

Intermediating policy affordances in creative clusters: the Boost initiative[☆]

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ABSTRACT

Since 2012 UK policy surrounding regional development has increasingly prioritised the development of creative clusters to support and bolster the country's creative economy. The Creative Industries Clusters Programme (CICP) is one such example of the current models of support being enacted through this policy and is mainly delivered by universities who act as intermediaries between the creative sector and government. The primary mechanism of support involves micro-funding initiatives aimed at supporting creative small, micro and medium-sized enterprises (SMME) within a given, usually medium to short, timeframe. However, as the sector is largely composed of micro-enterprises and freelancers, ongoing instability due to these types of funding cycles often leave organisations vulnerable once support ends resulting in a need to either ameliorate the impacts of these types of policies or holistically rethink these types of policy models. This paper examines the BSU Boost initiative (formerly Counting House), developed at Bath Spa University (BSU), as a case study of a 'policy instrument affordance' within the UK's creative cluster policy environment. Drawing on Hellström and Jacob's (2017) theoretical framework of policy instrument affordances, this paper argues that Boost operates as an intermediary mechanism that bridges critical gaps in public funding cycles. It offers new possibilities—or affordances—for creative micro-enterprises by enabling them to access grants that would otherwise be out of reach due to pre-financing requirements. Through a reflexive case study methodology, the paper details how these affordances do not emerge from the policy instrument alone but rely on active intermediation by the university. Acting as an intermediary, BSU translates complex policy into practical support through Boost, but faces challenges like administrative friction and sustainability concerns. This case highlights the importance—and limitations—of university-led intermediation in making policy affordances real for creative clusters. Accordingly, this initiative serves as an illustrative case of alternative mechanisms for addressing the limitations inherent in short- to medium-term policy frameworks designed to support creative clusters.

1. Introduction

One of the significant flaws in current cluster policy aimed at the creative economy in the UK and indeed internationally is the lack of sustained policy support after a given life cycle of funding has concluded (Brenner and Schlump, 2011; Namyślak, 2020). This represents a particular funding model which initially leans heavily on the public purse but also aims to develop public-private partnerships (Roberts and Lowe, 2024); this model is replicated in other parts of the world (see: Kiese, 2019; Namyślak, 2020; Stam, 2009; Zheng, 2010). Consequently, creative clusters that have been publicly funded to achieve specific goals within a defined period often face a 'cliff edge' where funding dries up

and supportive policies cease (Markusen and Gadwa, 2010). This abrupt end to support is particularly damaging in the creative economy, a sector already fraught with risk and characterized by organisational survival rates lower than most other sectors of the economy (Comunian and England, 2020; Kerrigan et al., 2020). This precarity was evident even before recent external shocks, which in the UK context include Brexit, the COVID-19 pandemic, the cost-of-living crisis, and newer fiscal policies that have had unintended negative consequences for the sector (see Comunian and England, 2020).

Meanwhile, major policy interventions like the Creative Industries Clusters Programme (CICP) perpetuate a model of short- to medium-term support where universities are positioned as important intermediaries

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between government and the sector. This model has been historically ad hoc where explicit planning for what follows after a given life cycle of funding and support has been provided is not clear (UKRI, 2024). As a result, creative and cultural organisations that become dependent on these instruments face existential threats to their viability as funding cycles end (Fleming, 2007, pp. 107–125). This precarity creates a double-edged sword where the intermediaries, in this case universities tasked with managing these policy instruments, are compelled to seek further funding which is a process that can take months or years to materialise, if it does at all. This can lead to a cascade of challenges, including rising business liquidation rates, as creative and cultural micro-enterprises and small and medium-sized enterprises (SMMEs) are forced to move on, rendering the impact of the original project potentially transient.

In response to this systemic challenge, a need has arisen to reconceptualise forms of funding and financial support within this particular policy landscape. This article applies the theoretical framework of ‘policy instrument affordances’, as articulated by Hellström and Jacob (2017), to analyze a specific intervention that emerged from the UK’s recent cluster policy environment. The concept of ‘affordance’, originating in ecological psychology (Gibson, 1979, 2002), describes the action possibilities that an environment or object offers to an agent. When applied to policy, it allows for an analysis of how policy instruments create potential for action, which may or may not be realised depending on the context and the actors involved. This paper uses the affordance framework to examine the Boost project, an initiative developed by Bath Spa University (BSU) in the southwest of England. Boost emerged from BSU’s work as a delivery partner for Bristol and Bath Creative R + D, one of the nine creative clusters funded by the CICIP (UKRI, 2024). This geography-based cluster ran from 2018 to 2023 and sought to super-charge the region’s creative industries through investing in SMEs, micro-businesses and freelancers working across the broad themes of Digital Placemaking, Expanded Performance, Creative Ecologies, and Amplified Publishing (See: UKRI, 2024; Dovey and Virani, forthcoming). The Boost initiative was designed specifically to function as a bridge between funding cycles, addressing a critical barrier for creative micro-enterprises; namely, the inability to pre-finance projects as required by many grant funders.

This article will argue that Boost exemplifies numerous policy instrument affordances under Hellstrom and Jacob’s (2017) framework. Moreover, a central argument is that this affordance is not inherent in the policy design itself but is actively created and sustained through intermediation; indeed it emerges through the intermediation process usually enacted by those tasked to manage these projects at the university. The university, acting as an intermediary, is essential in translating policy, managing risk, and navigating institutional bureaucracy. By examining this initiative, the paper illuminates not only how policy affordances can be materialised but also the significant challenges and limitations involved, including institutional friction, power imbalances, and long-term sustainability. Nevertheless, such initiatives may also provide further evidence of why universities themselves are uniquely positioned to deliver policies like the Creative Industries Clusters Programme where there exists the necessary flexible and agile infrastructures, no matter how slow they might be to respond, allowing for the types of support enacted by higher education institutions like BSU.

2. The concept of affordances

The concept of affordance was introduced by ecological psychologist James J. Gibson (1979). It emerged as a part of wider work conducted by Eleanor J. Gibson who instantiated and continually developed an influential body of work known as the Gibsonian ecological theory of development (see Gibson, E. J., 2002). Affordances according to James Gibson describes the action possibilities that objects and environments offer to agents, whether beneficial or detrimental. He defined affordances as ‘what it offers the animal, what it provides or furnishes, either

for good or ill’ (Gibson, 1979, p. 127). This idea emphasizes that actions are grounded in the possibilities available within an environment, contingent on the agent’s abilities, countering earlier views that overlooked environmental influences on perception and behaviour. Gaver (1991) expands on this by noting that in any interaction between an agent and a system, enabling conditions involve properties of both. These properties are the system’s affordances; namely, what it allows the agent to perceive and do. For example, dry wood affords making a fire if the agent has the skill, a spark, and suitable conditions. A hammer affords driving a nail, given certain competences and circumstances.

Chemero (2003) highlighted the action-inducing aspect of affordances, suggesting they correspond to verb phrases ending with ‘-able’ (e.g., a cliff is ‘fall-off-able’). Understanding actions related to a tool or program requires elaborating on these properties relative to a niche where they are causally effective (Scarantino, 2003). The concept has been widely adopted in design, human-computer interaction, architecture, informatics and, more recently, policy.

Further, Norman (1988) proposed that ‘the term affordance refers to the perceived and actual properties of the thing, primarily those fundamental properties that determine just how the thing could possibly be used’ (p. 9). Echoing Reed (1996), he viewed affordances as exploitable properties of objects, referring to them as ‘features’ (p. 9). See Table 1 for the key aspects of affordances.

Norman (1988) observed that users may not be aware of all possible affordances of an artifact, and designers might not anticipate all uses. History shows many examples of technologies repurposed beyond their original intent. For instance, the telephone evolved from a device intended for listening to remote musical performances (Preece, 1876) to an essential tool for social interaction (Lodge, 1926).

Affordances exist inherently but are graded (as in gradation) and conditional, operating on probability or propensity (Gaver, 1991). Hutchby (2001) suggested that ‘affordances are functional and relational aspects which frame, while not determining, the possibilities for agentic action in relation to an object’ (p. 444). Recognizing these aspects is central regarding how policy instruments function and influence behaviour.

3. Policy instrument affordance (Hellstrom and Jacob, 2017)

Applying the concept to policy instruments, affordances are potential, dispositional, and relational, highly dependent on context and sometimes hidden from both policymakers and targets. Nonetheless, a policy instrument’s affordance is an objective property as it confronts an agent in a specific setting. Just as a hammer can drive a nail regardless of the user’s knowledge or availability of a nail, affordances are real properties of the agent-environment relationship, observable in action (Gibson, 1979).

Hellstrom and Jacob (2017) propose a theoretical framework to understand how the characteristics of policy instruments (or interventions) facilitate or limit policy action by developing the notion of a

Table 1
Key aspects of affordances (Norman, 1988, 2013; Reed, 1996).

Possibilities, not necessities	Affordances denote potential ways an object can be used or how it can constrain a user, without prescribing a single necessary action. They specify possible interactions between entities, whether humans, animals, or objects.
Context-dependent efficacy	The effectiveness of an affordance depends on circumstances; it may exist without ever being actualized. An affordance might never manifest, even though it remains a potential within the human-instrument relationship.
Relational nature	Affordances are not inherent in objects alone but emerge from the relationship between the object and the agent. Tangible features may give rise to affordance relations, but these are embedded and can vary with context and user. This relational aspect means affordances can be challenging to identify for a particular actor under certain conditions.

policy instrument affordance. The concept seeks to explain how policy instruments influence their targets, promoting or inhibiting certain actions depending on context and the actors involved (Le Galés, 2016). Recognizing that instruments can have both intended and unintended consequences (Hood, 2010), the authors argue for a concept that captures the mutual shaping of instrument, context, and actor without sacrificing conceptual clarity. Drawing from James Gibson's (1979) work the paper extends the concept of affordance to policy instruments and suggests that they are technologies of governance, that offer certain affordances to their targets. These affordances are relational and depend on the interaction between the instrument and the actor within a specific context. Their paper illustrates how policy instruments can be analyzed through their affordances by presenting four typologies, outlined in Table 2.

To effectively analyze instrument affordances, Hellstrom and Jacob (2017) emphasize considering both the opportunities and constraints offered by the instrument and the dispositions and contingencies of the actors and environment. This involves examining the mutual relations between the instrument, actor, and environment to understand how instrument features (affordance modalities) lead to specific impacts. This affordance-based approach bridges functionalist perspectives, which focus on the practical effects of instruments (see for example: Becker et al., 2010; Kline and Moretti, 2014), and constructivist views, which emphasize the social and political context (see for example: Lascoumes and Le Galés, 2007). By highlighting the interplay between instrument properties, context, and actor propensities, the framework has the potential to aid policymakers in anticipating the impacts of instruments in new contexts and enhancing policy learning.

4. Applying the theoretical framework to creative cluster policy in the UK

The concept of policy instrument affordances can offer insights into current UK creative cluster policy, specifically the CICP, by illuminating how specific policy instruments facilitate or constrain actions within the creative economy. By viewing these instruments as technologies of governance that afford certain possibilities to actors such as businesses, universities, and local governments, we can better understand how they influence behaviour and lead to desired policy outcomes. As alluded to

Table 2
Typology of policy affordance according to Hellstrom and Jacob (2017).

Typology	Description	Policy Example
Enduring affordances	Instruments that trigger both action and learning, leading to lasting changes.	European Research Council's funding requirements inadvertently standardized career trajectories across the research community by specifying detailed eligibility criteria (see Beerkens, 2019).
Temporary affordances	Instruments that stimulate provisional action without leading to lasting learning.	Funding schemes that mandate partnerships between universities and small businesses, which often result in short-term collaborations without enduring impact (see Frolund et al., 2018).
Preparatory affordances	Instruments that foster learning and capacity building but do not immediately trigger action.	Programmes promoting knowledge transfer can build long-term collaborative capacities without immediate tangible outcomes (see Simonin, 2004).
Inactive affordances	Instruments that fail to facilitate action or learning due to certain features being ineffective in specific contexts.	Research funding schemes that emphasize organisational processes may have little impact if the targeted leaders do not perceive the need for such guidance (see Yuki, 2008).

earlier these actors also play an increasingly important intermediating role that is discussed in section 5.

The UK government has actively promoted creative clusters to bolster economic growth, innovation, and cultural development (Swords and Prescott, 2023). Initiatives like the Creative Industries Clusters Programme (CICP), funded by UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) through the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC), aim to do three things: first, foster collaboration between academia and industry; second, support research and development (R&D); and third, enhance the global competitiveness of the UK's creative sectors (UKRI, 2024). As such applying the framework to the CICP would entail measuring or analysing the following in Table 3.

The effectiveness of these policy tools relies on the relationships among the tool, the actors, and the environment (see Table 4). Firstly, the success of a policy instrument hinges on the target actors' ability to perceive and utilize the affordances. For instance, micro-creative enterprises might lack the resources to engage with certain funding mechanisms, limiting the instrument's efficacy. Second, local economic conditions, existing infrastructure, and cultural factors can enhance or impede the affordances of a policy instrument. In regions where creative industries are already concentrated, policies might have a greater impact compared to areas lacking foundational support (see Roberts and Lowe, 2024). Third, the design of the policy instrument itself such as its simplicity, accessibility, and relevance, affects its affordances. Instruments that are transparent and align with the actors' goals are more likely to be effective. Affordance analysis hence might allow policy-makers to do a number of things such as: (1) understand why certain instruments are underutilised or ineffective, allowing for adjustments that make them more accessible or relevant; (2) tailor policies to the specific needs and capacities of different creative clusters, recognizing that a one-size-fits-all approach may not work; (3) design instruments that not only prompt immediate action but also build long-term capabilities and networks within the creative industries; and finally (4) be aware of how instruments might produce unintended actions or fail to produce the desired effects due to overlooked affordances.

5. The importance of intermediation in applying an affordance framework to university – industry collaboration in the creative economy

As this paper will show, intermediation is a vital component of identifying and indeed enacting policy instrument affordances. Virani

Table 3
Applying Hellstrom and Jacob's policy affordance framework to the CICP.

Typology	Potential measurement areas
Enduring affordances	The AHRC's investment in research consortia not only produces immediate collaborative outputs but also potentially builds enduring networks and capacities within the creative sector.
Temporary affordances	Some instruments stimulate short-term actions without fostering long-lasting change. For instance, one-off grants or competitions may encourage creative businesses to engage in specific projects but fail to create enduring relationships or capabilities. While they can boost activity temporarily, their impact may wane once the funding ends.
Preparatory affordances	Policies that provide training and skill development for creative professionals fall into this category. By improving skills in digital technologies or management, these initiatives prepare individuals and organisations to capitalize on future opportunities, even if they do not lead to immediate changes in behaviour.
Inactive affordances	In some cases, policy instruments may fail to stimulate action or learning due to misalignment with the needs or abilities of the target actors. For example, if a policy requires complex application processes that small creative enterprises find burdensome, the intended support may remain unused, rendering the affordance inactive.

Table 4
Specific methods applied in this study.

Method	Description
Document Analysis	A systematic review and content analysis were conducted on internal and external documents related to Boost. These included BSU strategic documents, financial reports, funding applications, evaluation reports, policy briefs from UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) and the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC), as well as relevant legislative and governance documents. Document analysis allowed the researchers to verify and supplement information gathered from insider observation and reflection, facilitating comprehensive data triangulation.
Participant Observation (Yin, 2015)	Researchers actively participated in a variety of project-related activities, including strategic planning meetings, operational discussions, stakeholder workshops, and community engagement events. Observational data was systematically recorded, capturing real-time interactions, decision-making processes, and operational practices, thereby enabling an authentic understanding of Boost's functioning. Participant observation was instrumental in identifying implicit organisational norms, stakeholder dynamics, and procedural bottlenecks, which were integral to the study's analytical insights.
Semi-Structured Interviews (Brinkmann, 2014)	Targeted semi-structured interviews were conducted with key stakeholders, including BSU staff, Boost partners, funding agency representatives, and creative industry beneficiaries. These interviews provided critical qualitative data on stakeholders' perceptions, experiences, and insights regarding the efficacy, challenges, and affordances of Boost. Interviews followed an open-ended format, allowing participants to articulate nuanced and detailed accounts, subsequently analyzed thematically to identify common patterns and unique insights.
Reflective Practice (Schön, 2017)	This involved regular structured reflection sessions where the research team critically examined their involvement, methodological decisions, and data interpretations. Reflective practice ensured continuous methodological transparency, allowed for the identification and rectification of biases, and provided a structured means of capturing tacit knowledge and experiential insights integral to interpreting qualitative data effectively.

and Pratt (2016) explored the dynamics of collaboration between higher education institutions and small, medium, and micro-sized enterprises within London's creative and cultural industries. They argue that traditional models of university-industry collaboration, which often focus on high-technology sectors and measure outcomes in terms of patents or material products (Acworth, 2008; Jong, 2008), are insufficient for the creative and cultural sector due to organisational asymmetries and differing scales. The authors contend that the normative 'black box' approach to knowledge transfer - recently re-oriented and understood as knowledge 'exchange' (see Mitton et al., 2007) - assumes passive diffusion and lacks consideration for institutional embedding. In the context of the creative economy, where outputs and organisational forms differ markedly from high-tech industries, a more nuanced methodology that is sensitive to differences in products, processes, and contexts is necessary. They emphasize that knowledge transfer/exchange here benefits from active intermediaries who facilitate collaborations by engaging in brokerage, translation, and network building (Virani and Pratt, 2016). Importantly they are essential in managing collaborations, especially when partners had no prior working relationship.

5.1. What are intermediaries in the creative economy?

Intermediaries in the creative economy act as crucial connectors between individuals, organisations, and sectors to enable collaboration and exchange. While academic discussions on intermediaries vary across business, marketing, and finance, three core strands have emerged in the literature surrounding the study of the creative industries: knowledge intermediaries, cultural intermediaries, and creative intermediaries (Virani, 2019).

Knowledge intermediaries primarily feature in university-industry collaborations, especially within technology transfer, where intermediaries bridge gaps between research and commercialisation (Yusuf, 2008). Their role is often framed in terms of innovation, facilitating the exchange of tacit knowledge and supporting processes like patenting. However, this approach tends to overlook the relational aspects of collaboration, including trust and human dynamics, particularly within micro-enterprises in the CCE (Virani and Pratt, 2016). Despite these limitations, the recognition of intermediaries as connectors remains fundamental to understanding collaborative processes within the sector.

The sociological strand of research, influenced by Pierre Bourdieu (1984), conceptualises cultural intermediaries as active agents who shape tastes and translate value between production and consumption (Hracs, 2015; Negus, 2002; O'Connor, 1998; Pratt, 2008; Taylor, 2013). These intermediaries are vital in an economy centred on symbols and qualities (Callon et al., 2002; Scott, 1999), where production does not follow a linear process. Recent work highlights their role in fragmented markets, using curation and digital platforms to connect producers and consumers (Balzer, 2014; Jakob and Van Heur, 2015).

A third category, creative intermediaries, focuses on actors embedded in predominantly urban creative economies who enable cross-sector collaborations and community-based activities (Fleming, 2004; Virani and Pratt, 2016). Operating as brokers, gatekeepers, advocates, and knowledge resources, these intermediaries both serve and represent their communities, mediating between grassroots networks and institutional actors. Their ability to bridge diverse spheres of production and consumption highlights their central role in the CCE's relational and place-based dynamics.

5.2. Universities as intermediaries in the creative economy

As such intermediaries in the creative economy act as brokers by facilitating introductions, managing expectations, and ensuring compatibility between partners before projects commence. They navigate the complexities of differing incentive structures, with academics seeking to disseminate ideas quickly for academic recognition and micro-enterprises focusing on commercial interests that may require confidentiality (Bruneel et al., 2010). By translating the 'languages' of academia, policy and industry, intermediaries help align goals and mitigate conflicts over intellectual property and time constraints.

Many universities in the UK have been asked to take on the intermediary role with regards to creative cluster policy, however this has taken a particular shape. Universities as intermediaries for creative economy collaboration, and in many instances as micro-financiers for creative and cultural projects, has resulted in universities creating intermediary roles 'within' their institutions to position themselves as qualified to distribute funds from government to the sector. This brings to light a situation where the intermediation activities themselves are undertaken by a chosen few within the university; often hired as part of academic teams to deliver their programmes. As such the boundaries of where intermediation begins and ends can be clearly located within the university where funding cycles have an internal impact - attesting to the riskiness attributed to short term contracts within the university system. The end of a particular project not only means the end of funding for creative and cultural micro-organisations but also for a potential workforce within the university, where upward mobility into the system

is never guaranteed. Positions such as post-doctoral positions, or research associates, or indeed external organisations such as creative hubs that are partnered to these projects also face a precarious future and timeline; and these are usually the positions that enact intermediation roles facilitating the flow of funds from the university into the sector. As such a lack of planning with regards to policy instrument affordances, if not thought through, can have an adverse impact within as well as outside of the university.

What is clear is that intermediaries play a crucial role in identifying and leveraging policy instrument affordances for the creative economy within publicly funded university-industry collaborations. In the creative economy which is characterized by small and micro-sized enterprises (SMMEs), project-based work, and a high degree of informality, the affordances of policy instruments are not always immediately apparent or accessible. Intermediaries help bridge this gap by interpreting, translating, and activating these affordances, enabling more effective collaborations between universities and industry partners, as has been done with Boost.

6. Methodology

This research employs a mixed-method qualitative approach, focusing on an in-depth case study analysis of the Boost initiative at Bath Spa University (BSU). This methodological approach aligns with established qualitative research standards, emphasizing transparency, reflexivity, and methodological rigour through triangulation to ensure validity and reliability (Bryman, 2016).

The primary methodology utilized is an insider case study approach. This insider perspective facilitates a detailed exploration of Boost by leveraging the authors' active involvement and experiential knowledge within the project. Insider research methodology offers considerable advantages, particularly in capturing the intricate internal dynamics, operational nuances, and stakeholder relationships that external methodologies may overlook (Coghlan and Brannick, 2014).

To mitigate potential biases and ensure methodological rigour, reflective practice was employed systematically. Reflective practice involved regular journaling, peer review discussions, and structured debriefing sessions throughout the project's lifecycle (Berger, 2015). This method provided a disciplined approach to critically examine researchers' positionalities, identify and control potential biases arising from their direct involvement, and continuously validate emerging insights against documented experiences and recorded data. Desk research was conducted concurrently to complement the insider approach, ensuring that findings were situated within broader academic and policy discussions.

Data triangulation across these methods was applied, cross-validating findings to ensure comprehensive analytical depth and reliability. Detailed documentation of all methodological processes, from data collection to analysis, was maintained, enhancing transparency and providing a clear audit trail for future scrutiny or replication. In sum, this insider perspective resulted in a 'thick description' of the institutional processes, negotiations, and frictions that are central to the creation of a policy affordance but are often invisible to external analysis. It allows for a granular account of how the initiative was navigated through the university's legal, financial, and ethical frameworks. This approach is justified by the need to understand not just the 'what' of the policy intervention but the 'how' exemplified by the messy, relational work of intermediation.

6.1. Methodology limitations

We acknowledge the inherent limitations of this approach. The primary risk is a lack of critical distance and the potential for an overly positive or uncritical narrative. To mitigate this, we have deliberately grounded our analysis in the external theoretical framework of Hellström and Jacob (2017) and the literature on university-industry

intermediation. Furthermore, this paper explicitly foregrounds the challenges, limitations, and power dynamics of the Boost model. The aim is not to present an unqualified success story but to offer a candid, scholarly account of an ongoing experiment. By being reflexive about our positionality and transparent about the project's difficulties, we seek to provide insights that are both deep and critically aware. The findings are therefore presented not as universally applicable truths but as a detailed account from which generalisable lessons about institutional practice can be drawn.

7. Case study: the boost initiative

7.1. Origins and context

Boost was developed at The Studio, Bath Spa University's (BSU) city-centre enterprise and innovation hub in the city of Bath, which provides free support, co-working space, and access to technology for freelancers and micro-businesses in the creative economy. The Studio was established in 2019 by BSU's Centre for Cultural and Creative Industries as part of BSU's growing engagement with the regional creative economy, driven by large collaborative research projects such as Bristol and Bath Creative R + D. Through these projects, the university became a significant, high-level intermediary, channelling research and development funds from funders like UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) to creative economy actors. This experience provided the university team with a deep understanding of the challenges facing the region's creative micro-businesses. A recurring and critical issue was the inability of small entities to access grant funding due to cash-flow constraints. Many funders, including the regional West of England Mayoral Combined Authority (WEMCA) and national bodies like Innovate UK, operate on a reimbursement model. This requires applicants to spend their own money on project costs such as equipment, staff, or rent, months before the first grant payment is released. This model effectively excludes the very businesses that arguably need the support most; namely, sole traders, freelancers, and micro-businesses with limited liquidity. As one potential applicant for a grant noted, the requirement to 'have the cash to buy the things up front' made the opportunity inaccessible, particularly for sole traders without dedicated financial support like an accountant. Research indicates that being unable to take up a grant offer due to such barriers can negatively affect a creative practitioner's confidence and credibility (Lee et al., 2018). Boost was conceived to address this specific opportunity gap. The initiative was designed to act as a mechanism through which BSU could provide bridging finance. By acting as either the lead partner on a grant or a contractual partner, BSU could use its own funds to advance payments to creative micro entities, which would then be recouped once the funder released the grant money. This would remove the primary barrier of needing upfront capital. The initiative specifically targets creatives from underrepresented backgrounds, including those from working-class, global majority heritage, and neurodivergent communities, as well as BSU graduates, thereby not only targeting the sector at large but those within it that are consistently excluded from the funding landscape (see Hollands, 2023).

7.2. The pilot: BSU and Little Lost Robot

To trial the Boost model, a pilot project was initiated in partnership with Little Lost Robot CIC (LLR). Little Lost Robot CIC is a not-for-profit collective of artists working with social practice. They manage community studios in the area of Bath and North East Somerset. These spaces host a programme of free drop-in creative, community learning activities, alongside studios for resident artists and provide affordable room hire for community organisations and events. They also create art that is 'immersive and interactive, digital and playable' (lostrobot.org).

The pilot involved a joint funding application to the West of England Mayoral Combined Authority, with BSU positioned as the Lead Contractual Partner and LLR as the delivery partner for a community-

based skills and training programme. The Combined Authority awarded the partnership £100,000 from the Department for Education's Adult Education Budget (AEB) to deliver Ofsted-approved community learning.¹ Under the 'Lead Partner Model' BSU contracted directly with the funder and subcontracted LLR. This structure allowed BSU to manage the financial claims and reporting, advancing funds to LLR as needed, thereby bridging the gap before the funder's retrospective payments were made. Fig. 1 illustrates the network of relationships in the pilot project.

The pilot project, which began in January 2024 and was recommissioned for two additional years, has provided significant learning about the practical challenges of this model of intermediation. There were four key learnings that arose through this process. First, even with the bridging mechanism, the university's standard 30-day payment terms could still pose cash-flow challenges. Mitigating this required building strong internal relationships with finance staff to expedite payments. Second, standard university legal contracts can be intimidating and inaccessible for micro-partners. A crucial learning was the need to co-develop simplified, partner-friendly, agreements and to introduce them early in the bid-writing process to ensure mutual understanding of roles and liabilities. Third, the model inherently places the university in a powerful position as the gatekeeper of funds and the manager of compliance. The pilot's success relied on the pre-existing trusted relationship between BSU and LLR. For future projects with

new partners, the university must actively work to mitigate this power dynamic through transparent processes and a clear commitment to acting as an ally rather than a top-down manager. Finally, the support provided to LLR, including helping them become an Ofsted-accredited provider, required a significant investment of in-kind time and expertise from BSU staff. This highlights that the real cost of such intermediation goes far beyond the direct financial bridging and includes substantial human resources.

The pilot project resulted in significant outcomes for all parties. For LLR, it enabled organisational development, business growth, and the ability to secure further funding. For the funder, it expanded adult education provision to underserved communities. For BSU, it generated income, delivered against key strategic metrics, and, crucially, created a set of transferable templates and practices for future collaborations, beginning to demystify the university's own complex internal processes.

7.3. Navigating institutional friction

The development of Boost was not straightforward and highlights the institutional friction inherent in such a university-led intervention. The initial proposal was rejected by the university's senior management on the grounds that it did not sufficiently meet the requirements of BSU's charitable objectives, which mandate activities to have a clear 'public benefit' and be 'linked to education'. This hurdle is significant. It demonstrates that a university, even one with a strong civic mission, cannot simply act as a passive financial conduit. Its actions must align with its core legal and ethical framework. To overcome this, the project team had to reframe the initiative, demonstrating that the collaborative nature of the projects would inherently involve knowledge transfer/exchange between the university and its partners. The focus on supporting sustainable, socially impactful businesses from underrepresented groups helped satisfy the 'public benefit' requirement. A set of aims was co-developed with the legal team to ensure compliance, framing Boost as a vehicle for alternative learning, community-based research, and the creation of sustained partnerships. This process of internal negotiation and translation is a critical aspect of intermediation that is often overlooked (Virani and Pratt, 2016). The rigour BSU applied to the project's development, while stemming from its specific charitable status, reflects the due diligence and risk assessment processes any HEI would undertake when committing institutional funds to such a novel scheme. The challenge of aligning an innovative, externally facing project with internal governance is a generalisable lesson for any university seeking to play a similar role. However, ensuring that these internal governance structures allow for (or afford for) future projects that seek to have an impact within regional creative economies while ensuring institutional memory in order to facilitate them where the intermediation role becomes critical. It is only complete if these structures become enshrined within the institution.

8. Discussion

8.1. Boost as a policy instrument affordance

The Boost initiative can be understood as a direct response to a 'temporary affordance' and in some cases an 'inactive affordance' in UK creative cluster policy (see Table 3). Regarding the former, while funding schemes that mandate partnerships between universities and small businesses often result in short-term collaborations, enduring lasting impact and especially support can be elusive (see Frølund et al., 2018). While the CICIP had numerous mechanisms within it that tried to mitigate this specific aspect, it was difficult (given fiscal priorities from the UK Treasury) to commit to further funding for the sector (or already funded clusters) while the initial CICIP programme was running from 2018 to 2023. As such a metric was instantiated within the evaluation framework for the entire CICIP that used 'leveraged funding' as a yard stick for 'success'. Leveraged funding regarding the CICIP essentially

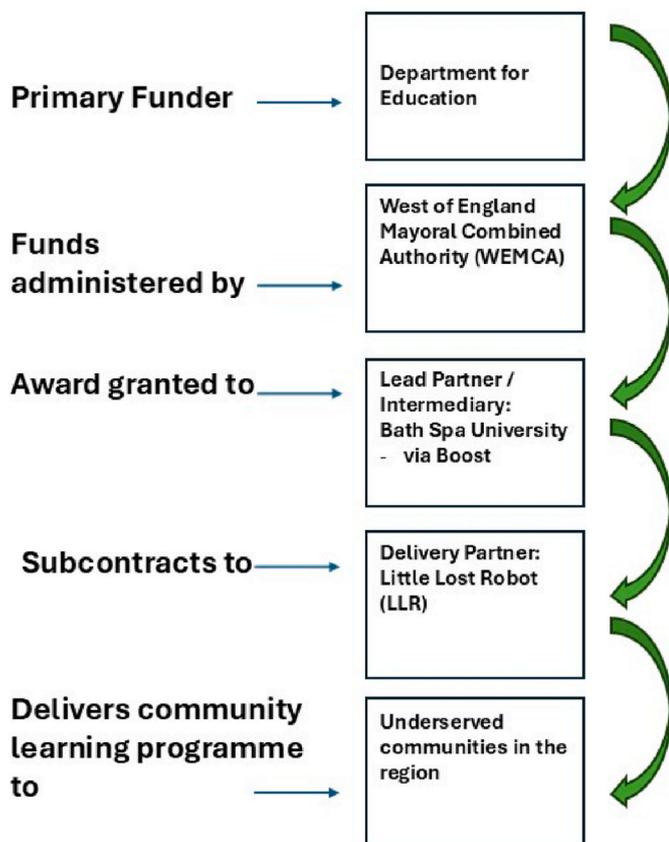


Fig. 1. Organisational relationships in the Boost pilot project.

¹ "Ofsted approved community learning" refers to adult education programmes that have been inspected and rated by Ofsted—the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills in England—and found to meet certain quality standards.

meant that the individual funded clusters should be able to attract private sector funding in order to facilitate the clusters programme and potentially show future engagement. This had mixed results, but it also might have inadvertently affected the sector as potential for leverage funding might have been baked into the application process for many small creative enterprises meaning that right from the start numerous organisations were essentially excluded out of participating in the programme.

As such while grant funding schemes theoretically afford opportunities for growth, their requirement for pre-financing renders this an inactive affordance for many cash-poor micro-enterprises. Inactive affordances occur when policy instruments may fail to stimulate action or learning due to misalignment with the needs or abilities of the target actors (see Table 3). While this financial burden may not have been apparent regarding Bristol and Bath Creative R + D with regards to the creative micro enterprises that they worked with, the risk associated with it was transferred to the university with a requirement that they (the university) show 'leveraged funding', as discussed previously, for the projects that they might micro fund.

In light of the above, Boost functions as an intervention that transforms these types of temporary and/or inactive affordances into a 'preparatory affordance'. It does not, in itself, constitute the final action (i.e., the funded creative project), but it prepares and enables the creative entity to access and utilize the primary funding instrument. It changes the relational dynamic between the small business and the funding environment, creating a new possibility for action: applying for grants they previously could not consider. By assisting with compliance, reporting, and financial management, the initiative also creates what Hellström and Jacob (2017) might term enduring affordances. It helps establish new norms and configurations for how micro-enterprises can successfully navigate complex, bureaucratic funding landscapes, especially within the university; reframing the rules of the game (externally) as well as the rules of engagement (internally).

8.2. The necessity of intermediation

This analysis confirms that the affordance created by Boost is not a standalone feature but is contingent on active and intensive intermediation. Bath Spa University's role is not passive; it is the relational 'go-between' that translates complex requirements, manages risk, and provides the administrative backbone that small creative businesses often lack. The affordance only materialises because of the human actors within the university such as the producers, finance partners, and legal staff, who perform the trust-building and support functions that unlock the instrument's potential. This directly supports the argument of Virani and Pratt (2016) and reinforces Hellström and Jacob's (2017) view that policy instruments are deeply embedded in social and organisational relationships.

8.3. Limitations and challenges

While Boost provides an example of an intermediated policy affordance, the case study also reveals its limitations. First, the initiative is constrained by the university's own legal and organisational framework. The need to demonstrate 'public benefit' and an 'educational link' could limit the type and scope of projects it can support, potentially reducing its flexibility and scalability. Second, the intermediation process itself creates friction. Navigating slow internal university processes, such as payment cycles and legal approvals, can still create delays and frustrations for partners, potentially undermining the trust the initiative seeks to build. Third, the model creates a significant power imbalance. The university becomes a powerful gatekeeper, deciding which projects receive support. While the pilot mitigated this through a pre-existing relationship, expanding the model to new partners without such a history will require robust and transparent processes to prevent conflicts of interest and ensure equity. Finally, the long-term sustainability of Boost

remains an open question. The initiative was born out of a specific, publicly funded cluster programme (the CICP) and is designed to mitigate the effects of short-term funding cycles. However, it remains vulnerable to the same forces. If public funding for the creative industries shrinks or policy priorities shift, the university may lack the resources or incentive to continue the initiative. Without a strategy to develop a self-sustaining financial model, Boost risks sharing the same fate as the programmes it aims to supplement, becoming another transient intervention.

9. Conclusion

This paper has argued that the Boost initiative serves as an example of a 'policy instrument affordance' in action. It creates a preparatory affordance that enables creative micro-enterprises to overcome the critical barrier of pre-financing, thereby activating grant funding opportunities that were previously inaccessible. However, this affordance is not intrinsic to the policy landscape; it is the product of deliberate, resource-intensive intermediation by actors within a higher education institution. The case study of Boost demonstrates the vital role that universities can play as intermediaries in the creative economy, translating policy, managing complexity, and bridging gaps between funders and small-scale creative practitioners.

Some lessons learned from BSU's experience are generalisable to other higher education institutions. As such, the challenges faced by BSU such as aligning the initiative with the university's core mission, navigating internal bureaucracy, managing power dynamics, and bearing the significant hidden costs of staff time and expertise, are not unique to BSU. They represent common institutional frictions that any university would encounter when attempting to act as a financial and administrative intermediary for a high-risk sector. Therefore, the Boost model, with its co-designed agreements, dedicated producer roles, and internal review panels, might offer a transferable framework for other institutions considering similar interventions.

Despite the documented difficulties, a compelling argument remains that universities may be the best-placed institutions to fill this funding gap. Unlike the transient, project-based entities that dominate the creative economy, universities are 'anchor institutions' with longevity, significant infrastructure (legal, financial, and administrative), and a public-facing civic mission. They are uniquely positioned to absorb risk and provide the stability that the creative sector often lacks. The relationship is symbiotic: for the university, such initiatives deliver against key strategic objectives like research impact, knowledge exchange, and social enterprise, while for the creative businesses, they provide the critical support needed to survive and thrive.

However, this paper also sounds a note of caution. The limitations of the model should be acknowledged; namely, its resource intensity, inherent power imbalances, and questionable long-term sustainability. The success of such an intermediated affordance is thus fragile. It depends on continued institutional will, dedicated human resources, and a supportive external policy environment. As this case study demonstrates, creating a policy affordance is not a simple act of design but a continuous process of negotiation, adaptation, and relational work. While Boost offers a promising new tool, its resilience in the face of shifting policy landscapes remains to be seen. The ultimate limitation of this paper is that, as a single, insider case study, its findings are based on an ongoing project. Future research should track the long-term impact of the initiative and explore its scalability and adoption by other institutions to build a broader evidence base on the role of universities as financial intermediaries in the creative economy.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Kate Pullinger: Writing – original draft, Investigation. **Stacey Pottinger:** Writing – original draft, Methodology, Investigation. **Tarek E. Virani:** Writing – original draft, Methodology.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare the following financial interests/personal relationships which may be considered as potential competing interests: Kate Pullinger reports financial support was provided by Bath Spa University. If there are other authors, they declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Data availability

No data was used for the research described in the article.

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