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Social Enterprise J

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Journal:	*Social Enterprise Journal*
Manuscript ID	SEJ-03-2019-0017.R3
Manuscript Type:	Research Paper
Keywords:	social innovation, creative sector, university, creative economy, action research, micro creatives

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Purpose – This paper explores the university as a nexus of socially innovative support and engagement with micro- and small-sized (mSME) creative businesses in rural and semi-rural regions. This paper argues that universities can play a socially innovative role in and around their regions.

Design/methodology/approach – The researchers used an action research approach to shape university-led interventions for creative mSMEs in a predominantly rural/semi-rural deprived area in the North East of England. A series of additional interviews were conducted with a participant sample to further explore issues raised during the action research phase.

Findings – The research found that while the university is seen by these mSMEs as a trusted source of socially innovative support, there is an expectation being for long term and meaningful interventions that facilitate impactful change. University-based knowledge exchange and innovation can be oriented toward these tiny businesses for mutual benefit and as an enabler of societal change in a transitional economy.

Research limitations/implications – As this study focused on a small, geographically similar cohort of creative mSMEs, the further application of these findings may be limited in dissimilar settings. More research is encouraged to further explore and test the conceptual points this paper raises.

Originality/value – This paper contributes to the social innovation field and creative economies policy research by presenting how a university can enable and shape authentic forms of engagement and impact in the mSME creative economy across the rural/semi-urban landscape.

Keywords: social innovation, creative sector, micro creatives, creative economy, university, action research

Introduction

This paper considers the rural/semi-rural creative[1] and the university and their potential interaction through the lens of social innovation (SI), In this regard, SI is "a novel solution to a social problem that is more effective, efficient, sustainable, or just than existing solutions and for which the value created accrues primarily to society" (Phills et al., 2008: 36). On the one hand, disparate rural/semi-rural creative micro- and small-sized businesses (mSMEs) are generally formed around geographically shared communities of support, with like-minded individuals for knowledge exchange and commercial practice (Luckman, 2012; Blanchard and Gray, 2019). On the other hand, universities are central to a local, regional, and the broader economy, often seen as nexuses of creativity, generating their communities of support, knowledge exchange and commercial practice (Winter et al., 2006; Buys and Bursnall, 2007). These two groups—the rural creative and the university located nearby--do not seem dissimilar in their aims and purpose, but their access, visibility, scope and affordance of impact is often markedly different, as observed by Comunian (2017). However, even when occupying the same geographic area, the two groups may not always interact with each other. In a way, and as this article will indicate, the two groups operate as two worlds, which may seem to be in parallel universes, despite being on each other's doorstep. Previous research has considered the role of a university as an SI agent (Benneworth and Cunha, 2015, Anderson et al., 2018). This approach toward SI impacts notions of university engagement and innovation policy and theories. This paper articulates what role and impact a university can have as a supporter of creative mSMEs in a transitional, rural and semi-rural economy. Particular attention is given to considering how seemingly disconnected elements such as location, reputation, and business growth can mutually benefit each other.

[1] We define 'creative' as those working within the creative sector as defined by UK government's sector deal: advertising and marketing; architecture; crafts; design; film, television and radio; IT, software and computer services; museums, galleries and libraries; music, performing and visual arts; publishing (Bazelgette, 2017).

The creative mSME working in rural/semi-rural isolation may seem a world away from the better known and represented areas of the creative economy, particularly those in the city-space. There are tensions within the widespread notions of what terms like 'innovation', 'creativity', and 'business growth' have come to mean (particularly aligned to governmental and policy perspective). Allied to these terms, how these relate to and impact semi-rural creative mSMEs is somewhat missing from the statistically driven maps of wider policy. One explanation is the size of the enterprises involved, another their location away from major urban centres of economic investment and culture. Bringing together these experiences and spaces, to support sustainable and socially impactful practice, the research team undertook an action-research driven project. These experiences resonated with the nature of SI as evoked by Howaldt et al., namely that 'social innovations are first and foremost *ensemble performances, requiring interaction between many actors*" (2018: 19), and by Ziegler (2017) as a potentially collaborative concept.

This paper draws on a programme of engagement with mSME participants over 11-months involving action-research driven support and interaction conducted in the North East (NE) of England (UK) by Durham University. The project was part of the regionwide, multi-university research project named *Creative Fuse North East* (CFNE). This approach goes above and beyond pre-existing and more traditional university mechanisms of engagement such as knowledge exchange, cultural collaboration, and creative education of students. This context is particularly critical in regions such as County Durham (the focus of Durham University within the Creative Fuse consortium), which may not enjoy as much national or economic investment as other parts of the UK. County Durham has been designated an economically 'in transition' region by the EU, having a GDP between 75-90% of the national average. By considering the lens of SI as a critical element of the support delivery, it lays a case for support that can impact these creative mSMEs' ability to sustain their incomes and, potentially, grow. The outcome of the project shows that due to its visibility, power, and permanence a university is uniquely poised to be a SI actor within its region's creative sector.

Universities are under-represented in SI practices and research (Anderson et al., 2018), and there is a pressing need to reconsider the value of a SI approach in this context. We argue that the role SI plays in the semi-rural creative economy needs consideration, providing a helpful context

from which to explore the reality (rather than the rhetoric) of creative mSMEs business growth and what prosperity and sustainability can look like beyond the city landscape.

Literature Review

In contemporary narratives, beyond its traditional role as a site of higher education learning and academic research, the university has primarily been seen and presented as a machine of economic growth, social mobility and reducer of social inequality within and beyond its locality and region (Oxford Economics, 2017). The university has been referred to as an "established and revered institution" (Audretsch and Link, 2017: ix), and often seen as providing a public or common good (Brown-Luthango, 2013; Tian and Liu, 2019). Concerning SI, researchers have argued for the role of universities as facilitators of this concept, to draw on their existing resources and capabilities to really champion the potential of SI (Anderson et al., 2018). Universities have a reputation of far-reaching impact within their immediate areas, feeding policies such as economic growth within the creative industries in particular (Oxford Economics, 2017).City-based hubs and areas of activity, such as Bristol's Watershed, exemplify the varied ways that universities can champion and facilitate innovation in the creative economy(Watershed, n.d.; Ashton and Comunian, 2019). Support for innovative collaborations and interventions between universities and creative clusters is gaining traction, with research funders increasingly funding projects that facilitate research and development activities that positively impact creative clusters and businesses (AHRC, 2018). These moves focus funding priorities on the industrial strategy and on fitting the arts and humanities narrative into more extensive industrial needs and funding opportunities, particularly with the digital at their forefront (UK Government, 2017). While less focus has been on the social or interventional role that a university can play in communities, novel forms of university intervention are emerging, though often by necessity rather than intent. One example is the role that Northampton University (UK) took on to fill gaps in local public services left by its county government going bankrupt in 2018 (Tickle, 2018).

In addition to being a site of innovation, a university holds an established role as a site of both creative and cultural production (through creative spaces and academic departments and their

taught courses) and preservation (through associated or affiliated arts centres such as museums, stages, or music venues). As Comunian and Gilmore (2015: 5) note, "Many universities have been beacons of cultural production and preservation […] This continues today with the hosting of performing arts spaces on campus and the undertaking of academic research on arts and cultural activities." This activity, however, need not be limited to the confines of the university, and Comunian and Gilmore stress the university's ability to "reach beyond the campus boundaries and consider its contribution to cultural regeneration and local communities" (2015:10). With regard to SI, how universities articulate this, including its relation with aspects of cultural regeneration and the inclusion of the local community, differs across regions and practices (Benneworth and Cunha, 2015). In the UK, there have been further efforts to provide more extensive engagement and community interaction by universities through the Research Excellence Framework's 2014 requirement that UK universities evidence the impact of their research activities (REF, 2019). This provocation is enabling new forms of engagement by universities, which can be applied in novel contexts and framed for communities otherwise disconnected from higher education, including the semi-rural creative economy.

Many universities, being predominantly urban-situated, appear to have focused on urban creative clusters, however (Crossick and Kaszynska, 2016). As a possible result of this, the creative economy literature has tended (though with some exceptions, such as Bell and Jayne's 2010 study of the creative countryside) to over-focus on the intersection between the city and creative industries. As Cho et al. note, "[Sole creative practitioners'] economic contribution may be indirect and small, but cannot be ignored. … [and] sources of creativity are not all concentrated in major cities (2018: 37-38). The UK government's cultural and creative-facing policy and research into the creative industries and on the functions, nature, and needs of the creative sector have been primarily fixated on the city-space rather than the semi-rural or post-industrial semi-urban creative landscape (Crossick and Kaszynska, 2016; Fleischmann et al., 2017). This has resulted in the policies and research relating to the creative sector being less oriented toward the rural or semi-rural space, despite an acknowledgement that the creative economy's landscape and needs may differ in these spaces (Gibson et al., 2010, Luckman, 2012). For geographical regions like County Durham, comprising only small cities (of 100,000 or fewer people),

questions then arise about how current creative sector-concerned policies might work, particularly when considering SI.

With these nuances in mind, we acknowledge that innovation policy should not be focused on one driver or site of activity. Some research suggests that a multifaceted approach can benefit regions. Sleuwaegen and Boiardi argue for "regional innovation policies that do not merely focus on one driver of innovation" (2014: 1519). Amongst drivers of innovation within a region, local authority-driven policies, third sector inventions, or external investment have traditionally played a key role; however the university can also contribute and not merely in the more traditional areas of research and development. Work by Florida et al. describes the university as a "powerful creative hub" (2010: 46), arguing its function is as part of a more extensive series of actors on the regional stage: "On its own, the university can be a necessary but insufficient component of successful regional economic development; to harness the university's capability to generate innovation and prosperity, it must be integrated into the region's broader creative ecosystem." (46)

In contrast with more widely recognised forms of innovation regularly associated with universities, SI speaks to different priorities and allows us to address the unique contributions of the university context. As Anderson et al. (2018: 51) note: "While their potential remains largely untapped, HEIs represent ideal partners to help break down or at least mitigate against multiple barriers to SI. They can serve as intermediaries between the subversive nature of SI and its need for institutional and political recognition." While the field of SI might be criticised as being "fragmented" with a "young and unsettled history" (van der Have and Rubalcaba, 2016: 1932), SI's interdisciplinary and multifaceted approach (Avelina and Wittmayer, 2018) can serve as a helpful modality. SI's capacity for this approach has been tracked through examples of research such as the use of creative design and co-creation to design new spaces (Deserti et al, 2018); co-creation of a defibrillator network across Austria (Windrum et al., 2016); cross-over approaches to improving childcare provisions using parent-based initiatives (Jenson, 2015); and the fair-trade movement and microfinance (Phills et al., 2008). Here the university's multidisciplinary capacity can make it an agent for the SI process, such as in response to regional or national government industrial strategy; this was clear in Creative Fuse North East, which specifically

reacted to the UK Government's new sector deal for the creative industries, with funding dispersed via universities.

Despite the new opportunities in the development of SI engagement and action, as Anderson et al. explain, "HEIs do not engage systematically in the field of social innovation so far. Universities participated in only 14.9 percent of the reviewed initiatives and in total organizations from the field of research and education were involved in slightly more than 21 percent of social innovations" (Anderson et al.: 2018, 50). Significant here is that the university plays a pivotal role as a driver of social change and development with the creative and cultural sector and that this investment in turn "can also lead to the overall wellbeing of communities, individual self-esteem and quality of life, dialogue and cohesion (UN, 2013: 10).

The concept of SI—and its application within the creative economy—can provide an effective mechanism to facilitate meaningful impacts within the local or regional space. As van der Have and Rubalcaba note, "Well-defined 'social innovation policy' could prove useful for facilitating the scaling-up of locally co-produced social innovations, so they diffuse in society" (2015: 1933). This research contributes to these debates by analysing the previously under-examined differences in interactions between communities, in particular the creative community, and the university enabled by two correlated but distinct standpoints: meaningful support and sustainable impact, facilitated by an action-research approach whose methods and aims align with SI.

Background and Context

In this section, we provide background and context to first, the Creative Fuse North East project and the nature of its action-research interventional support programme, and, second, to the geographic area and university through which this programme was delivered.

About Creative Fuse NE and the research programme

In 2016, a consortium of all five universities in the North East (NE) launched an unprecedented project for the region which was aimed at understanding, facilitating, and eventually supporting a fusion of the creative, digital and information technology (CDIT) sector itself, CDIT-related research across the universities involved, and research collaborations between SMEs in the CDIT

sector and universities. The project grew out of the Creative Fuse projects in Brighton and London (Sapsed et al., 2015). In early 2017 an initial survey was conducted to understand scope and geography of CDIT SMEs in the NE (Creative Fuse NE, 2017); this was followed by the provision of support (usually in the form of academic-led training) and innovation funding, directed by each university in a way appropriate to the needs of its surrounding region - particularly County Durham in the case of Durham University - and the institutions' unique disciplinary specialisms and expertise.

The research team shaped its interventional delivery activities between October 2017 and September 2018 in collaboration with participants, relying on the iterative approach of action research (Brydon-Miller, 2003) and a mixed-methods approach to track, adapt, and pivot interventions around their needs. The research and engagement activities were informed by participatory input at various points along the project's timeline to enable reflection and further engagement. Action research was chosen as the most effective mechanism as it allowed the team to develop meaningful, impact interventions while also gleaning qualitative insights into the cohort; it also allowed for a research-driven engagement against the challenging backdrop of a project facing the precarity of short-term funding (Bradbury, 2015). The work closely followed the inter-related phases of action research identified by Brydon-Miller et al. (2003): (i) planning; (ii) community engagement, (iii) taking action, (iv) evaluation of the action, leading to (v) further engagement and planning. Although action research was only formally mandated through the AHRC-funded part of the project, the researchers opted to extend this methodology into the interventional activities as it was seen as the most effective way to engage participants and to build continuity into the project itself.

Between December 2017 and July 2018, the team delivered support to 80 mSMEs (with 87 participants) including direct interventions, collaborative research, development workshops, and peer-to-peer (business-to-business) support, and local and regionwide networking and promotional activities. The majority (81.3%, n. 65) of participating businesses were sole traders (at 0.97 of a full-time employee [FTE]. Most were in crafts and art, with some having a digital focus. A noticeable number of businesses were not formally linked to formal creative networks – regional or national. A common theme amongst the creatives was that their businesses were new (under five years) and owners had experienced a significant life or career transition. The

businesses were mostly led by women (n. 62, 77.5%); 61.3% (n. 49) of mSMEs were located in a transitional economic area (County Durham and Tees Valley). The majority (70%) of mSMEs were located in County Durham. At the close of the project delivery period, the team conducted group and individual interviews with a representative sample of the overall cohort to explore themes relating to how the university is perceived and what amounts to meaningful support for this cohort.

The team also reached out to key rural and semi-rural community, cultural or creative spaces, social enterprises, or networks to serve as hubs of activity to host or support project events. In total, activities took place or were held at or supported by five identified hubs and enabling the dispersal of support across the rural and semi-rural spaces where creative practitioners were located. The project's approach followed SI practices (Anderson et al, 2018) through anchoring the programme through community groups and the local cultural fabric around the university.

Additional methods were drawn on to help shape the work. To help identify the movement of creative practitioners in the region the research team utilised a mapping approach to record their location and interactions. A variety of inclusive pedagogic methods, such as play-based learning, were used to deliver research and support activities (Cockshut et al., 2017). The action research focus enabled the "innovative ability and future sustainability" (Howalt et al., 2018: 15), aligned with the SI modality, allowing the project team to identify, monitor and track changes within new ways of thinking, setting up and doing creative work.

Reflective mechanisms such as evaluation forms and individual and group discussions were used, which allowed researchers to amend the project's support and scope of delivery further. Also, the research team used a research-informed and led approach to design content and delivery, drawing on their pedagogical and research backgrounds and collaborating with content experts within the university on workshops such as a funding advice workshop and a digital skills development course (Brown and Flood, 2018; Wright and Osman, 2018). All these experiences helped shape the themes explored during the interviews conducted toward the end of the programme, which comprise the findings of this paper.

About Durham University and its region

As identified in the literature review, universities have payed less attention towards the semi-rural or rural creative economy. This section highlights why being mindful of the location and status of the university may be relevant to effectively engaging in socially innovative activities. For the most part, Durham University is comparable to other universities with a long history in their local area and beyond (Woolston, 2015). A high-ranking university in a medieval city established by an Act of Parliament in 1832 and given its Royal Charter in 1837, Durham is among the oldest universities in England and is centred on a UNESCO World Heritage Site. The campus, like other small cities with universities, inhabits much of the city, with the local community working for or around the campus and the city population swelling by up to 30% (approximately 17,000) when students are in residence. Tensions have arisen between the university, the County Council, students and residents over issues such as excessive student property development and student conduct (Brown, 2014; Bennett, 2018).

Geographically, Durham and its County include a mix of rural and semi-urban spaces, with a countywide population that has scarcely risen above 500,000 over the past 100 years. County Durham is designated as an economy *in transition* by the EU. Overall, as a region, North East (NE) England has higher levels of deprivation and unemployment, along with poorer educational achievement and health outcomes than the national average (UK Government, 2015).

The regional and local deprivation contrasts with the relative wealth and position of the University as the County's only higher education institution and one of just five in NE England. Its outlook has typically been global and extra-regional in association and even make up of student population. The majority of its students come from other parts of the country, with 30% of its student population coming from outside the UK (Durham University, n.d.). Until recently, many of its associations and collaborative priorities were with business and opportunities beyond the County and, only a few graduates tended to remain in the area for work opportunities. Compared to similar institutions, the university has an unusually large impact on its regional economy. For example, the Biggar Report (2016) identified Warwick University as a close equivalent, but the influence of Durham University on County Durham is greater as a proportion of the region's GVA: 4.64% for Durham University versus 3.37% for the University of Warwick upon Warwickshire. These factors have led to local perceptions of remoteness and elitism, both on the part of those within the city where a growing university exerts pressures on housing and

facilities and on those dispersed across the wider region who do not appear to be direct beneficiaries of the University's presence. As the University has hitherto, like many UK universities, focused on knowledge exchange and commercialisation with larger companies at a national or international level that seem to have synergy with the institution, it has engaged less with the creative economy surrounding it (Oxford Economics, 2017). We argue that undertaking an SI-oriented approach may enable a university to redirect its attention on local prospects and prosperity. It suggests a narrative around means and approaches to engagement and impact activities that may—likely unintentionally, but significantly nonetheless—have overlooked its local position in preference for broader and further-reaching interests.

Social enterprise and innovation have played a role in the NE's CDIT sector, particularly around community and business support. The region itself has a small but growing creative sector, with identified pockets of activity predominantly around urban areas such as Tyne and Wear (Newcastle, Gateshead, and Sunderland) and Teesside. The NE was one of the few areas that showed fast growth in the CDIT sector in 2017 (DCMS, 2019). These more urban areas of the region have enabled clustering of activities within the CDIT sectors, which has led to research projects and government and policy-driven interventions aimed at scaling up growth and new opportunities. Research into the region's CDIT sector indicated some spread of activity in the more rural areas of the region, but this has been less consistently mapped (Creative Fuse NE, 2017). One challenge to overcome is the way SI-aligned enterprises, such as business start-up enterprise agencies, are constrained by government funding paradigms focused on funded support for the 'start-up' or 'ramp-up' phases of business growth (Mawson, 2010), rather than promoting or support sustainability or self-sufficiency. Further to these activities, the establishment of creative social enterprises have provided a critical SI intervention in the form of creative education and mentoring support in schools in areas including film making, fashion, and music, and are often the only education in the creative subjects offered to pupils (TICE, 2019). In the context of deprived areas like the NE, and 'in transition' County Durham in particular, there is an opportunity for a university to enter this space by adopting a new form of SI. Such interventions, as discussed in the findings below, optimise engagement in less densely populated areas with limited resources and opportunities for collaboration.

Methodology

The team conducted research interviews in August and September 2018 with a representative sample of nine individuals (=n.9 mSMEs out of 80 SMEs) who had participated in at least one part of the overall programme of support. The aim was to explore the mSMEs' experience in the programme and their perception of the role of the university. All participants were sole traders, with two being digital practitioners and the remainder involved in visual arts or crafts. Two of the participants had a previous formal interaction with Durham University (with one being a recent graduate), while seven did not. Three participants were male, and six were female. One participant was both a sole practising creative practitioner and an employee of local cultural heritage and social enterprise organisation.

Conversations around related SI topics—such as sustainability and meaningful support--allowed us to capture the ways in which the participants were connecting their creative activities with the needs and value of developing their entrepreneurial practice. Coding used 'essence-capturing' (Saldana, 2016: 4) techniques; the following four themes were identified as those that cut across all themes:

(1) The mSME's perception of the role of the university;
(2) The size and location of the mSME;
(3) Meaningful support for mSMEs;
(4) How should universities facilitate sustainable impact.

Within these, socially orientated goals were a recurrent response. For example, what made support 'meaningful' was their ability to pursue business for ends that were both economically viable but also boosted creativity in social settings, such as among those with health needs, and universities should facilitate 'impact' that supported this'. These cross-cutting themes allowed an analysis of SI development strategies that resonated with these creative mSMEs and identified the embedded ways that interventional opportunities can emerge from universities. Extracts from research interviews are quoted verbatim and in italics with each participant identified numerically, such as (p1), (p2), etc.

Limitations of this research included the small sample size for the interviewed group and the fact that individual interviews were conducted only at the latter stage of the project. Short-term funding also impacted as there was only time to interview a representative sample (9 participants) of the overall cohort (87 participants).

Research and Findings

This section highlights the themes that emerged from interviews exploring how a university can engage with SI through the themes raised above.

Perception of the university

It emerged during interviews that many participating creative mSMEs had little to no previous direct engagement with the university (or, in fact, any university), particularly in relation to receiving support for their creative business: *'I'd not had any experience or any opportunities at all to do anything with a university and that sort of side of things.'* (p8)

Despite this lack of exposure, however, there was a perception of the university as a positive force, which speaks to work identifying universities as being a common good to the wider community (Brown-Luthango, 2013; Tian and Liu, 2019): *'if you say university you think 'oooh'...yeah, it's going to be good.'* (p4)

This positive perception of the higher education institution is not entirely clear to respondents, however; as one participant (p1) explained when asked if they felt a university was a trusted source for support: *I'd say 'yes', but I'm not entirely sure why I'd say yes. There's just a perception, yeah.'*

One participant expressed their perception of the university in terms of a motivation to 'build it better':

> *you're [the university] not doing it because to try and get funding, you're doing it because you kind of want to build it better, make a change, and I think that's really important.* (p2)

For another, the perception was about the university 'breaking down barriers'. These barriers were particularly felt within the post-industrial landscape, a zone usually overlooked in city-based creative policy and research. Here the identity of community and social struggles were important factors in forming part of the SI role for the university:

> *I come from a very small town, Spennymoor, both my grandparents were miners, obviously my parents didn't go to university, I didn't go to university. So the fact that the university can offer something to people that are potentially not that academic, give something back to the community I think it's fantastic really, and if we could make that work I think that would be amazing. Look at all the surrounding villages that surround Durham, they've all got the same issues haven't they, ... I think as well it's great that we're actually breaking down barriers.* (p1)

This also raised ideas of what kind of responsibility a university might have to its local or regional area, or as one participant put it, its 'duty of care'.

> *I think [the university] has a duty of care towards the area that it's operating in. I think it has a duty of care towards the lives of those people. ... I think it has a duty of care to…to understand that actually large institutions wield huge amounts of power, and that they can wield that for good or ill.* (p6)

P6's sense that a 'large institution', such as a university, has a duty of care seemed in tension with the perception that it also has 'huge amounts of power' and can use it for 'good or ill'. Another participant used historical comparators to describe the significant 'standing' of a university within a community: *It's almost like the uni these days has the standing the church had years ago, in that it embodies best practice, morals* (p3)

The university was also seen as impenetrable as articulated by the same participant, who though they had more experience with universities than others in the cohort, still found the institution hard to access from the outside.

> *I'm very pleased with just I have found a little chink in the university armour.* [laugh] *through creative fuse and that then possibility of networking and the next step and the next step has never dried up and there was also a next step to follow up* (p3)

From the above, our participants shared a perception and experience of a university with two sides: first, powerful and at times impenetrable (*"university armour"*), and second, trustworthy and resourceful (*"it embodies best practice"*), hinting at Kleimann's articulation of the university as a multiple hybrid organization (2019). Also, SI is potentially a powerful leverage in terms of locating it more firmly into community groups and the creative businesses around a

university, echoing Howaldt et al.'s (2018) description of SI as ensemble performances. This complexity of roles and perceptions suggests that a university can benefit from the multifaceted and interdisciplinary nature of SI (Avelina and Wittmayer, 2018). Moreover, the university is set up to positively impact the communities around it, though it has to be mindful of its perceived (and real) power imbalances when 'breaking down' those real and imagined barriers that might traditionally restrict access (Comunian, 2017). These perceptions or enactions of power imbalances, however, have also been suggested by some SI researchers as a reason for universities' poor engagement with SI (Benneworth and Cunha, 2015; Audretsch and Link, 2017; Anderson et al., 2018).

Size and place for the creative mSME

Understanding participants' location and size in relation to their creative practices allowed researchers to classify the types of SI-driven interventions that would be sustainable, meaningful, and ultimately impactful by universities.

Size and location also created barriers for some creative mSMEs as far as a perception of access. This raises the importance of shaping SI interventions around the mSMEs' perceptions of location and size:

> *If you get towards the coastal side of Durham and into Teesside … there is no scene there, there is no creatives there. There are no galleries or spaces for you to use. Invariably I find myself constantly looking north … there isn't anything for me where I am and where I'm based ... there's no businesses spaces, there's nothing... there is very, very little.* (p7)

For one participant, recognising the 'reality' of the 'littleness' of the creative mSME in the region was critical to understanding the foundation of the region's creative economy

> *it's recognising … how the economic structure of the North East is. It's not going 'oh let's work with all these bigger companies' it's going 'actually the reality is it's all these little people'* (p6)

This issue of size, being 'little', for these creative mSMEs seems to differ from wider policy and concepts of 'growth' and 'expansion' explored in other areas of the creative economy. (Faggian et al., 2017) Like the fundamental principles of SI (Phills et al, 2008; Howaldt et al, 2014), they appear interested in maintaining or widening their capacity (*'something spectacular'*), but in a

sustainable way, also noted in Comunian's work exploring creative work in the Newcastle-Gateshead area (Comunian, 2009).

There was a general consensus that support delivered in remote or rural communities made a *'statement about their value'* (p6) and that *'the setting can make everything'* (p5). As one respondent noted: "*I think some people, particularly people who do work on their own and don't do a lot of travelling out and about a lot of the time would rather have something closer to them than travel into the city to do it.*" (p8)

Support delivered off campus (in one of the hubs the team used) appeared to make the experience more accessible, particularly if a participant felt daunted by going into the university.

> *So in some ways that probably did influence me: 'Oh, ok they are a bit more accessible...!' ... and it's not the university. You weren't going into the university building thinking...'* [hushed tone] *'I'm going to university.'* [laughs] (p8)

For the creative mSME in this space, ideas of size, space, and location were part and parcel with the ways they viewed notions of business sustainability within the rural/semi-rural landscape. The reputation of the university and SI-based interventions through action research-led support which is shaped around the specific needs of the mSMEs themselves. Such focus echoes the work of the Latin American Social Innovation Network (LASIN), which proposes a model of university SI engagement harnessing "the facilities, knowledge and resources at their disposal to serve their communities in an innovative, effective and sustainable way." (Anderson et al., 2018: 52) Paying due consideration to MacCallum and Haddock's (2009) assertion that SI cannot belong to one site of delivery and moving beyond the university, location factors must be factored into any SI intervention. Such interventions should occur "within a complex web of spatial interconnections." (Ibid). (7) This was particularly true when considering those mSMEs that were social enterprises or sites of collective creative activity that delivered a service to, or drew users from, across the region.

Meaningful support for mSMEs

To enrich the SI framing of the study, the team explored ways in which the interview participants felt the university designed support around their needs. Such interventions emerged in the context of *support* that had meaning and relevance to the mSME: relevant avenues of support; growth and connection; and supportive interventions which were person-centered and

community-based. Such 'meaningful support' came to refer to *how* a university can employ novel forms of collaboration and support. This process was a way of giving agency and voice to the participants to help shape any support delivered, and being agile and responsive in modifying interventions as warranted; this echoes underpinning concepts of SI such as an orientation toward sustained and meaningful (Ayob et al., 2016; Howaldt et al, 2014).

It appeared that the role and knowledge of the researchers themselves had a part to play in what was seen as meaningful support to participants. This suggests that the support delivery was not simply a formal process of professionalised support, but partly dependent on the meaningful rapport developed between the researchers and mSMEs involved,

> *so what's the university element? It's like I don't know… was very thorough, very proper… I felt very held. But without that 'chung, chung, chung'* [factory conveyor belt sound] *business model. … Yes, so it's definitely this human approach which you guys put in.* (p3)

One interpretation of this is that the research team, by extension, allowed a re-anchoring of the 'human' side of the university, embodying yet another of the hybrid and varied elements of a university and how it is perceived (Brown-Luthango, 2013; Kleimann, 2019). In addition, relevant networking, peer support and access to beneficial collaborations were raised as essential areas of support. For one, peer support was critical during a funding workshop led by the research team, providing a 'realistic' insight into the funding application process:

> *talking to the person [at] the next door computer, realising she'd been on her path for two years and now she was ready to make that final* [funding application]. *I thought ok, that just gives me a realistic [idea of how long it would take].* (p3)

Creative mSMEs appear to require sensitivity to the creative nature of their business or practice and also an awareness of the isolating and, at times, overwhelming nature of managing a business that benefits from both peer support and other types of support. This validation of the meaningfulness of peer support also resonates with the 'transformative potential' (Avelina and Wittmayer, 2018: 50) that SI can have as it blurs power dynamics and boundaries (Butzin and Tierstrep, 2018) that might usually exist through the prevalent paradigms of top-down support that may come from traditional university-community engagement or business support programmes.

How should a university facilitate sustainable impact?

The final area explored with the participants related to what kind of long term and sustainable impact the project (and university) had had on participants' creative business. The analysis of impact in this study meant looking beyond the short-term—often project-based and limited by external funding sources—interventions of universities to establish strategic mechanisms and consequences that sustained and collaborative engagement would have on creative mSMEs. In addition, for participants, impact included increased confidence, the launch or development of new products, new revenue, and investment in training and equipment:

> *I've invested in tools for workshops, I've contacted lots of different workshop providers, I know how much I'm going to pay now to host a workshop, I can do some accurate costing, got some really good contacts, and obviously got some experience now as well.* (p1)

> *it's given me some confidence to go on and deliver a couple of workshops on related material...* (p9)

One participant shared how they had modified their business model based on received support, resulting in new revenue for their business, saying it had *"boosted my kits sales straight away...."* (p8)

In terms of how far a university can deliver impactful SI-driven support and impact going forward, the response was largely positive, but mixed insofar as how this is implemented and what the nature of the support should be. For one, the university's *'visible presence'* enables it to serve as a *'catchment for resources'*:

> *the university is such a big presence in the NE and in quite an otherwise impoverished area, and so the university is like this antenna or catchment for resources so that things come.. the university has a presence to the world.... You know, so it's a visible presence here that can then help to channel and meantime have an awareness of what's available.* (p3)

One participant noted that universities had *'social responsibilities'*, but that it should be a partnering role, evoking the collaborative nature of SI (Butzin and Tierstrep, 2018).

> *it's one of its social responsibilities to take on [support]... But what they have access to is to a large pool of people with different experiences and it's that, again, it's then working in partnership. Cause I think it's not just isolation then, it's working in partnership.* (p5)

For another participant, the relevant impact of activities were critical to whether a university goes into the 'community', as they warned that *'it's always nice to get out into your community'*

but that it had to be relevant and never 'going out for going out's sake, […] If you're doing it just to do something different I kind of don't see the point, you know.' (p7)

However, the viability of any interventional support from a university aimed at creative mSMEs also appeared linked to the perception of how long the programme of support was in place for. This appears to relate to issues of trust and that creative mSMEs feel that 'it's not just going to disappear suddenly'—that the support is both meaningful and long term.

> *I think for a project like this just to run longer. And the idea that people from outside of the University know that it's will be there, that it's not just going to disappear suddenly, that it is something they can rely on. … I think something like this is very valuable and if they could just support it for…a longer…ten years…imagine that.* (p2)

But in the case of a time- and funding-limited project, which Creative Fuse was, how the work is carried out can help reduce the adverse impact of that sudden disappearance that participant 2 noted: by being effectively linked in with existing social enterprise organisations with a similar outlook and aims.

> *working with the really small businesses was really brave, and I think a really constructive thing to do. And I think as well because you linked into the organisations that are already doing that, so it's kind of, it doesn't feel like you're going to leave and there will be no legacy at all, because it was linked in.* (p2)

While there is an acknowledged benefit from a university providing a socially innovative role in the wider community, this is put at risk within the current paradigm of short-term funding and research staff (often at the early career stage) turnover that often typifies a great deal of socially innovative and action research-oriented projects coming out of universities (Raynor, 2019). It also suggests that whatever a university does, consideration should be given to what power imbalances may emerge when universities—seen as powerful, yet resourceful—engage with and deliver sustainable and impactful interventions, particularly with communities or groups ordinarily disconnected from the university, which has also been stressed by Comunian in her work on dynamics of creative collaborations (2017).

Analysis and Discussion

Many of the creative mSMEs who engaged with this project felt a world apart from the university, and this added to the importance of the action research modality that underpinned the team's interventional approach. There is also evidence that the action research-driven interventions, shaped around the articulated needs of these creative mSMEs, impacted on their businesses, from enabling the creation of new services or products, generating new revenue streams, enabling new collaborations, or refining or progressing business plans going forward. In our experience, the action research methodology is a useful framework for these types of interventions, particularly as they align well to the transformative capacity lauded by SI researchers (Benneworth and Cunha, 2015; Howaldt et al., 2018). It allowed the team to be responsive to the uneven conditions of the region in terms of the places visited, recognising the creatives were already located within community groups. Action research also allowed for the extension of interventions and to test their effect throughout the project. In following this approach, the pace and objectives of the research were designed to fit more firmly with how SI was lived and experienced in the local cultural fabric of Durham and also reflected the multifaceted nature of the SI approach (Avelina and Wittmayer, 2018).

Our initial finding suggests it was important that not only was support offered to creative mSMEs but that it was relevant and meaningful to the mSMEs as well, particularly about their identity as 'creatives' and 'little'. These mSMEs were often already familiar with other forms of business support and engagement on offer elsewhere through government or social enterprise agencies in the region. What appeared different in what the research team offered was the creative-relevant support and the supportive relationship the researchers fostered with the cohort, perhaps partly attributable to the nature of how a university is perceived (*'you're [the university] not doing it because to try and get funding, you're doing it because you kind of want to build it better, make a change'*) and its ethos toward ethical research.

Overall, there was a consensus that a university has a role to play supporting creative mSMEs, as an '*antenna or catchment for resources'*. What distinguished such activities was the trust in the motives and abilities of a university to do this. However, support should be relevant and sustainable for the individuals involved. In an economically deprived area such as the North East, and in 'transitional' County Durham in particular, this kind of engagement should represent a new form of SI and optimise engagement in an area with more limited resources and

opportunities for collaboration (as compared with more densely populated and developed economic areas). However, one challenge with the nature of this type of approach is how this might be scaled up beyond one research team into the wider institutional ethos, and in turn scaling up these results to non-participant mSMEs, thus spreading knowledge in this environment from just small and disparate communities into denser mechanisms of networking.

The mSMEs themselves portrayed a series of conflicts: first, around the nature of being creative; of managing the 'non-creative' aspects of managing a creative business; and, second the sense of isolation that comes from not only often working as sole traders but also compounded by being in a more isolated location (Bell and Jayne, 2010). *'In reality it's all these little people',* away from the denser mechanisms of networking and support that may be more readily present in an urban or clustered creative setting or in more conventionally associated approaches to innovation.

One significant challenge is how these creative mSMEs are not necessarily on the radar of the local university, nor is the university itself on the radar of the mSME itself, meaning that the mSME may not think of the university as the first port of call for support, resources, or as an SI collaborator (Ziegler, 2017). This could be born out of the perception of the university as an impenetrable fortress, where it can be hard to make a dent in the *'university armour'* that some of these mSMEs encounter when they do try and engage with the institution, or it could be due to the fact that many of these creative mSMEs have little to no previous experience with the university setting.

With nurturing confidence and sustainability appear to be a concern for these creatives mSMEs to survive, a university may need to factor in how they set those concerns at ease through their very approach to these types of interventions. For the mSME concerned about long-term access to these mechanisms of support, '*it's not just going to disappear suddenly, that it is something they can rely on',* the traditionally short term and limited nature of funded research projects may need to be reconsidered against this backdrop. The data suggests that a more nuanced, innovative approach is required for the delivery of *meaningful support* in these types of communities, driven by the local needs of the creative economy in question and built around structures that facilitate sustainability.

The main challenge for universities is their lack of engagement with the full breadth of what SI is or can be. As argued by Anderson et al. (2018), universities are often quick to engage with the social responsibility and engagement elements of SI, but less so concerning the wider potentialities of SI, such as collaborative research or sustainable growth. When universities consider using a SI-considered approach with groups that may be new to the university—such as the mSME creative beyond the urban creative cluster—it can expand its engagement with SI, enabling a furthering of SI research, providing valuable insights for policymakers and university research into areas such as the rural creative economy.

The university is seen as a source of knowledge and innovation. These forms of knowledge exchange and innovation can be oriented toward these tiny businesses, which often form the bedrock of many economies, especially beyond the urban space, for mutual benefit and as an enabler of societal change in a transitional economy.

Conclusion

This paper has outlined an action research project aimed at supporting creative mSMEs in an economically transitional area as an example of how universities can play a socially innovative role in their local and regional communities. The university can become its own SI nexus around the context of sustainable creative mSME business growth and/or development within the local creative economy. The nature of these forms of transformative support does not have a single recipe for success, however. A flexible and malleable action research approach allowed time to engage the creative mSMEs in articulating their needs and shaping (and reshaping) sustainable and socially innovative changes that provided meaningful support for them. This work contributes to the field of SI by demonstrating a model for how universities can be socially innovative with creative mSMEs in their regions. It also contributes to creative economy policy research about the role a university can play in providing meaningful and impactful support to the creative mSMEs, particularly in transitional and non-city areas.

Much more work needs to be done, and more universities need to engage in SI. The lack of universities taking on a more active role in SI is holding back the potential for transformative change and for HEIs to take on a more active role in this field of work, including research into

SI. As Anderson (2018: 53) notes: "while solid academic knowledge of social innovation remains scarce, many universities still rarely—if at all—participate in social innovation research."

Universities may struggle to embrace a long-term endeavour such as SI, however, as long as funding remains short-term in scope, and research staff face short-term precarity less opportunities for publication. The potentially adverse consequences of this ephemerality cannot be understated. It risks meaningful, long-term interventions being stalled or halted, thus damaging trust and sustainable businesses in communities—and working in direct contradiction with the principles of effective SI—but also raises the chance of losing key research staff, which could adversely impact relationship building.

Finally, the short-term funding approach works against the necessity of sustainability as a facilitator of meaningful support. In order for this type of SI to really take hold, therefore, institutions and research bodies need to address the potential elephant in the room: How can this type of SI become institutionally embedded rather than solely relying on external funding to carry out its *'social responsibility'* and '*duty of care'* to its surrounding communities, thus becoming a third mission pillar extending out across the university agendas of education, research and impact?

Acknowledgements

This research was supported by the European Regional Development Fund (25R16P00751) and the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AH/P005160/1). The authors would also like to thank the reviewers and special issue editors for their feedback, which greatly improved the quality of this paper.

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