

AHRC Creative Communities

Community Innovation Practitioner Pilot
Policy Paper

Scotland Skills

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Policy Context

Knowledge Exchange (KE) and Public Engagement are mechanisms that enable academic research to have an impact on the world outside the Higher Education Institute (HEI) sector. However, they are increasingly subject to criticism because they can be:

- driven by an academic curiosity rather than the strategic need of the organisation;
- based on timescales dictated by a funding opportunity or availability of a student/research associate rather than being the 'right time' for the organisation;
- focused on final outcomes that are not always readily actionable.

At the University of Glasgow, the [Arts & Humanities Partnership Catalyst](#) was developed to address these issues through co-creation of research with communities and cross-sector groups.

The Catalyst creates communities as sustainable networks of academics and stakeholders brought together through a series of activities to address the challenges that exist within identified sectors. Critically, the Catalyst applies Design Led Innovation, introduced via partnership with the Glasgow School of Art.

The Govan Old (GO) Catalyst meaningfully deploys academic strengths to engage with the local context by leveraging and creating a community of practice around the existing Govan Old Heritage assets.

Recommendations

To address the policy context, several recommendations are proposed which if employed in future policy development, strategic funder plans and HEI governance would address the issues raised by the research.

Using Creative and Design Methods as a holistic approach to policy development

The value of design-led approaches is not limited to specific KE activities, such as workshops. By embedding design strategy throughout the entire process of co-creation – including policy making – we can ensure that all foundational processes are established within a considered “service”. This integration will create a more unified and comprehensive experience for both participants and the project team.

A framework for partnership co-creation enables coherent collaboration. Organisational frameworks and toolkits, a structured map of interaction, should cover all aspects of partnership facilitation including but not limited to, recruitment to the network; devising communication channels; review; and follow-up. Establishing a 'theory of change' from the start can support developmental evaluation throughout co-creation work.

Initial Relationship Building

Engaging with existing knowledge shapes informed action. Before launching activities in a new sector, researchers should engage proactively with existing knowledge from

within that sector, learning from it and building on it. This can be achieved through targeted discussions and thorough scoping, which may include interviews, walks, desk research, and consultations with researchers who have conducted similar work.

Design methods such as visual mapping can support documentation. This ensures that the team is immersed in the topic and can offer more to participants, generating a reciprocal exchange between organisers and participants. This creates an ethos of positive naivety and openness can be balanced with judicious augmentation of precious resources, like participants' time and knowledge.

Skills for Stakeholders

Providing training and upskilling opportunities across the network of stakeholders can enhance community contributions and development. Project leaders should collaborate to create training programmes designed to upskill community members using a transdisciplinary approach. This would develop a robust infrastructure through commitment and ownership, thereby ensuring sustainability of the networks.

Providing training and upskilling in design-led innovation for KE practitioners can also embed co-creation practice. The development and delivery of methods for co-creation is not formulaic but requires bespoke adaptations or creation of new methods to ensure meaningful and equitable participation and engagement. An investment in design capabilities can include working with designers as well as training wider cross-sector practitioners to establish strong and sustainable co-creation

practices and relationships.

Lead With the Sector Need

Co-creation should be driven by community needs to increase relevance and impact. Research activity with stakeholders outside of HEIs tends to be led by the research goals of the academic. Although this may be of interest to the non-academic participants it is rarely of strategic value to the engaging organisations. By setting the goals of activity based on sector need, the contribution from the HEI sector increases in relevance and therefore becomes more impactful. More impactful research being delivered both where and when needed may also result in direct and indirect benefits to the economy and provide more effective deployment of UKRI, central government and devolved administrations' funding.

Co-creation and Engagement Practice

Mandating fair compensation practices will promote broader and more diverse participation. To recognise the value of stakeholders' time and contributions, fair compensation practices should cover the time of stakeholders who are not otherwise paid. This could include adjusting funding guidelines to cover fair compensation, building on existing mechanisms like travel reimbursements and providing food and beverage to participants, thus ensuring financial constraints do not limit participation.

Early and diverse community involvement shapes the direction of future co-created research. Engaging representatives from local areas early on through scoping

sessions, informal gatherings and workshops will help to understand their needs and aspirations. Diverse communication channels, including face-to-face, social media, local radio, and community groups should be used to ensure a variety of voices are heard. Long-term engagement mechanisms, such as regular meetings and online platforms for ongoing feedback, will sustain these efforts.

Civic Capacity Building

Strengthening cross-sector partnerships can generate deeper connections between HEIs and the civic realm. The Govan Old Catalyst engaged several schools across Glasgow (including Govan High School, Pirie Park Primary School, Riverside Primary School, or St Saviour's Primary School) in new conversations with a new generation about their heritage. However, there is insufficient volunteer infrastructure to support this work on a long-term basis. By enabling partnership working between HEIs and communities, it is possible to establish programmes of placements or internship for students that are supervised by academics with expertise relevant to the research area.

Long-term educational initiatives connecting local schools and universities with heritage and community projects would engage students with local history and regeneration efforts and train them in heritage skills. HEIs and local educational authorities should include engagement in heritage studies delivery of work experience by involving students in projects like oral history collections and digital heritage initiatives.

Devolved Context

In Scotland, the recently published [National Innovation Strategy](#) highlights innovation as a key tool for a fairer, more equal, wealthier, and greener country. The strategy emphasises the importance of transformational innovation policy interventions, like the move towards long-term innovation infrastructure investments by the [Scottish Funding Council](#).

[HEIs are essential stakeholders in regional transformation](#) but [face multiple barriers to play a regionally engaged role](#). Creating challenge-driven research and impact assessments in the Research Excellence Framework (REF) encourages universities to play a proactive role in the [development of their civic realm](#). HEIs have a clear role as [drivers of sustainable co-creation of research in Scotland, particularly in the Arts & Humanities](#).

The Scottish government should better incentivise HEIs to create sustainable co-creation of research with cross-sector regional stakeholders, particularly smaller cultural organisations, social enterprises, and freelancers who are more distant from R&D. Additionally, developing targeted policies to support design-led innovation and community co-creation of research activities would align with the recommendations for creative methods and co-creation practices outlined in the above reports.

The Catalyst's replicable model and design-led approaches to co-creation can be used as a model to help the Scottish Government and the Scottish Funding Council to transform the R&D landscape. By creating sustainable HEI-stakeholder networks and better informing the co-creation of policy making at a devolved level, this would significantly enhance the civic engagement of our HEIs. It would also ensure that the devolved Scottish Government and its governance structure can contribute effectively and inclusively to engage all sectors and communities in culture and R&D to create a sustainable innovation ecosystem that is fit for the future.

Further Information:

For more information on AHRC Creative Communities visit <https://creativecommunities.uk/>

Contact the CIP

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