National Centre for Universities and Business

SHAPE the future

SHOWCASING COLLABORATION:

Innovations in social sciences, humanities and arts for people and the economy

Autumn 2024

Contents

2 ..... Re-engaging children with reading through play

4 ..... Art and poetry transforming the housing sector

6 ..... Connecting Creators: Collaboration in the global immersive arts sector

8 ..... Hub for Innovation and Growth in Wales' Creative Industries

10..... Advancing green energy and social sustainability

12..... Uncovering hidden histories: exploring coded language in the 1921 census

14..... How better communication could help prevent evictions

16..... Cracking the class ceiling: helping employers tackle accent bias

18..... Transforming financial regulation: Financial Regulation Innovation Lab

20..... Creating future talent in the publishing industry

SHAPE is an acronym for Social Sciences, Humanities, and Arts for People and the Economy

Introduction

Joe Marshall
Chief Executive, National Centre for Universities and Business

Subjects across the social sciences, humanities and arts are sometimes seen as "nice to have" but their real-world impact is critical to humanity and the economy. New technologies have the potential to provide solutions to global challenges and economic growth. However, they will only do so if adopted by society. This requires insights into what people want and need.

The creative industries are one of the eight key sectors in the Government's new industrial strategy, reflecting the sector's role in exporting UK culture and driving regional economic growth.

SHAPE subjects directly help people, by identifying and addressing struggles and inequalities, and bringing joy and leisure. This allows SHAPE subjects to have a transformative effect on communities, industries, and even policy-making.

As businesses and universities join forces, they unlock fresh ways of thinking, blending creativity with practical solutions to address societal challenges. In this booklet, we spotlight these collaborations, showing how partnerships between the humanities and industry are creating positive change in everything from the housing sector to financial regulation.

The case studies presented in SHAPE the Future demonstrate the power of humanities-driven innovation.

Whether it's helping businesses overcome accent bias, using art to inspire new ways of thinking about urban spaces, or supporting children's literacy through play, these collaborations are driving progress, offering fresh perspectives, and shaping the future of both industries and society.

Re-engaging children with reading through play

Lancaster University has developed Litcraft, an educational initiative aimed at re-engaging children with reading through the popular game Minecraft. By creating virtual worlds based on famous literary works, such as Treasure Island and Kensuke's Kingdom, Litcraft allows children to explore these stories interactively within the game, motivating them to read the original texts.

Litcraft worked in collaboration with Blockworks design company to create a large scale build for Sherlock Holmes in Victorian London. The collaboration addresses a global decline in reading motivation among children, exacerbated by the rise of digital entertainment. By merging literary studies with interactive gaming, Litcraft presents a new way to reinvigorate children's interest in reading.

Exciting, new ways of engaging children with literary culture and reading using the computer game Minecraft have been created by researchers at Lancaster University, working in partnership with design company Blockworks and other investors.

Reading ages around the world are falling year on year as a result of the digital world we now inhabit.

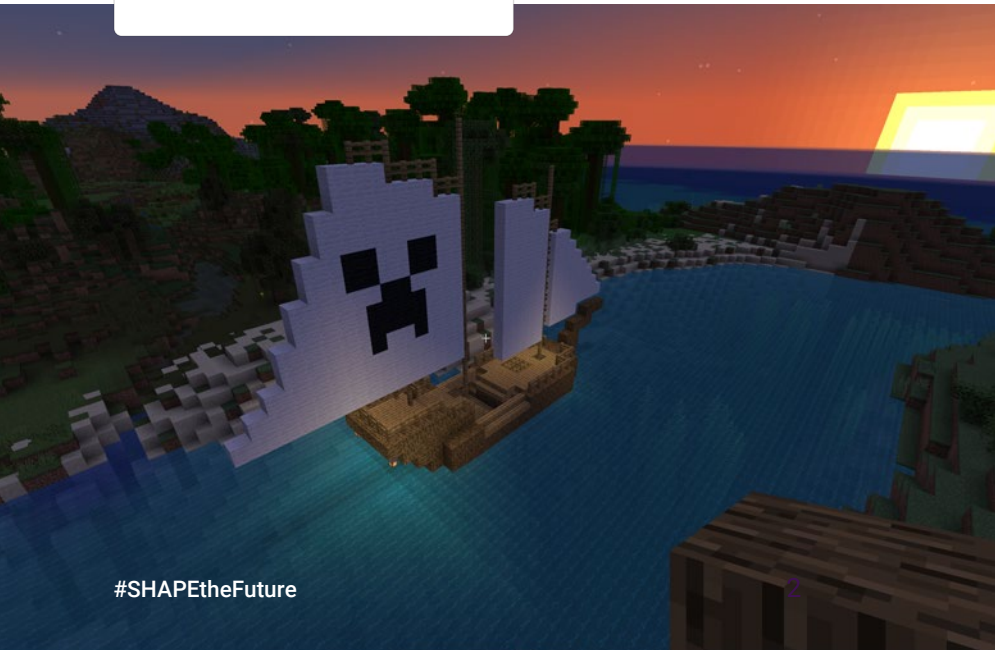
For schools this becomes a major problem and barrier to learning – not just in English Literature but across all subjects.

Litcraft aims to meet this major global and societal problem by re-engaging children with reading through play. The primary focus of impact is on motivation. If we can motivate children to read then they will continue to do so by themselves.

Litcraft, an educational resource that re-engages children with reading using Minecraft, links the reading of the text outside the game with shared in-game play, in a world-build that directly corresponds to the story.

Children are re-motivated to read as they experience reading interactively using the digital platform.

Smaller world builds for famous literary sites (such as Treasure Island) have been created by the Litcraft team at Lancaster, while a major large-scale build of Victorian London for Steampunk Sherlock Holmes has been made in collaboration with Blockworks.



The pirate ship from Treasure Island at anchor in the Minecraft world

Steampunk Sherlock Holmes Build: Victorian London in Minecraft

Sherlock Holmes
'Steampunk Sherlock Holmes' is based upon Charles Booth's colour-coded map of London Poverty 1898-99. The main build contains five interactive narratives from The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes and will be released at no cost on the Minecraft Marketplace with a predicted audience of 2-4 million.

Professor Sally Bushel

In 2024 Litcraft became a social enterprise to attract private investment, with major development planned for 2025-26.

Inspired by research into literary place and space, and the way readers visualise and navigate texts, Professor Sally Bushell, from Lancaster University's Department of English Literature and Creative Writing, saw potential in Minecraft's virtual worlds. She began to think about its literary possibilities after observing her son's engagement with the game, particularly as a means to engage reluctant readers for whom reading is a challenge.

Initially, literary islands were built in Minecraft creating accurate scale-models from the maps at the front of the text. Minecraft itself is a game that can best be understood as virtual Lego. In "creative mode" the basic blocks can be used to create anything that can be imagined.

The success of initial builds led to a unique collaboration with Blockworks and The British Library to develop the latest Litcraft project.

For Blockworks, this project develops their research portfolio and adds a fictional and literary dimension to their work.

The Knowledge Exchange partnership with Lancaster University provided insights into mapping and spatialising texts at a high level combining literary mapping and reading through an in-game experience.

Collaboration also enables the large-scale build to be launched commercially through the Minecraft marketplace for which Blockworks are already an approved vendor.

From 2024, Litcraft operated as a social enterprise with a hybrid business model currently in development. The aim is to continue to provide free resources to libraries but create a commercial whole-curriculum resource for primary schools.

Litcraft and 'Steampunk Sherlock Holmes' demonstrate how academic research can collaborate with creative industries, technology and cultural institutions to create impactful educational tools.

By merging literary studies with interactive gameplay, Professor Bushell's work offers a promising approach to the problem of reluctant readers in the twenty-first century.

Art and poetry transforming the housing sector

The Westpark development in Darlington is a unique housing project that integrates art, history, and community through a partnership between housing developer Bussey & Armstrong and Newcastle University. Over 15 years, Bussey & Armstrong have created homes with cultural and historical significance, addressing common criticisms of modern housing like poor design and lack of community spaces.

By embedding local heritage and public art, Westpark has set a new standard for housing developments, influencing local council practices and promoting sustainable, community-focused living. The collaboration has allowed academic expertise to drive innovation and regional regeneration.

A unique housing development in Darlington has seen a ground-breaking collaboration between sculptors, artists, designers, landscape architects, and fabricators to design a series of homes with culture at their heart.

Bussey & Armstrong Homes
ESTABLISHED: 1902

Newcastle University

Over the last fifteen years, Bussey & Armstrong has worked together with lead artist and poet Professor Bill Herbert from Newcastle University to develop an arts strategy which would enhance the sense of place and community among the residents.

New housing with a difference

The Future Homes Commission recently produced a report highlighting that up to 80% of people in the market to buy a house would not consider buying a property built in the last ten years. Reasons included bad design and a lack of communal space and natural light.

Bussey & Armstrong develops high quality, well-designed, affordable homes in the North East of England. A Knowledge Transfer Partnership between the company and Newcastle University aimed to embed knowledge of arts strategies within its infrastructure, and create a genuine unique selling point for its housing – that it is dedicated to creating a more meaningful environment for communities to live in.

From this partnership we have seen the creation of the Westpark development – the largest single site development in Darlington's history, with a school, shops, homes, hospital, sports facilities, and a public park. Westpark is a living integration of bespoke art, poetry, and community that taps into the social history, ecology, and heritage of the local area.

Local history made real

The site for Westpark borders on three areas of historical importance to Darlington: the medieval villages of Archdeacon Newton and Whessoe, and a site where Romano-British remains have been discovered. This provides the artists with the opportunity to explore how the interrelated areas of agriculture, trade and technical innovation which have defined the identity of region over the centuries.

The poetry which appears on the bridges, street signs, and windows of Westpark focuses on the interrelationships with people, the past, and the environment. Sculptures of local species such as the dingy skipper

butterfly and little ringed plover are crafted from local stone from Teeside-based quarries, coupled with ironwork, Corten steel, glass, and enamel work.

Even the street signs themselves are closely connected to the industrial and agricultural history of Darlington. Designed to be read many times and reflected on, verses accompanying the signs connect as a narrative, inviting residents to explore and stroll around the community at their leisure.

"Whether they're place names, or visuals, or even memories, these connections locate us in relation to our surroundings and each other and create a mutual frame of reference when sharing experiences with each other."

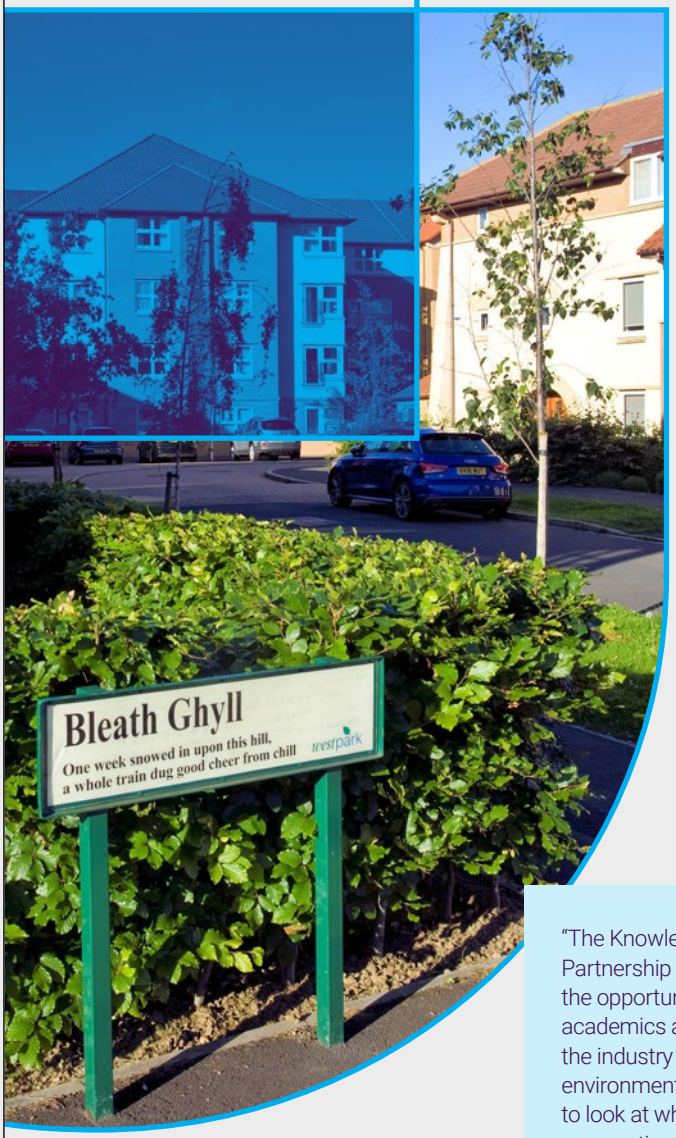
James Annesley - Associate Dean, Research and Innovation (Humanities and Social Sciences)

Changing the future of housing developments

The Westpark site has won and been shortlisted for multiple awards for its approach to design, regional regeneration, and constructing sustainable communities.

"The embedding of the arts strategy throughout Westpark led to an enhanced sense of place and community among the residents. As the 'Art in Westpark Report' showed, residents all felt the positive effects of the arts features in joining up the built environment with its immediate historical and geographical setting in ways described by one resident as "a sense of permanence. They are robust and meaningful ... connecting Westpark to the surrounding areas."

James Annesley - Associate Dean, Research and Innovation (Humanities and Social Sciences)



The Westpark development project approach has since been adopted as standard practice by Darlington Borough Council, directly impacting the work done by housebuilding companies across the region.

What are Knowledge Transfer Partnerships?

Knowledge Transfer Partnerships such as the Westpark project last between 1-3 years and support UK businesses wanting to improve their competitiveness, productivity, and performance by gaining access to knowledge and expertise with UK Universities and Colleges.

"The Knowledge Transfer Partnership has given us the opportunity to work with academics and others outside of the industry to create a better built environment. It has challenged us to look at what we do with a fresh perspective, and as a result, to improve our practice."

Tony Cooper, Managing Director, Bussey & Armstrong

Newcastle University's Knowledge Transfer Partnership portfolio covers many industries, cultural organisations, social enterprises, and academic disciplines. Its dedicated Knowledge Transfer Partnership Unit has a track record of successfully delivering more than 60 projects in the past 10 years.

Find out more about Knowledge Exchange Partnerships at Newcastle University https://www.ncl.ac.uk/business-and-partnerships/expert-solutions/ktp/

Connecting Creators: Collaboration in the global immersive arts sector

It was during the first Covid lockdowns in 2020 that the idea for the Immersive Experience Network, (IEN) first emerged. Unable to work, isolated artists and professionals in the live/location-based immersive experience (LIE) sector put aside any qualms about being competitors and were making connections via Zoom to offer support and share each other's pain.

The University of Birmingham's Immersive Experience Network (IEN) aims to provide a collaborative community, support commercial growth, and set industry standards in the arts sector.

The immersive arts sector is expanding rapidly, attracting younger, diverse audiences that traditional arts struggle to reach. IEN offers crucial infrastructure for creators, potentially driving innovation and economic growth. By lobbying for governmental recognition and providing a centralised platform, IEN aims to support the global growth of immersive experiences, creating jobs and expanding cultural offerings beyond major cities.

The experience inspired Dr Joanna Bucknall, Lecturer in Drama and Theatre Arts at the University of Birmingham, to reach out and discover fellow creatives from the LIE sector. They all saw a similar need for a collaborative community for new immersive creators wanting to explore and develop ideas for new shows. Together they started up a small incubator project to test the concept.

"For us, this offered us two huge opportunities," says Andy, whose London-based company Entourage provides bespoke immersive experiences for clients. "Firstly, to meet and support some of the most interesting and talented new immersive creators. And secondly, so that when brands and PR companies came to us with an idea, they wanted to execute for a big brand activation or campaign, we knew exactly the right people who we could bring in to deliver it for them."

The project started out with a consultation focus group and an extensive survey of over 100 immersive creators. The results showed a huge unmet need for peer networking and collaborative opportunities, as well as exposing a lack of advocacy for a sector that currently does not qualify for traditional funding streams and is yet to be formally recognised by government bodies as a creative industry.

After their first successful summit in May 2022, attended by 150 creators, and several smaller 'huddle' events

> **"By providing more support to this innovative and vibrant industry we will be able to produce better shows and experiences, providing audiences with high-quality culture and added security for those working in the sector. Support from funding bodies and government is essential if the immersive experience sector is to make the most of this potential."**
>
> **Joanna Bucknall**

in London, the incubator eventually evolved into the Immersive Experience Network (IEN) – the first professional body for the immersive sector in the world. The IEN is due to be launched globally at the start of 2025 as a subscription-based membership entity. IEN's three main aims are:

1) To provide a supportive and collaborative community for creators (both on and offline)
2) To accelerate the industry's commercial development and expansion
3) To standardise knowledge, best practice and resources.

"The UK is a global leader in the immersive sector and to remain so will need to be recognised as a credible and valuable part of the wider creative and cultural industries ecosystem," says Joanna Bucknall, who – with support from the University of Birmingham's institutional Impact Acceleration Account funding and the University's Enterprise' Medici Training Programme – has secured more than £85,000 in ESRC, UKRI and LSE grants, as well as a AHRC IAA award, to support the research and development of the IEN and its potential future commercialisation.

The team are currently developing the IENgine platform that will be the 'engine room' of the membership platform and is preparing to leverage IEN's industry data to lobby the government with a white paper that will give greater recognition of the immersive sector's cultural and economic currency.

A series of research reports instigated by Joanna and the IEN team into the immersive sector and its audience have already led to some important learning. For instance, many creators and the public often struggle to agree on a definition of what immersive experiences are. While escape rooms and interactive theatre have become well known, others like immersive audio and transmedia are less prominent and well-defined.

Encouragingly, the reports also proved what a strong demand there is for the immersive arts among young and diverse audiences – demographics that traditional arts and culture are struggling to attract. And that appetite exists right across the UK, demonstrating the potential for this sector to bring good quality creative jobs and cultural events to towns and cities beyond the usual metropolitan hotspots. Joanna's unique position as a first wave immersive maker and her insights as a practice-based scholar has been a key benefit of the collaboration thus far. Andy says: "Joanna has been able to connect the sector with a large amount of academic research currently being undertaken into the creative development of immersive work, which is shaping what IEN can offer and creating new opportunities for other academics to engage with creators dealing with the commercial and practical realities of the LIE sector."

IEN's team has now expanded to seven people, some of whom are also creative producers and directors of other organisations working at the intersection of events, theatre and immersive experiences. The membership subscription model will allow the team to raise finances while keeping LIE community support at the core of the Network's mission and focus on investing revenue back into the LIE community. They have also partnered with many of the biggest companies in the immersive sector, who help support their programme of events and activities. The summit in October 2024 saw the IEN support the return of Escape Room Industry Conference (ERIC), by hosting an escape room content thread across the summit programming.

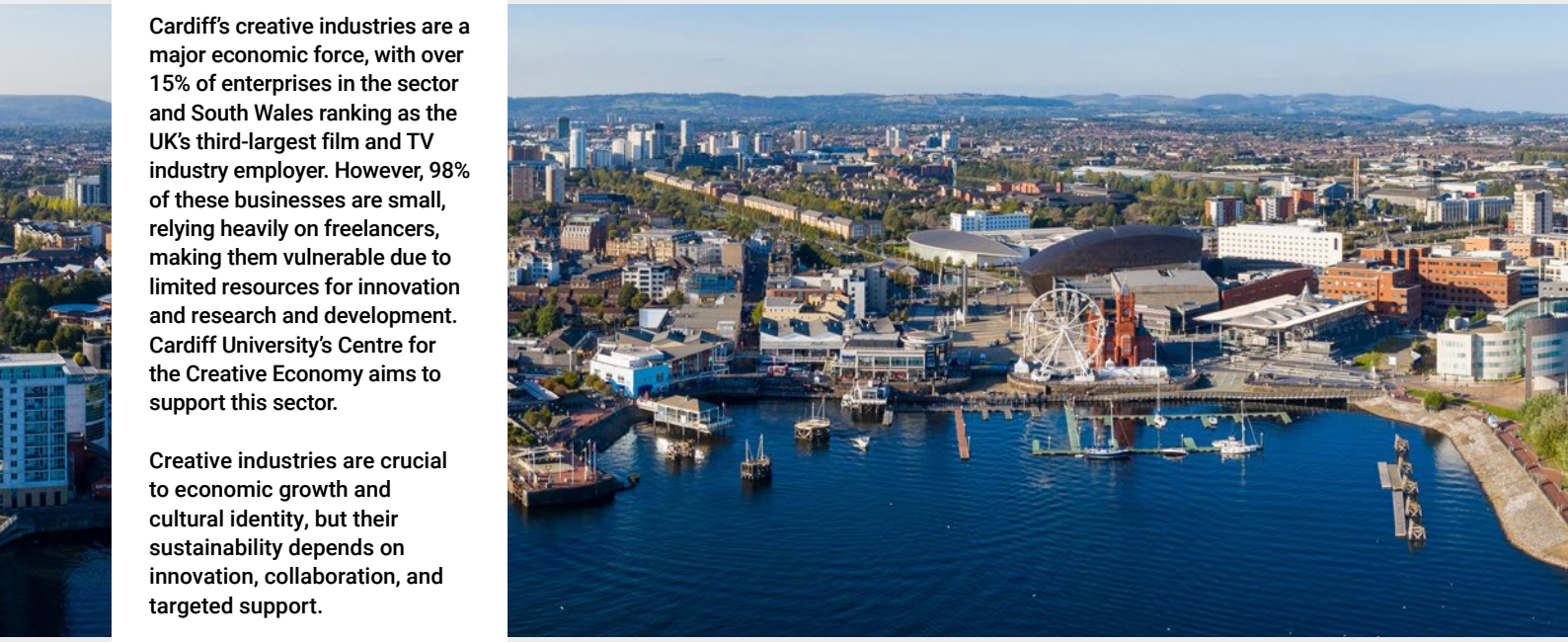
If the global launch is received as well as they are expecting, the network could very soon be expanding into the US, France and across Europe where the immersive experience sectors are growing. "More than ever, we believe that collaboration is going to be key to the continued growth of the immersive sector in the UK and internationally," says Andy Barnes, cofounder of the IEN.

Joanna Bucknall agrees, seeing the enormous potential of the IEN to act as a catalyst for the industry. "As well as an important support network, the IEN will make available the biggest publicly available market research ever created for this sector," she says. "We hope it will help support hundreds of commercial models, funding applications and investment decks for new and exciting ventures all over the world."

Hub for Innovation and Growth in Wales' Creative Industries

Cardiff's creative industries are a major economic force, with over 15% of enterprises in the sector and South Wales ranking as the UK's third-largest film and TV industry employer. However, 98% of these businesses are small, relying heavily on freelancers, making them vulnerable due to limited resources for innovation and research and development. Cardiff University's Centre for the Creative Economy aims to support this sector.

Creative industries are crucial to economic growth and cultural identity, but their sustainability depends on innovation, collaboration, and targeted support.



More than 15% of Cardiff's enterprises are in the creative industries. South Wales has more TV studios than anywhere in the UK outside London and is the UK's third largest film and TV industry employer (after London and Manchester). However, the success of the creative industries is fragile: about 98% of creative businesses in Wales are small, supported by a large freelance workforce, a composition that is typical of most creative clusters.

Cardiff University / Prifysgol Caerdydd

media cymru

Cardiff University / Prifysgol Caerdydd — Centre for the Creative Economy / Canolfan i'r Economi Greadigol

These small businesses are full of creative energy: they have a strong desire but little capacity to innovate. They lack the time and resources enjoyed by global media and digital companies to do research and development (R&D) or to exploit their intellectual property (IP) across genres. This makes their businesses precarious. In a fastmoving digital landscape, creative companies must innovate and collaborate to survive and thrive. Cardiff University's Centre for the Creative Economy creates a space for much-needed research and engagement projects focused on the creative industries in Wales. Within the Centre, two specific programmes of work are being delivered: Creative Cardiff, established in 2014 and Media Cymru (2022 - 2026). Previously, the Centre also delivered Clwstwr (2018 - 2023).

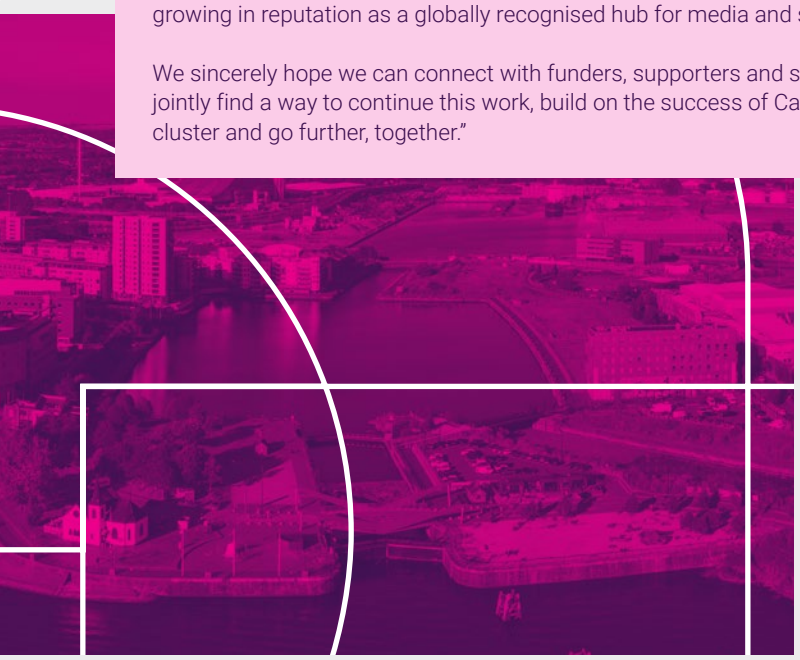
Creative Cardiff

Established in 2014, the Centre for the Creative Economy's initial focus was on network building, launching the Creative Cardiff network in 2015 to engage with industry and encourage cross-sector collaboration and innovation.

Head of Creative Cardiff Jess Mahoney said: "From the results of the pilot, it's clear that the framework offers an opportunity to better support, engage and enable the cultural and creative workforce across the entirety of the Cardiff Capital Region.

At Creative Cardiff, we love Cardiff's thriving creative workforce and take great pride in seeing all that the sector has achieved: bringing communities together to share experiences, driving jobs and growth, realising bold new innovations, and growing in reputation as a globally recognised hub for media and screen.

We sincerely hope we can connect with funders, supporters and stakeholders to jointly find a way to continue this work, build on the success of Cardiff's creative cluster and go further, together."



Creative Cardiff aims to deliver a vision of Cardiff as a connected, collaborative and inclusive capital of creativity. It is open to anyone who works, or wants to work, in the creative industries within the Cardiff Capital Region. Creative Cardiff host regular engaging and inclusive events and activities, both in-person and digitally, to amplify connectivity and foster collaboration and innovation within the city – and region's – creative industries. Creative Cardiff also delivers a range of projects to facilitate best practice and enhance the impact and reach of the Cardiff creative cluster.
Between July 2023 – March 2024, the Centre for the Creative Economy (via the Creative Cardiff network) delivered Creative Industries Cluster Hubs. This £200K pilot project was funded through the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) and Department of Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) as part of a £2.6M investment in 'Demonstrator' projects. These were a UK-wide portfolio of eight projects designed to explore the potential of existing creative industries clusters to grow, attract investment and deliver impact. This projected aimed to nurture creative talent in three local authority areas (Newport, Monmouthshire and Rhondda Cynon Taf) and resulted in 15 new jobs and up to £230,000 in additional revenue.
In 2024, Creative Cardiff partnered with Hypha Studios to offer free gallery and studio space for Cardiff creatives at two empty retail units on Cardiff's Queen Street.

Clwstwr

Clwstwr was an ambitious five-year programme to create new products, services and experiences for screen. Building on South Wales' success in making creative content, Clwstwr put research and development (R&D) at the core of production, creating a culture of innovation in the cluster to move the screen sector from a position of strength to one of leadership, internationally. Clwstwr created a platform for independent companies, SMEs, micro-businesses and freelancers to compete with global, highly integrated media companies. Clwstwr was led by Cardiff University in partnership with University of South Wales and Cardiff Metropolitan University.
Clwstwr built a number of activities and interventions, investing in and supporting 118 innovation projects in the Welsh creative industries. In a report measuring the impact of the programme, it was found Clwstwr's funded projects have directly contributed to more than £20m of additional turnover and more than 400 additional jobs in the creative industries. Between 2019 and 2022, Clwstwr directly contributed £1 in every £13 of annual turnover growth in the Welsh creative industries.

Media Cymru

Established in 2022, Media Cymru is a 5-year collaboration aimed to turn Cardiff and the surrounding capital region's media sector into a global hub for media innovation with a focus on green and fair economic growth.
Led by Cardiff University, this strategic investment programme brings together 22 media production, broadcast, technology, university and local leadership partners for the first time to supercharge media innovation.
Media Cymru is funded through £22m from UK Research and Innovation's (UKRI) flagship Strength in Places Fund, £3m from Cardiff Capital Region, £1m from Welsh Government, through Creative Wales, and £23m match funding from industry and university partners.

Media Cymru Consortium partners:

- Universities: Cardiff University, University of South Wales, Cardiff Metropolitan University (PDR)
- Development Agencies: Ffilm Cymru Wales
- Media and technology companies: Boom Cymru, Wales Interactive, Rondo Media, Unquiet Media, Nimble Productions, Rescape Innovation, Gorilla TV, fivefold studios, Dragon Post (Wales), Alacrity Foundation, Object Matrix, TownSq
- Local leadership: Welsh Government, Cardiff Council, Cardiff Capital Region
- Broadcasters: BBC Cymru Wales, Channel 4, S4C

Advancing green energy and social sustainability

Durham University's Durham Energy Institute (DEI) and leading renewable energy developer Ørsted have renewed their long-standing partnership to help deliver net zero emissions by 2050.

Durham University's Durham Energy Institute (DEI) and Ørsted have renewed their partnership to support the net-zero transition by 2050. The new five-year agreement appoints social scientist Professor Simone Abram as the Chair of Green Energy Systems and DEI Director. Shifting focus from technical research, the collaboration will now explore social aspects of energy, such as community engagement and social sustainability.

Ørsted will also continue funding scholarships and PhDs, nurturing future energy experts. This partnership aims to integrate environmental, economic, and social factors to advance inclusive research and innovation for a clean and just energy transition.

As part of the new five-year agreement, Ørsted will fund the Durham University Chair of Green Energy Systems. The Chair, who will also be Director of the DEI, will be Professor Simone Abram, the first social scientist to lead the Institute.

Previous research to come out of this partnership has focussed more on the technical aspects of offshore wind and whilst these studies have improved diagnostics within the industry, Professor Abram's speciality is more focused on society.

With extensive experience in researching the social aspects of current and future energy systems, the partnership now has an appetite to focus on how people engage with the energy transition as well as interactions between communities and energy businesses.

DEI and Ørsted both see innovation as central to the energy transition. Their work focuses on a holistic approach

Professor Simone Abram, Director of Durham Energy Institute and Chair of Green Energy Systems, said:

"The DEI is a home for integrated, innovative and visionary work in the field of energy transition. Our research is inclusive and insightful, recognising how deeply energy systems are embedded in everyday life, and how they can shape energy justice around the world.

"Our partnership with Ørsted provides the opportunity for exciting and pioneering research tied to valuable industry insight. Working together, we can have greater influence towards a clean and just energy transition."

to sustainability – incorporating environmental, economic and social considerations.

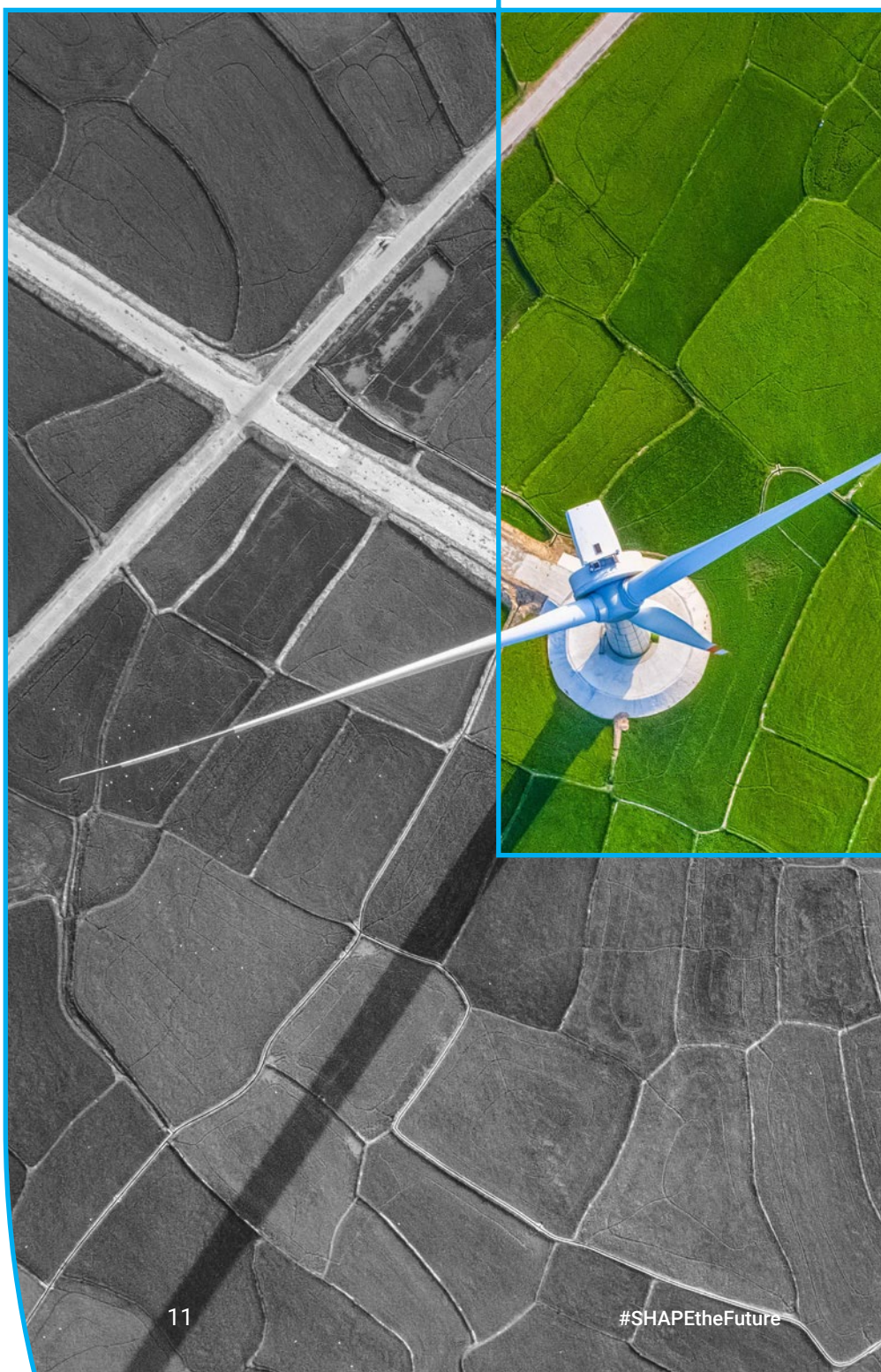
The ongoing partnership brings together Ørsted's industry-leading renewable energy knowledge, providing industrial insight and intelligence with DEI's research expertise.

The renewed partnership will also see Ørsted continue to fund MSc scholarships and PhDs, supporting the visionary and world-leading research taking place at the DEI.

Nurturing the next generation of energy researchers and technicians, the partnership will continue to position both organisations at the forefront of energy transition research and innovation.

The DEI and Ørsted have worked collaboratively for a number of years, sharing the joint aims of high quality research with real world initiatives, knowledge exchange and teaching.

David Bould, Head of UK Ventures and Open Innovations at Ørsted said; "We're so pleased to have Simone on board for this exciting project. Social sustainability is an area of exploration that holds so many possibilities for us. The communities in which we operate are extremely important and we want people to come along with us on this energy transition journey. Better understanding the social aspects of the way we work can only be a positive move for all parties involved.



Uncovering hidden histories: exploring coded language in the 1921 census

A collaborative PhD project at the University of London explores the 1921 census of England and Wales, using newly digitised data to uncover how socially taboo topics – such as poverty and mental illness – were concealed in historical records through coded language. In partnership with Findmypast and supported by the London Arts & Humanities Partnership, the research uses digital tools and traditional methods to interpret ambiguous language. By analysing these hidden patterns, the project aims to recover marginalised voices and offer fresh methodologies for historians.

This research challenges historical narratives that often obscure marginalised experiences. By decoding euphemisms in official records, the project makes historical data more accessible to both academics and the public, helping to foster a more inclusive understanding of the past. It also highlights how collaborations between academia and industry can enrich both fields and bring new insights into the public sphere.

Find my past

SCHOOL OF ADVANCED STUDY UNIVERSITY OF LONDON

As the largest release of census data in a generation, the digitisation of the 1921 census for England and Wales represents a significant opportunity for historians and the public alike to explore and recover marginalised voices and experiences.

A PhD project at the School of Advanced Study, University of London is taking advantage of this unique opportunity to explore topics in the census data considered 'taboo' and to address the challenges of interpreting ambiguous language in the historical record.

The project is a partnership with Findmypast, who in collaboration with the National Archives, digitised and released the 1921 census data in January 2022. Envisioned as a collaborative doctoral award, the project includes both academic supervisors from the School of Advanced Study and an industry supervisor from Findmypast

The collaborative doctoral award model encourages knowledge exchange between universities and partners in the private and third sector. The projects provide opportunities for doctoral students to work closely with industry supervisors, gaining valuable skills while contributing research insights to the organisation hosting them.

This doctoral award is supported by the London Arts & Humanities Partnership (LAHP), a collaboration between eight London universities and five partner organisations in the creative and cultural industries that is funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council. LAHP

supports doctoral students to become experts in their discipline and to develop the knowledge, skills, and experience required for their future careers either in universities or in a wide range of non-academic roles.

Jane Skelding, the student undertaking the PhD research, said: "My experience working with Findmypast has been very rewarding. The CDA model means that, in effect, the main contact at FMP is a third supervisor who has been my first point of contact and who, in my case, has been invaluable in navigating both the organisation and the datasets. Chris Brake facilitated the database access required as well as supporting my journey to acquire the digital coding skills I have needed to analyse the data. Chris has mentored my development in this area, from checking over code to helping me solve more complex data questions and challenges as the project has progressed."

Because the partnership lasts the full length of the PhD, it facilitates long-term relationship building between the academic and non-academic partners. It also brings benefits to the host organisation, allowing them to contribute to research that directly addresses their areas of interest.

Chris Brake, the Head of Data Products at Findmypast and the industry supervisor for the project, said: "It has been very rewarding for me and my colleagues to support Jane in her research, discuss her approach, and hear about her analysis and conclusions. As a team we put so much effort into digitising and releasing the 1921 Census and it is wonderful to see it the subject of such interesting research. We hope in time that some of the insight from Jane's work can make it back into how we present the census data to our customers."

Skelding's research recognises the complexities that arise when interpreting historical records, particularly those involving euphemisms and socially coded phrases that were used to conceal experiences considered 'taboo' by past generations. These coded phrases often reflect the social norms and values of the time, making it difficult for contemporary researchers to fully understand the context and meaning behind them.

To address this challenge, the project makes extensive use of the digitised 1921 census records and leverages Findmypast's extensive partnerships with over 400 archives and unparalleled access to back-end datasets. This kind of access to the census data is unusual for a PhD student and is only possible because of the support of Findmypast. Using both qualitative and quantitative methods, it will identify and interpret ambiguous language in the historical record. This will include the use of digital tools and algorithms to detect patterns in the data, as well as more traditional historical research methods, such as close reading and contextual analysis.

By analysing these datasets, the project aims to identify patterns in the use of coded language across historical records such as census data and newspapers. These patterns may include repeated phrases or terms that were commonly used to describe sensitive or stigmatised topics, such as poverty, illegitimacy, or mental illness, in a way that obscured their true meaning.

The outcomes of the project are expected to be of significant value to both academic historians and the general public. For historians, the project will provide new methodologies and approaches for interpreting census records, particularly those involving coded language. For the general public, the project will make it easier to understand and engage with historical records, particularly those that involve sensitive or stigmatised topics.

In doing so, it will contribute to a more inclusive and accurate understanding of the past, helping to bridge the gap between professional historians and the general public in the interpretation of historical records.

How better communication could help prevent evictions

The loss of a home through eviction can be financially and emotionally devastating. And with the cost-of-living crisis placing new pressures on low-income households, it's a situation being faced by increasing numbers of people.

With input from law firms and debt advisors, the University of Southampton's law school has explored why people facing eviction often don't seek help or engage with debt management processes. In collaboration with abrdn Financial Fairness Trust, the study surveyed tenants and borrowers, uncovering barriers they face. The findings highlight the need for better communication and compassionate support from landlords and lenders.

The project brings to light systemic issues in how housing debt is handled, particularly for vulnerable populations. With the cost-of-living crisis still a huge issue, improving these systems could prevent further financial devastation and homelessness. By influencing national policy and improving communication strategies, this work could create more compassionate and effective solutions for those at risk of eviction.

"I discovered from previous research that people actually don't tend to engage in the arrears and repossessions process even though their home is under threat," said Professor of Property Law, Policy & Practice Lisa Whitehouse. Letters pile up on doormats, court summons are ignored – "and there wasn't a lot of research explaining why."

Funded by abrdn Financial Fairness Trust, Lisa set out along with Research Fellow Dr Tracey Varnava to fill in the evidence gap.

The project was designed for policy impact from the beginning, with Ministry of Justice (MoJ) representatives on the advisory board and input from law firms and debt advisors. The team gathered data via a survey of 139 people who had missed rent or mortgage payments, along with conducting court observations and 53 interviews with tenants, mortgage borrowers, and advice service providers. The results are shedding light on why current practises aren't working – and what can be done to help.

"Phonelines would ring and ring"

"Our first finding was that people often don't obtain advice and support when they fall into housing debt," explained Lisa. In fact, 56% of survey respondents did not or were unable to access debt advice from charities, local councils, and online providers.

"Some people were simply going to the wrong place for advice – to their landlord or mortgage lender, who obviously aren't impartial. They'd just get rote responses or demands for repayment," said Lisa. "Others were put off accessing support because of a lack of face-to-face provision. They'd find online support too hard to navigate, while phonelines were overwhelmed and would just ring and ring. Even when people did get through, they'd struggle to articulate their situation. One mortgage borrower told us that once they got into debt, they were scared to speak to anybody."

The shift to a depersonalised approach was also reported by local housing authority officers, who said remote work practices during and since the pandemic had undermined their relationship with tenants. Covid exacerbated other difficulties too, with furlough, job loss, bereavement and ill-health all impacting tenants' and borrowers' ability to manage their finances.

Hidden factors

The study revealed other hidden factors which complicated people's experiences of housing debt. "Around 80% of people in our study reported that they had a health issue and of those, a large proportion had a mental health issue," said Lisa. "The research demonstrates that this can be cyclical: debt causes mental health issues, which leads to more debt, and so on.

"The main sense we got from the data was just the fear and anxiety that came from the threat of losing your home."

Universal Credit was shown to be more of a hindrance than a help in many situations. Some people found the system impossible to navigate, while others, seeking an advance payment, didn't realise that this functioned as a loan and accrued new debt without realising it.

One significant new finding was the role of communal heating and water charges, where social tenants are asked to pay a fixed monthly rate regardless of how much they have used. "As one of our respondents said, they can't even put a jumper on and turn the heating off. It completely removes their control and autonomy." Worse still, since these service charges are considered part of rent, failure to pay can lead to eviction. "As legal academics this is worrying to us. Normally you can't be evicted for not paying your gas or electric, but communal charges bring eviction in through the back door."

Amplifying voices

Lisa and Tracey set out their resulting policy recommendations in March 2024 at a roundtable in Westminster, which included representatives from the MoJ, Department of Work and Pensions (DWP) and Department for Levelling Up Housing and Communities (DLUHC). "Our particular recommendation is an improvement in communication, particularly from landlords and mortgage lenders," said Lisa.

"We've seen evidence of threatening language and of shaming, which is just counterproductive. Our advice is that a compassionate, individualised response is much more likely to be effective. Staff need to be trained as advisors, not as rent collectors. And they need to recognise that people who come to them may be vulnerable, particularly because of mental health issues."

Lisa and Tracey already work closely with Southampton City Council to develop better communication strategies for engaging with their housing tenants, and hope to work with other local authorities and social housing providers once the report has been widely distributed.

The team's other recommended national policy interventions include installing smart meters to ensure equitable heating charges in social housing, and encouraging people in debt to attend court hearings. "The new government Housing Loss Prevention Advice Service (HLPAS) means that people are now entitled to free debt advice or legal advice before and on the day of a possession or eviction hearing. So there needs to be a national information campaign about this free support. The evidence shows that if people show up for their hearing, they're less likely to be evicted."

The project report has resulted in plans for further talks with DLUHC this summer, and it has been suggested that amendments in the Universal Credit system for reporting income changes will be made, thanks to one survey participant's input. "This report is the culmination of ten years' worth of my work in this area," said Lisa. "It builds on what's come before, and the networks I've already developed with the Ministry of Justice and others. I hope there's potential for quicker policy impact now since the groundwork has already happened."

She is particularly proud that this research brings vulnerable individuals' stories to those in power. "Academic research can add real value to the work already being undertaken by representative groups like tenant activists. We can bring evidence together which amplifies the voice of a single person who feels powerless and disengaged, and make change thanks to their lived experience."

abrdn Financial Fairness Trust funds research, policy work and campaigning activities to tackle financial problems and improve living standards for people on low-to-middle incomes in the UK.

This piece first appeared in the Summer 2024 issue of Re:action magazine.

Cracking the class ceiling: helping employers tackle accent bias

76% of employers admit to discriminating based on accents, influencing hiring decisions. While accent bias is common, it can be limited through awareness and targeted strategies, such as raising recruiters' awareness and emphasising fairness and objectivity.

Accent is a strong indicator of social and ethnic background in Britain, often serving as a barrier to social mobility. By addressing accent bias, this collaboration supports greater diversity and inclusion across professions, challenging deep-seated stereotypes and promoting a fairer hiring process. By working with over a hundred businesses, including corporate law firms, recruiting and HR agencies, multinational banks, marketing firms, Queen Mary University of London's research findings have already influenced corporateculture, encouraging companies to embrace accent diversity and reduce discrimination.

How biased are you?

You probably know you shouldn't discriminate based on characteristics like ethnicity, gender, or disability. Yet you could be among the 76% of employers who admit to discriminating against candidates based on their accent. Indeed - a 2006 survey by the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development found that 76% of employers admitted discriminating against candidates based on their accent, while only 3% of employers recognised accent as a protected category.

Would you instinctively think a candidate less capable if they spoke with a Brummie accent? What about Scouse? Or Cockney? Even if you say you wouldn't, you're probably not surprised to see these examples given. What does that say?

Research for the Accent Bias Britain project showed how an established and enduring 'hierarchy of accents' persists in the UK. Attitudes have changed little in the last fifty years. The research was led by Devyani Sharma, Professor of Linguistics at Queen Mary University of London, and visiting professor Erez Levon.

It's perfectly normal to have stereotypical reactions. Intuitions help us navigate our daily lives. When we have a lot of information to process quickly, stereotypes and snap judgments free up cognitive effort.

But normal doesn't mean okay. If left unchecked, stereotypes can lead to discrimination.

More encouragingly though, the research also showed that accent bias is sensitive to context – people's responses are more nuanced when listening to actual speech. And that, with increased awareness, people can almost fully suppress this bias under certain conditions – for example, in a professional recruiting context. The team have since worked with over a hundred organisations and thousands of individuals to respond to these findings – engagement which is producing new questions for researchers as their theories are tested in a real-world context.

The ability to ignore stereotypes and process information more consciously is called cognitive control. The team tested five strategies to beat bias:

1) **Raising awareness:** Recruiters are alerted to the existence of accent bias.
2) **Identifying irrelevant information:** Recruiters are asked to commit to ignoring irrelevant information like accents when making their decisions.
3) **Committing to fairness and objectivity:** Recruiters are asked to commit to an agreed set of objective criteria before making judgements.
4) **Increasing accountability:** Recruiters are told they will have to justify their decisions.
5) **Appealing to multiculturalism:** Recruiters' attention is drawn to diversity and its positive benefits.

All strategies had some effect, but Raising Awareness had the strongest and most consistent impact. This means when people are alerted to the existence of accent bias, differences between their ratings of job candidates with different accents drop.

Interestingly, such interventions for racial and gender bias are no longer very effective, as the message has become too familiar. But the team's finding for accent awareness suggests people have not thought as much about their unconscious reactions to accents.

These findings form the basis for research-based training and consulting to help employers tackle accent bias. The tutorials cover why accent differences exist, what accent bias is, what accent discrimination is, and provide evidence-based advice on how to minimise it.

With accent perhaps the most recognisable sign of social and ethnic background in Britain today, this research-based consultancy could help expand access to high-status professions.

Partners

UKRI funded the original research, which drew upon theories and methods from sociolinguistics and social psychology. The Sutton Trust commissioned a further report on speakers' experiences, with national recommendations.

Based on the findings, the team is now helping employers to recognise and tackle accent bias in their hiring process.

The team have spoken with over a hundred organisations and thousands of individuals, including the Social Mobility Commission, Sutton Trust, government departments, corporate law firms, recruiting and HR agencies, multinational banks, marketing firms, schools, and universities - as well as contributing to a review of the Equality Act.

They have found high engagement among employers, linked to changes in corporate culture. There has been growing critique of employers expecting employees to 'code-switch' to a formal style and manner at work and widespread interest in allowing people from a range of backgrounds to be their authentic selves, supporting better work environments and productivity. Accent diversity forms part of that culture change.

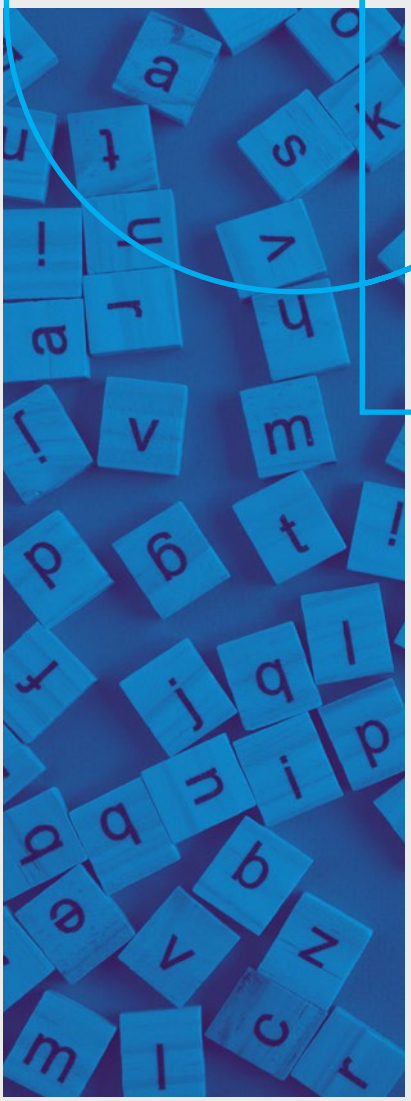
This engagement is leading to new research questions, for example how these effects differ across seniority, professions and sectors, social characteristics, and even across countries.

Key achievements

The collaborative work has shown that recruiters can disregard accent when alerted to the problem, as well as when candidates speak confidently and knowledgeably, regardless of their accent. In this way, both listeners and speakers can start to tackle accent-based discrimination.

Sir Peter Lampl, founder and chairman of the Sutton Trust, said of the findings: "Today's research provides new evidence on the major role that accents play in social mobility… A hierarchy of accent prestige is entrenched in British society."

Requests for help from companies and charities are rising. In an interview with the Financial Times, Prof Devyani Sharma, the



lead researcher for the project said: "We've had a very unexpected level of uptake and interest. I think there is a mood to address this issue."

Next steps

The team are developing an e-learning course to make the findings and recommendations more accessible. The course is expected to launch this autumn and will be available at accentbiasbritain.org.

Transforming financial regulation: Financial Regulation Innovation Lab

The Financial Regulation Innovation Lab is a collaborative initiative aimed at establishing Glasgow as a global leader in financial regulation. Funded by Innovate UK and involving partners like FinTech Scotland and the universities of Glasgow and Strathclyde, the lab focuses on using innovative technologies like artificial intelligence to simplify compliance and enhance environmental, social, and governance (ESG) reporting.

The collaboration not only advances the field of financial regulation but also exemplifies how academia and industry can work together to drive meaningful, practical solutions in a rapidly evolving regulatory landscape.

The Financial Regulation Innovation Lab is a multi-disciplinary programme aiming to make Glasgow City/Region a global centre of excellence in financial regulation. It is funded by Innovate UK as part of its broader innovation acceleration programme, and is a partnership with FinTech Scotland, University of Glasgow, and University of Strathclyde.

The overall principle of the project is to be practice-led, to include financial services, financial technology and financial regulation. FinTech Scotland specialises in ecosystem development, comprising over 220 FinTechs, 36 Financial Services and Professional Services Companies, Regulators, Government Officials and Universities.

Inspired by the UK Government's 2021 Kalifa Review, FinTech Scotland commissioned a Research and Innovation Road Map for 2022 to 2031. Priorities include: applications of artificial intelligence to simplify and reduce the costs of financial regulation compliance; enhancing compliance with the rapidly developing field of environmental, social and governance reporting, and more broadly sustainability reporting; implementing the UK Financial Conduct Authority's Consumer Duty and addressing financial inclusion; and countering cyber and financial crime.

University of Strathclyde colleagues have focussed on finance and management science research, including applications of artificial intelligence, and developing executive education. Glasgow, have complemented this with contributions in Law, Entrepreneurship, Marketing, Strategy, Management, and Professional Development. The project is connected with two other RCUK-funded projects, of Future Finance, and UK Productivity Institute. As the project has developed, both university partners have realised further potential - across quantum, computing, space and earth observation data.

As an industry-led project, FinTech Scotland - Scotland's cluster management body -has introduced an industry advisory group with representation from the leading financial services and professional companies, Glasgow City Region and the UK Financial Conduct Authority. The project utilises a structured delivery framework that focus on actionable research, skills development, innovation calls, and knowledge exchange.

Innovation calls have become a vital feature as the project has developed, led by FinTech Scotland in the partnership and providing strong engagement with practice in a series of industry working groups nominated from the Industry Advisory Group to work on four areas including Simplifying Compliance through the application of artificial intelligence and emerging technologies, Shaping the future of ESG, Addressing Financial Crime and consumer duty identified through the Research and Innovation Roadmap.

Researchers at the University of Glasgow have come to know the working groups as they have planned and implemented two of the four innovation calls, which has informed their thinking on how to shape actionable research and micro credential skills development. It also help them to get to the heart of how our work can help Financial Services in a very practical way.

Innovation calls involve larger Financial Service companies developing innovation challenges and use cases based on operational challenges they deal with every day. Once the use case/ challenge is agreed the team work with the Fintech community inviting them to apply to our innovation call, comprising of face to face briefings with our Financial Services partners and academics, a period of proposition and product development, and demo days over three months. Their first calls attracted 70 applications from FinTechs across the world and they have taken forward around 40 applications in the first two innovation calls, which focussed on artificial intelligence and on environmental, social and governance compliance. They consider the best submissions as eligible for pilot development grant awards.

The innovation calls are the project's 'secret sauce', allowing rich engagement with practice among Financial Services, FinTechs and Regulators. Current activity includes developing the actionable research stream, white papers, micro-credentials for professional and executive education, and a series of knowledge exchange contributions as blogs and webinars. They are pursuing research in RegTech and artificial intelligence, environmental, social and governance reporting and business strategy, consumer duty, financial inclusion, addressing financial crime, and skills and capabilities development for the sector. Innovation calls, webinars, blogs, white papers and micro-credentials are all being delivered, or in advanced stages of development.

What are our lessons so far?

The most challenging, and most insightful, dimension is developing and following relationships in practice. The subject matter is critical, of financial regulation. Many regulatory changes have been introduced in 2023 and 2024, for instance in the UK and in the EU. The team's challenge remains understanding how regulation impacts practice, and also the wide range of practices, companies, entrepreneurs and technologies. Regulatory change opens up practice, and does so in many ways, with training requirements, case studies, new data sources, technology solutions, entrepreneurial ventures and organisational change.

Ultimately, this project has introduced a way of working in which we are undertaking our academic activities - research, learning and teaching, engagement - in parallel with industry and regulatory practice, which allows us to ensure our work is highly relevant, industry leading and impactful.

Creating future talent in the publishing industry

Supporting businesses in the North East to thrive and enabling transformative experiential learning are integral components of Northumbria University's ambitions.

The University's partnership with one of the world's largest publishing houses, Hachette UK, and reading and writing development organisation, New Writing North, is just one of the collaborations that is making this vision a reality.

Northumbria's one-year MA Publishing programme gives students a guaranteed work placement with the global publisher and the opportunity to work on live writing development projects. It allows them to apply their learning in a real-life context, gain valuable work experience and enhance their knowledge of publishing and the wider writing industries.

In the groundbreaking conception of this MA, Northumbria had the benefit of New Writing North's expertise so as to design a programme fit to respond to recognised skills gaps within the contemporary publishing industry. The MA covers all stages of the publishing process, from commissioning and editing through to marketing, sales, data, and production of print, digital, and audio books. It aims to make a change within the industry with a particular focus on talent from the North of England.

Students are taught both by a team of expert academics, led by novelist and former Faber editor Richard T. Kelly, and by New Writing North's Programme Manager Will Mackie, with the support of specialists and staff from Hachette UK and New Writing North. In particular, the extent to which senior Hachette UK staff are engaged in the delivery of this MA constitutes a remarkable corporate commitment on the publisher's part and is a unique factor in why the collaboration has proved so innovative and successful.

The students' final projects have included topics such as sustainable book production, artificial intelligence's effects on publishing, the rise of South East and East Asian (SEEA) translated fiction in the UK, and the current state of and future prospects for both literary agenting and literary festivals.

Claire Malcolm, Chief Executive of New Writing North, said that the new programme supports the broader ambitions of the region: "The new programme will build up the creative industries infrastructure and workforce in the North East to support our broader plans to develop a new Centre for Writing here."

Richard Kitson, Deputy Group CEO at Hachette UK, said: "We all share a vision for this MA to develop the next generation of publishing talent and to give graduates a real world understanding of the skills needed to work in our amazing industry and the myriad roles available."

One graduate from the 2022/2023 class went on to be recruited by Hachette UK as a rights assistant for a number of their imprints, and the publisher has offered recruitment support to the

Northumbria University's partnership with Hachette UK and New Writing North has led to the creation of a groundbreaking one-year MA Publishing programme, which guarantees students work placements and hands-on experience in the publishing industry. Designed to address skill gaps within the sector, the programme covers all stages of the publishing process and focuses on nurturing talent from the North of England.

This initiative is part of Northumbria University's broader ambition to support regional businesses and enhance experiential learning opportunities. It strengthens the North East's creative industries, drives social mobility, and contributes to the region's cultural and economic development.

Northumbria's Chief Strategy Officer Dan Monnery said: "The new Centre for Writing will help to drive social mobility by providing opportunities for individuals to engage with writing and publishing, establishing a new hub for talented writers in the North of England.

"We're delighted to be supporting New Writing North in this ambitious plan which will bring huge benefits to the regional economy."

remaining alumni. Other alumni have gone on to roles including academic consultant/sales rep for Norton and bookseller for Waterstones.

Hachette UK have also gifted more than £2,000 worth of brand-new books to the IntoUniversity centre in Newcastle – a partnership between Northumbria and Newcastle Universities which supports young people facing disadvantage to achieve a place at university.

The partners have recently submitted a bid to the Department for Culture, Media and Sport's Cultural Development Fund to finance the development of a physical location for the Centre for Writing. This new centre would provide opportunities for professional writers and publishing businesses across the North as well as enable writing and reading initiatives with our communities.

Alongside the success of the partnership with New Writing North and Hachette UK, Northumbria has fostered valuable partnerships with Baltic Centre for Contemporary Art and the British Film Institute. Recently the University has also announced a new collaboration with Tyne and Wear Archives and Museums and Live Theatre which will open up new real-world learning opportunities for students in subjects ranging from creative writing and theatre, through to occupational therapy and early years education, further strengthening the region's cultural prominence.

Conclusion

SHAPE the Future has showcased a series of impactful collaborations between universities and businesses, demonstrating how SHAPE partnerships are sparking innovation across diverse sectors. From arts transforming housing, to accent bias being challenged in the workplace, these case studies highlight the vital role of the humanities in addressing complex societal challenges.

The value of creativity, critical thinking, and cultural insight is becoming ever more apparent. The ten case studies featured here exemplify the commitment of NCUB members to harnessing the power of the SHAPE subjects for the benefit of society. These collaborations are not only reshaping industries but are also offering new perspectives on how we engage with the world around us.

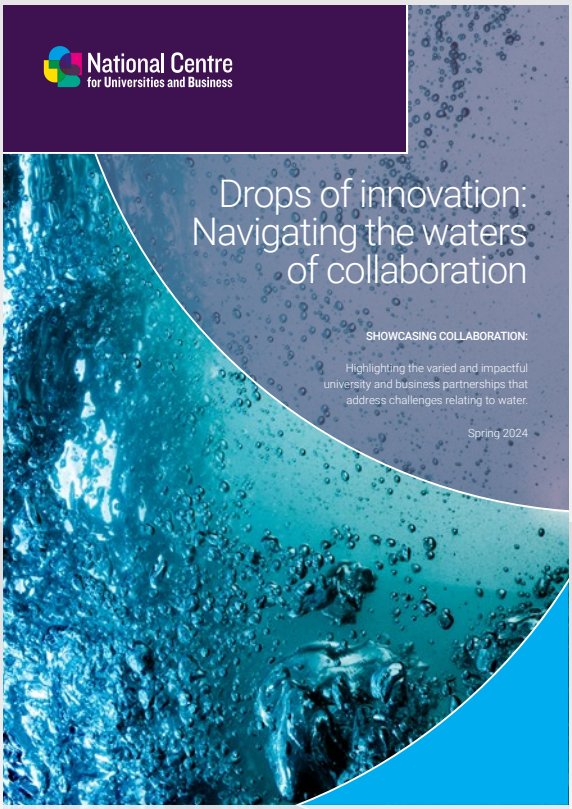
In a time when the need for adaptable, human-centred approaches is growing, the importance of SHAPE in business cannot be overestimated. Whether through uncovering hidden histories, re-engaging children with literature, or pioneering financial regulation reform, these projects are transforming how businesses and people think and operate.

This booklet serves as a reminder of the rich potential that SHAPE collaborations hold in building a more inclusive, creative, and innovative future. By continuing to foster these partnerships, universities and businesses can unlock fresh opportunities and lead the way in addressing the critical challenges of our time.

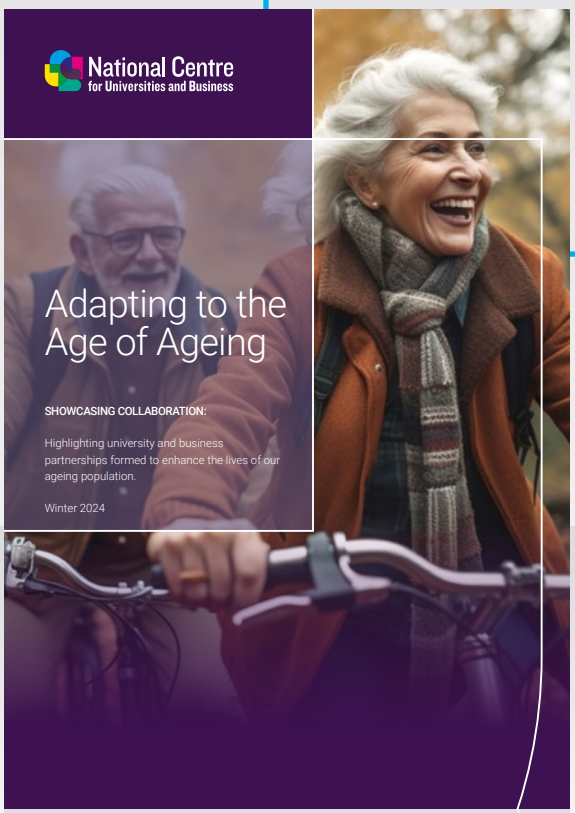
More from NCUB's showcasing series

Each quarter we will focus on a different theme under which we will celebrate and share the best of NCUB member collaborations. Previous editions include:

Nature's Nexus



Drops of innovation: Navigating the waters of collaboration



Adapting to the Age of Ageing

Making Small Mighty: The Power of University-SME Collaborations

National Centre
for Universities and Business

The National Centre for Universities and Business is the collective voice of the UK's universities and leading businesses, promoting and shaping their collaboration through research, digital insight and advocacy to secure the UK's prosperity.

HELPING THE UK PROSPER, BY WORKING FOR THE UK TOGETHER

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