on diffusion as on a market in ideas; here knowledge exchange is figured as a market. Diffusion is replaced by the market allocation system of supply and demand. However,

there is a problem as the market in ideas seems to be stuck. The idea to “help” the market is to incentivize the transaction, to create a “voucher” that gives both parties a financial prize for their knowledge exchange practice. These initial vouchers were focused on technology industries, and inter-industry collaboration. The idea was then transposed to the UK and a pilot scheme set up with “creative credits” which was run by NESTA (see Chapter Two). The origin for the Creative Hubs voucher program was this experiment, which at the time of commissioning the Creativeworks London project had not been completed, nor evaluated².

As we were faced with a project that required us to deliver £1 million worth of creative vouchers over four years we did due diligence on the notion, and its assumptions and how it had been evaluated. As just noted, the NESTA evaluation was not complete,³ and in any case the scheme was different.⁴ In our project it was to be university-creative industry vouchers, not creative industry-creative industry vouchers (which was the innovation voucher model). We tracked the notion back to the EU innovation vouchers and were surprised to find that many of the schemes had not been evaluated either. It was seemingly considered as self-evidently a “good thing.”

Looked at another way, one might consider a valid evaluation tool to be the “take up” of vouchers: the voucher award is ipso facto a case of collaboration and exchange. We think that this common sense notion of a voucher “empowers” the practitioner to seek collaboration, which is probably what underpins the popularity of vouchers (and, as a foot note, we can see that vouchers are a common currency in neoliberal states: be they school place vouchers, training vouchers, etc.). If we accept this (albeit) superficial model then it points to a rather over-simplified model of knowledge and its transfer. It is a contact form of transmission—like diffusion. Human agency, reflection and values do not enter into it. There is now a substantial body of academic work that has examined the notion of knowledge and its transfer, and simplistic and mechanistic notions, such as those implied above have been on the whole rejected and displaced in favor of relational and generative notions of knowledge.⁵ As part of our contribution to a “meta-knowledge transfer” we regarded it as critical that we shared this knowledge in our understanding of the voucher process.

Additionally, academic work on innovation has rejected the linear and atomistic notion of the lone genius—current debate concerns the social, economic and cultural environment that can enable, or constrain, knowledge production and transfer.⁶ A body of research has concerned itself with the ways in which institutions frame and enable or block the transfer of knowledge and that a knowledge market does not exist. Instead it has to be made and operated, and regulated. Reflecting on this we can re-interpret the creative voucher as a spur to construct such institutions. This is rather a bizarre way of going about things, but perhaps reflects a reality. We had to deliver a policy instrument (the voucher) into a mis-functioning market in knowledge, assuming that a financial incentive would “free up” this market. In order to achieve this effect we had to create a knowledge market, and build institutions and an exchange mechanism, as well as a system for the dispensation and auditing of vouchers. In short we had to build a world in which the creative voucher made sense, and thus would be successful. The rest of this chapter discusses how we built the voucher system.

Making Vouchers

It is self-evident that for a voucher system to work one needs a pool of potential “awardees” from which to choose the best candidates; moreover one has to decide what criteria will be used for selection. A basic element of any voucher scheme will rely on the quality of the “gene pool” for eligible businesses and academics, as well as the skill and ability to match them up, and then manage the voucher process. This sounds logical and straightforward, but in practice it is difficult. There is no single or current register of creative industry SME’s in London (or anywhere else), thus the first job is to construct a list. This was achieved initially through the pre-existing resources of the partners, in particular The Culture Capital Exchange (TCCE), who have been acting as cultural intermediaries for many years, and thus have a database of contacts.

A related difficulty is that the creative economy is a very fluid and fast changing field, databases are quickly out of date. A structural and organizational characteristic of the creative economy is that much of the work is based on teams combining for short life projects, and on completion dismantling (and wrapping up the firm); then, creating a new firm or network when the next project comes along. This organizational form is not generally that of “firms,” but of freelancers, artists, and networks, what some have termed a cultural economy “ecosystem.” Most creative businesses are not SMEs (which can be between 10–250 employees), but micro enterprises (below ten), or sole operators. There is then, not a ready “population” from which a sample, or selection can be made. Nobody knows how many “firms” exist, and there is no register. Hence, TCCE’s contacts were vital; however, they were simply a starting point and much work had to be done to generate a reasonable directory; a task that took all four years of the project to develop, and tragically, will probably be lost as the project dissolves.

Whilst it is normally assumed that a population of firms can be identified, apparently no consideration had been given to the partner component of the vouchers: the academics. Universities do not maintain a database of academic interests and their staff’s willingness to engage with creative enterprises. Moreover, due to the innovative focus of this project, only a small proportion of “matches” would be skill or interest based as in a skill swap. It is likely that if this demand had existed, it would already have been satisfied.⁷ Thus, the Creativeworks London team faced a considerable challenge to “find” academics. In the course of the project Creativeworks London engaged 20 higher education institutions or independent research organizations and a further 19 creative economy partner organizations (private firms) in delivery of the project, the knowledge exchange program and research strands. This is a massive enterprise, which discloses a substantial networking and organizational infrastructure that had to be created and sustained. By the end of the project a total of 92 academics from partner organizations collaborated on projects across all funding schemes, with over 40 further research assistants contributing to the program. Together, this represented a combined investment in knowledge exchange projects of £1.6 million from Arts

and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) and European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) and over 26,000 hours of collaborative research.

Creativeworks London has built a network between its partner organizations, SMEs and awardees and the wider public in a bid to increase awareness of the program and its activities. Four key elements of the dissemination strategy were: (1) the blog “Widening the Register” launched in 2014 which features articles and posts by members of the hub core team as well as invited pieces by researchers and awardees and (2) the monthly newsletter sent out by the knowledge exchange team featuring items, articles and event listings relating to hub activity and that relating to awardees and partners. Figures relating to the newsletter highlight the strength and size of the network and evidence of wide public engagement. As at January 2016 the total recipients of the newsletter were 4,072 per month. The average open rate between February 2015 and January 2016 was 25.1 percent, meaning on average one in four people opened the newsletter, approximately 1,022 people. The click through rate across the same period was on average 19.4 percent or around one in five which equates to approximately 790 people per month engaging with news items, events and articles circulated by the hub. A benchmark email open rate is 24.9 percent which is broadly equal to Creativework’s rate; significantly, however, the average click through rate is 3.42 percent meaning that Creativework’s click through rate—that is actual engagement with information contained within the newsletter—is almost six times higher than the benchmark figure.⁸ Creativeworks London has a database of a network totaling 1,966 SMEs and researchers who have actively engaged with the hub.

Third, further partnership activity also took the form of workshops and events for academics and businesses, who offered wider opportunities for knowledge exchange and network building. These were successful, and well attended by hundreds of individuals and businesses. New formats to promote knowledge exchange specifically to digital creative companies, such as “culture hacks,” modelled on software “hackathons,” were experimented with; and a blog, “Widening the Register,” offers a repository of articles, reports and updates from Creativeworks London’s people, partners,

awardees, and wider community. In a sense, this is all “hidden work” before the first voucher can be advertised, let alone awarded.

The Fourth and final element was the voucher process, which was not only an advertising and award process, but an active and cumulative growing of the network of academics and creative businesses. The voucher process was organized around five phases of activity. First, a call for applicants, this was an educational and informational dimension (as nobody knew what a creative voucher was, or whose was eligible). Second, an invitation to all those interested to an “ideas pool”; in effect this was the “dating agency” to match up academics and creative businesses. Third, a proposal writing event where those who were keen to apply were helped with the application process and the refinement of the proposal. Fourth, the applications were reviewed and winners selected by a panel of the CWL team. Fifth, an award event was held, and contracts were awarded.

Of course the process did not end there, post-award, a lot of work had to be put in by the CWL team to liaise with individual universities⁹ and their business support teams and finance offices to actually issue contracts (and deal with issues such as IPR, and processing of payments). In a sample of cases—as part of an evaluation process—voucher holders were invited back to share their experiences with one another and the CWL team. The outcome of all vouchers was documented, and some were selected for “showcasing” as exemplars to promote the program. It can be seen from the light description above that the organizational effort to establish a framework and process, as well as to disseminate information and expertise, as well as raising awareness in the creative community, was considerable. This is the “market making” side of the vouchers.

The process described above was repeated for each “round” of vouchers: over the period of the award, seven rounds were held. Each round had a theme; it was quickly realized that an open call for a voucher would not be effective as both academics and creative businesses had to be drawn in with an idea, one that was general enough to be inclusive and provocative, but not too obscure to marginalize. The experience developed that academic and research expertise was most helpful in setting the agenda of these sessions, in that way it was possible to engage particular academic

expertise (not necessarily drawn on a disciplinary, but a topic, basis). This strategy made the task of recruiting academics easier, and then presenting an “offer” to creative businesses. Again, this active and intensive “curation” process was critical in getting participants “to the table”: the market/community needed to be constructed step by step (see Table 15.1).

The team found recruiting academics particularly difficult whereas creative businesses were in search of an idea, or a solution; academics already had a full-time job with a more than full task specification. In many respects this was an extra-curricular activity. In the high pressure, output orientated modern academic world, it is remarkable that we managed to draw in as many academics as we did. This highlighted a rather naive conception amongst many policy makers, and politicians about academics and their research. Academics that did cooperate were very committed to outreach, and often had to battle with their managers to get time to participate, or get the value of the work acknowledged. Again, the project in this sense was an on-going and cumulative task.

[Table 15.1 inserted about here]

Approaches to an Evaluation

The process described above clearly indicates a learning process itself. The CWL team had to actively develop and redesign the delivery and modalities of voucher awards throughout the period as the methods were refined. Again, this was a learning process, and one that was based on a recursive process of discussing with participants and awardees what was working best; and, the growing population of the network. Moreover, the network although curated and mobilized by the ideas pools, other networking events and the newsletters, began to take on a life of its own as creative business began to use it as a networking space. The important point here is that business did not have the autonomous capacity to arrange such networking events; again, this was a

community benefit that CWL added, that did not exist, had to be created, and will disappear post-project.

There are many ways to evaluate the vouchers. One way that we are illustrating here is in a minimal sense, a descriptive one. This is purposefully provocative, in the comments that we are making about the process and the organization, we are stressing what is not recorded in the descriptive data; moreover, the whole of this book is testament to the diverse meanings and knowledge and learning experiences that participants traversed.

One measure of the success of the knowledge exchange program can be seen in the data gathered through a survey of all awardees across the funding schemes. Overall, 43 percent of partnerships across the three main funding schemes—creative vouchers, creative entrepreneurs in residence and researchers in residence—were formed through activity such as ideas pools for the vouchers, and information and match events for the residencies. A further 42 percent of collaborations were pre-existing, and 6.6 percent were formed through participants’ existing contacts, mentioned in the survey as affecting the extent to which participants felt part of a “Creativeworks family.”

In the survey awardees were asked what the key value of Creativeworks London was to them and the responses highlight the broad appeal and worth of the program. Sixty-six percent of respondents highlighted access to Creativework’s network and networking events as a core value. Unsurprisingly the brokerage provided by the knowledge exchange team was acknowledged by 50.9 percent of respondents—the ideas pools for the creative voucher schemes were particularly praised as was the “light touch” approach of the application, balanced by a responsive and supportive delivery team. Highlighting the recognized value of knowledge and expertise, 47.2 percent pf respondents recorded the value of access to specialist research and methodologies (relating to the research strands) and 34 percent valued access to a specialist creative and cultural skillset. Perhaps most significant given the program’s stated aims, 64.2 percent highlighted the worth of validation of ideas through an external funder, 66 percent acknowledged the space for

cross-sector experimentation and seeding of ideas not otherwise possible and 60.4 percent valued the fundamental access to exchange of knowledge made possible by the program. A significant 63 percent of awardees surveyed felt that the outcomes of their projects and their continuing work would have an impact on London's creative economy.

Overall, from the final reports and data gathered from the survey, 48 types of outputs were provisionally counted from the Creative Voucher projects. These included publications—academic or other including journal articles, internal or public facing reports, conference papers, blogs; tools—websites, apps, prototypes, methodologies or processes; visual outputs—films, artworks; events—exhibitions, workshops, conferences (local or international); and other—business plans, “new knowledge,” “new networks,” projects extending beyond Creativeworks etc. A provisional count of the data has recorded 420 outputs in total from the 109 projects, an average of 3.85 recorded outputs per project.

The impacts of the creative voucher scheme can be seen in four broad spheres—academic, business, creative and social/environmental. Some of the impacts are as expected—academic research outputs (published or work in progress, increased research capacity etc), perhaps increased business turnover. Some impacts are joint, for example leveraged funding benefiting both the academic partner and the SME—much of which the seed funding provided by the voucher scheme provided the catalyst. Unintended impacts might include a number of SME partners or creative entrepreneurs seeing the collaboration with an academic partner as a catalyst to pursue research for a higher degree themselves.

The majority of the successful projects (more than 95 percent) produced academic impact through their published outputs and events; a number engaged students—from undergraduate to doctoral level—with frequent mentions of engagement with an SME affecting a researcher's teaching practice. Projects such as “Making Friends” (Round 7) engaged with school children in another example of educational impact. Business impacts are hard to quantify in any commercial sense with such small investments and over a brief time period, but resolutions to business

problems provided by knowledge exchange, collaborative research and researchers' expertise can clearly be seen to have an effect on business practice moving forward, in, for example BeatWoven and June Givanni's Pan-African Cinema Archive. Projects that claimed new design approaches along with other creative outputs such as showcase films feed directly into and have an impact on London's creative economy as these approaches are further explored and subsequently adopted. Social and environmental impacts of the creative voucher scheme can also be seen in a range of examples including Vital Arts which sought to transform Royal London's Renal Unit through art and design intervention, and Heidi Hinder's Money No Object which used an adaptable interactive technology to explore financial transactions and donations and redefine value at the Victoria and Albert Museum.

The scale of projects pitched for the creative vouchers as opposed to the residencies aimed for more significant, "weightier" outputs, for example book chapters and journal articles for the researchers, or business practice or methodology for the SME partner and this is reflected in projects producing on average just a single output. The voucher scheme totaled 191 outputs, an average of 3.75 per project with the most commonly recorded being internal facing research or project reports. There were ten journal articles and eleven new processes, four apps, eight prototypes but no recorded "new marketable products," although this may be a reflection of the timing of the evaluation and the length of the program.

One thing that has become clear from the evaluation is that despite prolific publication and dissemination of the strands' research through various events, there has been minimal engagement with the core hub research from the perspective of the awardees, particularly not the entrepreneurs and researchers in residence schemes which were not directly connected to the research strands in the way that the creative vouchers were. Recipients of creative vouchers were generally broadly aware of the research associated with the strand that governed their award's round and may have attended additional events but there was very little engagement with working papers or other publications.

Reflections on the Creative Voucher

The creative voucher experiment is an interesting and provocative one. It provides us an interesting snapshot of the ways that policies find their way into programs, and then how programs have to invent them, and a process, as they go along. The case of creative vouchers was striking in that it seems to be based upon a “common sense” notion of knowledge and knowledge exchange that primarily exists in text books for the manufacturing industry. Moreover, the notion of the voucher as prize that will activate knowledge transfer is astonishingly naive. It works with a non-socialized account of society, as if it was mechanical, and one that is devoid of collective action, networks and institutions. The sort of assumptions that one expects to find in a GCSE level text on neoclassical economics. These do not apply to the real economy, let alone to the creative economy. The creative economy, in fact like all economies but more so, is driven by passions and a desire to make things and engage with audiences and users. Accordingly, whilst the evidence of the voucher scheme is firmly that of a success (in whichever value dimension that one chooses), it did not work because of the voucher scheme. It would be completely inappropriate to interpret the results as validating the scheme. What the evaluation shows is the inventiveness and ingenuity of the many cultural intermediaries—that CWL grew into—that was able to orchestrate this range of creatives, academics, institutions and the voucher scheme and turn it into something that was meaningful and useful to participants. As we can see in the other chapters presented in this book: how that happened was quite a different story, but one that needs to be told.

¹ See Tarek E. Virani, “Do voucher schemes matter in the long run? A brief comparison of Nesta’s Creative Credits and Creativeworks London’s Creative Voucher schemes” “Creativeworks London Working Paper No. 10, Creativeworks

London/Queen Mary, University of London, 2015),

<https://qmro.qmul.ac.uk/xmlui/bitstream/handle/123456789/6693/Working%20Paper%2010.pdf?sequence=2>.

² For more see Chapter Two.

³ It was completed in 2013.

⁴ See Virani, “Do voucher schemes matter in the long run?”.

⁵ See Andy C. Pratt, “Innovation: From Transfer to Translation. Illuminating the Cultural Economy,” in *The Elgar Companion to Innovation and Knowledge Creation: A Multi-Disciplinary Approach*, ed. H. Bathelt, P. Cohendet, S. Henn, and L. Simon (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, in press); Tarek E. Virani and Andy C. Pratt, “Intermediaries and the Knowledge Exchange Process,” in *Higher Education and the Creative Economy: Beyond the Campus*, eds. Roberta Comunian and Abigail Gilmore (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016), 41–58; Andy C. Pratt, “Resilience, Locality and the Cultural Economy,” *City, Culture and Society* 6, no. 3 (2015): 61–67; Andy C. Pratt, “Creative Cities: Tensions within and between Social, Cultural and Economic Development. A Critical Reading of the UK Experience,” *City, Culture and Society* 1, no. 1 (2010): 13–20; Andy C. Pratt and Paul Jeffcutt, eds., *Creativity, Innovation and the Cultural Economy* (London: Routledge, 2009); Andy C. Pratt, “Do Economists Make Innovation; Do Artists Make Creativity? The Case for an Alternative Perspective on Innovation and Creativity,” *Journal of Business Anthropology* 4, no. 2 (2015): 235–244.

⁶ Pratt, “Innovation.”

⁷ Except in the case where creative enterprises, or academics, did not know how to “find” a partner. The matchmaking element of CWL did do this; however, as noted above this simple matchmaking was a small proportion of the partnerships. Indeed, a really creative exchange would be based on partnerships that could not have been anticipated.

⁸ See <https://www.signupto.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/email-benchmark-2016.pdf>.

⁹ A characteristic of the scheme was that payments were made by CWL to universities, academics, and creative SMEs.