Title : The emergence of a translocal entrepreneurial ecosystem for those who set up and manage creative hubs: the case of the European Creative Hubs Network

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Abstract

Creative hubs have received attention in academia and policy as representative structures of the paradigm shift in the way cultural and creative labor is organised and for their impact in social and economic life. However, the support towards those who set up and manage creative hubs, as cultural entrepreneurs themselves has been overlooked. This research enriches the emerging literature on cultural entrepreneurship by adopting an entrepreneurial ecosystem approach which has overlooked the CCIs as a sector of entrepreneurial activity. It does so by addressing creative hubbers as entrepreneurs themselves and looking into the actors and factors that facilitated the emergence and consolidation of an transnational creative hubs ecosystem in Europe.

Keywords: cultural entrepreneurship, creative hubs, entrepreneurial ecosystems, cultural networks, policy, Europe

Introduction

Over the past years, creative hubs have emerged as alternative responses to the untraditional patterns of employment and self-employment in the cultural and creative industries (CCIs) (Gill et al, 2019 ; Lampel and Germain, 2016 ; Boswinkel and van Meerkerk, 2023) and have assumed the role of entrepreneurial support organisations (Bergman and McMullen, 2022; van Rijnsoever, 2022) for CCIs freelancers and entrepreneurs. These place-based and site-specific phenomena have attracted the attention of policy makers, whose subsequent actions have developed into a field of strategies and policy attempts to assist the cultural and creative industries, entrepreneurship, and innovation within a wider hyperbole around the contribution that CCIs, entrepreneurship and innovation can bring to the economy and to society (Avdikos and Papageorgiou, 2022; Poli and Schiach, 2020). However, while there is an wide body of literature on the role of creative hubs and other collaborative working places as support organisations in the CCIs, we know little about the support received by those who actually set up and run creative hubs, who should be regarded as cultural entrepreneurs themselves supporting other CCIs professionals in their entrepreneurial

journey. Further, although the "ecosystem" as a concept has been increasingly gaining ground during the last years both among researchers who explore the cultural and creative sector (Holden, 2015; De Bernard et al, 2022), as well as those who explore entrepreneurship (Acs et al, 2017; Fernandes et al, 2022; Spiegel, 2017), authors point to the limited attention that researchers on CCIs have given to the concept of entrepreneurial ecosystem (EE) which has focused mainly on innovation and technology related fields (Bakalli, 2015; Brydges and Pugh, 2021 ; Loots et al, 2021), although its potential for building better policy frameworks for the CCIs sector has been recently underlined (Mazzoni et al, 2023). Finally, research on EE predominately adopts a place specific lens, while the role of transnational actors, like the European Union or soft power institutions within entrepreneurial ecosystems, has been overlooked (Carayannis et al, 2020).

This article examines these gaps by means of an in-depth case study of the emergence of the European Creative Hubs Network (ECHN). Today the ECHN is described as "the only network in Europe specifically tailored to support hubs that host and connect multiple creative businesses"[1].

Research question and methodology

My research question is:

How is the entrepreneurial work of those who provide support for cultural and creative entrepreneurship (CCE) performed? Who are the key actors and which are the factors who enable the emergence and sustainability of entrepreneurship ecosystems in the CCIs on a transnational level?

For the purpose of this study, I was based on the review of a wide range of secondary data that included formal documents, such as recent and older studies produced by the network, EU policy papers, calls for proposals and other grey literature, such as learning material and manuals produced by the Network, and project descriptions. Secondly, the data collected was triangulated with twenty-seven semi-structured interviews with a variety of informants that took place from November 2022 to March 2023 which included 22 members of the Network, the member of the ECHN staff responsible for community development, one of the stakeholders who was involved at the outset of the first project which facilitated the creation of the Network, a policy officer from the DG Education and Culture of the European Commission, an ex-staff member of

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[1] As per the definition on the organisation's website www.creativehubs.net

the BC who worked of the project of establishing a network of creative hubs and a researcher that worked for one of the first reports on creative hubs commissioned by the BC on the topic.

Literature review

This study draws on two streams of research in developing a lens through which to interpret the field observations and answer the research question. The first is the literature on cultural entrepreneurship and cultural entrepreneurship support organisations such as creative hubs, and the second on cultural and entrepreneurial ecosystems.

1.1 Cultural entrepreneurship: specificities and support organisations

Over the past decades, cultural entrepreneurship has developed into a scholarly field (Klamer, 2011; Kuhlke, Schramme and Kooyman, 2015; Pechlaner, Innnerhofer and Borin, 2017; Chapain, Emin and Schieb-Bienfait, 2018; Lazaretti and Vecco, 2018; Sinapi, 2021; Horvath and Dechamp, 2021). Some researchers paint the cultural entrepreneur as someone alert to opportunities, passionate about artistic content, courageous, hopeful and equipped with persuasion skills vis-à-vis artists and funders (Klamer, 2011). Others stress that cultural entrepreneurs are driven more by ideals than by commercial interest (Halberstadt 2017: 33) and that oscillate between business and creativity (Gangi, 2015; Benghozi, 2021). In fact, in addition to engaging in commercial practices, cultural entrepreneurs must negotiate numerous identities. Naudin (2017) defines these as for example, the bohemian artist, the digital nerd, and the socially conscious citizen. The breadth and complexity of the CCIs as a sector of entrepreneurial activity differentiates cultural entrepreneurs from those adhering to mainstream entrepreneurship values and processes (Chapain et al, 2018: 31), and form the basis for specific support mechanisms (Horvath and Dechamp, 2018) which tend to prioritise assisting these individuals in developing an entrepreneurial spirit, while underlining the CCIs' contribution to the economy and society (Woronkowicz, 2021).

During the last decade, academic and policy discourses have positioned cultural entrepreneurship as a solution to various crises -economic, social and environmental- focusing on its potential to revitalise locations at different geographic scales, from the local to the regional, by generating growth and new jobs (Borin and Sinapi, 2023). Cultural entrepreneurship has also been looked at as a response to decreasing, inadequate and unstable public funding for the cultural and creative sector (Kolsteeg, 2013), especially after the 2008 financial crisis (Martin Zamorano and Bonet,

2022). These developments obliged professionals in the CCIs, particularly freelancers, to adopt entrepreneurial practices to survive (Hausmann and Heinze, 2016) and to tackle the insecurities brought about by precarious working conditions (Naudin, 2019). Such narratives still prevails although research has shown that cultural entrepreneurs are most often people who must make their living from micro-entrepreneurialism (Ellmeier, 2003) andlack the motivation, ability, and opportunities to become job creators (Haans and Witteloostuijn, 2018). In addition, the Covid-19 pandemic further exposed the precarity and other structural problems relating to creative and cultural work, which were highlighted by academics (Comunian and England, 2020) and networks representing various professional fields in the CCIs (Magkou, 2021).

In parallel, dluring the last decade, there has been increasing interest in the "transformation" of entrepreneurial support mechanisms (Messeghem, Sammut, Temri, and St-Jean, 2020), and especially of entrepreneurial support organisations (EOS). Bergman and McMullen (2021) describe EOS as those entities whose primary purpose is to support individuals and collectives, through (in)direct and (im)material assistance, as they seek to initiate and progress through the stages of the entrepreneurial process. In the field of the CCIs such EOS can take various forms: co-working places (Moriset, 2013; Bednář, Danko and Smékalová, 2021; Lorre, 2021), arts and creative industries incubators (Dechamp and Horvath, 2018; Essig, 2014; Bürger and Vecco, 2020), collaborative working places (Boutillier, Capdevila, Dupont and Morel; 2020), innovation hubs (Aubouin and Capdevila, 2019), fab labs and maker spaces (Dechamp and Pélissier, 2019; Kraus, Bouncken, Görmar, González-Serrano, Calabuig, 2022) or creative hubs (Gill, Pratt and Virani, 2019). Some of these EOS have been the result of bottom-up initiatives functioning as "mutual survival platforms of precarious employment and community development" (Avdikos and Merkel, 2020: 349) that provide considerable support to assisting cultural and creative professionals as a collective and community-based approach to the organisation of cultural and creative work (Merkel, 2015). During the last decade however, one also observes top-down approaches to setting up such spaces, which in the case of the CCIs claim to fulfill two purposes: to offer space for artists and cultural entrepreneurs, as well as to serve wider economic and social policy purposes (Boswinkel and van Meerkerk, 2022).

Although authors claim that we cannot yet define what a creative hub is (Pratt, 2021), we should recognise that creative hubs draw on features of various other typologies of entrepreneurship support organisations, as well as new configurations of working practices. In the interest of clarity,

we will use this term throughout the article, adopting the definition of creative hub offered by the European Creative Hubs Network itself- which constitutes our case study- on its website: "A creative hub is a physical space for creative and cultural professionals that offers the most effective way to support their growth, collaboration, interaction and development."

The literature stresses the role of such places as "relational spaces" (Jiménez and Zheng, 2021) that offer a spatial proximity that facilitates knowledge sharing (Parrino, 2015; Dechamp and Horvath, 2018; Dechamp and Pélissier, 2019-) and open innovation (Fabbri and Charue-Duboc, 2016). At the same time, they are seen as encouraging "interactional dynamics" (Trupia, 2016) and functioning as talent hubs (Orel, Mayerhoffer and Fratricova, 2022). Researchers focus on the benefits they create for creative workers and organisations through their responses to the distinct needs of emerging jobs in the creative economy era (Parlak and Baycan, 2020) and their function as places of informal knowledge, information exchange and mutual social support among residents (Krauss and Tremblay, 2019; Pratt, 2021). Such collaborative working spaces are said to strengthen CCI professionals' and entrepreneurs' resilience through cross-over innovation as a result of diverse stakeholder engagement and the spillover effects of knowledge sharing as a part of space resilience (Bednář et al, 2021). Yet they are also recognised as spaces that facilitate cross-disciplinary and cross-professional exchange, connecting dispersed individuals in creative or knowledge-based sectors (Montanari, Mattarelli and Scapolan, 2021). At the same time, they are described as helping creative workers deal with uncertainty (Merkel, 2018), which they do by enabling them to rely extensively on the emergence of a supportive community based on relationships of trust, mutual aid and shared values amongst co-workers (Fabbri, 2013, 2016; Garrett, Spreitzer and Bacevice, 2017; Spinuzzi, 2012).

However, two main gaps prevail. From one hand, little is known about those who took the risk of setting up infrastructures and support organisations for others in the CCI, in most cases during periods of financial uncertainty, and the support they receive as cultural entrepreneurs themselves. Further, while the literature on EOS emphasises the material space and physical proximity provided by such organisations, support for entrepreneurship can take various forms, and be multi-scalar, especially in the field of CCIs. For example, authors increasingly underline the importance of extended territorial resources and networks at various scales in cultural work and entrepreneurship (Chapain and Comunian, 2010; Emin and Schieb-Bienfait, 2018) calling for their exploration within wider ecologies.

1.2 Ecosystems in culture and entrepreneurship

The ecosystem metaphor has been increasingly gaining ground during the last years both among researchers who explore the cultural and creative sector, as well as those who explore entrepreneurship. However, there are to my knowledge very few articles that address entrepreneurial support ecosystems in the cultural and creative sector. For example, an UN document (Bakalli, 2015) proposes the development of a "creative ecosystem" approach to create an enabling environment for CCIs building on the Triple Helix model for national innovation systems analysis and on the creative clusters approach. More focused examinations of EEs in the CCIs include studies of Porto's cultural and creative economy (Loots, Neiva, Carvalho and Lavanga, 2021) and Toronto's fashion industry (Brydges and Pugh, 2021). This article constructs an ecological approach by bringing together these two widely discussed concepts: the cultural and creative ecosystem and the entrepreneurial ecosystem (EE).

Despite its indeterminacy, both in terms of its scope and analytical value (De Bernard, Comunian and Gross, 2022), the 'ecological language' is being explored with increasing frequency when studying the cultural and creative sector. This is especially because of its potential to shed new light on the interdependencies between various actorsand the larger socio-economic and political systems within which they develop and operate. Thus, drawing on a creative and cultural ecology approach, Borin and Donato (2015), explore the potential of intellectual capital in cultural ecosystems in the Po Delta area in Italy, Demir (2018) looks at Istanbul's creative economy ecosystem, Poprawski (2019) investigates the "rooting" of arts and cultural organisations in Poland, and Bertacchini Pazzola and Puletti (2022) discuss alternative cultural production ecosystems in Turin. These studies adopt a topological approach and mainly use the term ecosystem as a metaphor to describe a variety of actors involved in the cultural and creative scene in a specific location. This however does not do justice to the various layers of connections and interdependencies within the sector that often develop beyond geographical boundaries in the framework of a globalised creative economy impacted by technology (Bouquillon, Miège and Moeglin, 2013).

Researchers stress that it is also conducive to adopt a more "ecological" approach to policies related to the CCIs as a means of economic prosperity, underlying that such approach can achieve greater influence in policy and development agendas (Chapain and Comunian, 2010;

Gross, Heinonen, Burlina,Comunian, Conor, Crociata, Dent, Guardans, Hytti, Hytönen, Pica, Puk kinen, Renders, Stenholm and Wilson, 2020). Such an approach is considered preferable to other frameworks, such as the creative and cultural economy, have drawn heavy criticism for their limiting character in grasping the dynamics and interdependencies of the sector. Further arguments that have supported a more ecological approach in the CCIs are also related its potential for allowing a transdisciplinary stretch between research disciplines and between academia and practice (Derbellay, 2015; Fitzgibbon and Tsioulakis, 2022).

In a period shaped by economic crisis, austerity and stagnation in many economies around the world, the EE concept gained prominence during the past years emerging from the literature on entrepreneurship, business strategy and regional development and coming to occupy its own space in entrepreneurship theory (Acs, Stam, Audretsch, and O'Connor, 2017).

Approaching entrepreneurship through an ecosystem approach is said to offer a "systemic" and interdisciplinary perspective, focusing on the interrelational aspects of the various observed ecosystems (Cavallo, Ghezziand Balocco, 2018), the non-linear, socially involved and evolutionary aspect of entrepreneurship (Cooke, 2016) and placing entrepreneurs at the centre of the ecosystem (Stam and Spigel, 2017). The EE concept has also caught the attention of policy makers (Mason and Brown, 2014; Spiegel, 2020) who see in it the potential to build an engaged community of entrepreneurial actors. These might contribute to the development of the ecosystem in a more cost-effective way than, for example, the innovation systems or clusters that require investment (e.g., physical infrastructure) (Stam and Spigel, 2017).

However, the numerous systematic literature reviews of the field point to the fact that researchers are still grappling with the question of how best to understand these complex formations (Alvedalen and Boschma, 2021; Cao and Shi, 2021; Fernandes and Ferrreira, 2022). Furthermore, there is a divergence of approaches used to the study of EE; for example, configurational (Fernandes and Ferreira, 2022), relational (Theodoraki,Dana and Caputo, 2022) and evolutionary (Mack and Mayer, 2016; Colombelli, Paolucci and Ughetto, 2019). Authors signal that the concept has been under-theorised and that there is lack of longitudinal studies tracing the evolution of ecosystems. Nevertheless, in most studies, EEs are understood as a complex socio-economic and cultural phenomena that operate within particular *times* and *places* (Chapain et al, 2018: 33). Investigations of the significance of place in EE have been central in ecosystems literature (Spiegel, 2017), as most are organised spatially and are influenced by the community and culture

of a given place. Entrepreneurial ecosystems are understood as interrelated subsystems (Motoyama and Knowlton, 2017) made up of a variety of individuals and entities who share the same objective: fostering entrepreneurship within a particular geographic location (Theodoraki, Messeghem and Rice, 2018). However, although most studies of EEs approach them as local phenomena and adopting a spatial approach has been proposed as necessary for understanding EE (Schäfer, 2021), few researchers draw attention to the fact that an EE is not defined by a specific geographic area and does not require its different actors to be in spatial proximity (Bakalli, 2015: 42), while digital technology reduces spatial dependence in entrepreneurial ecosystems (Acs et al, 2017). The literature on EE has only recently started exploring the international dimension of EEs, by for example focusing on the transregional or transnational relationships between EE in relation to knowledge, migration or capital flows (Schäfer and Henn, 2018) or, more recently, the internationalisation of support organisations (Theodoraki and Catanzaro, 2022). However, as already identified before, there is a lack of knowledge about how best to approach EEs from a multi-local, transnational perspective, as well as to understanding the role of actors such as the European Union (Carayannis et al, 2020).

When it comes to time, most EE studies adopt a life cycle based approach, which has however been criticised for "resulting in a crude oversimplification of highly complex, unpredictable and fast changing realities" (Brown, Mawson and Rocha, 2022: 3). Within the evolutionary approach, different terminologies are used. Mack and Mayer (2016) explore EE through phases such as birth, growth, sustainment and decline, while Spigel and Harrison (2018) talk about nascent, strengthened and resilient EEs in an effort to offer a vocabulary which helps to understand the evolution of an EE over time.

The concept of entrepreneurial ecosystems is used here as an organising device to help us better understand the evolution and the structure of the interactions amongst numerous stakeholders. In this paper, following Stam (2015: 5), the entrepreneurial ecosystem is understood as a "set of interdependent actors and factors coordinated in such a way that they enable productive entrepreneurship within a particular territory". As noted above, there is no pre-existing analytical framework that could be specifically applied to either the CCIs or transnational entrepreneurial ecosystems. As a result, I decided to adopt an evolutionary approach to discussing the key actors and factors that enabled the emergence and evolution of ECHN as an EE over the last years. The article also draws on Spiegel's (2017) distinction between the cultural, social and material

attributes of an ecosystem, while underlying that those are in constant interaction. Cultural factors are related to beliefs and outlooks about entrepreneurship, social factors are related to resources offered through social networks, while material attributes are mainly related to tangible (infrastructure and support services) and less tangible attributes (regulation, opportunities and markets). Spiegel underlines that these factors should be understood not as hierarchical but as interacting factors that cannot stand alone and they reinforce each other in various ways. As mentioned, the approach I adopted here is evolutionary in that it considers the birth, transition and consolidation of the ECHN as an EE, where I identify the resources and support mechanisms mobilised at each phase of the evolution of the ecosystem. In doing so, I pay attention to how these were directed at supporting creative hubs as entrepreneurial practices.

Findings

In order to present my findings, I believe that it is necessary to describe the evolutionary dynamics of ECHN as an entrepreneurial ecosystem. This examines the processes through which an EE supporting creative hubs formed and evolved over a period of more than 10 years (2010–2022). Here, an evolutionary approach is productive as it allows us to sketch the evolution of the ecosystem over time. Additionally, through analysis of background materials and insights from the interviews, it enables us to identify the actors and factors (Stam, 2015) that influenced each phase of this evolution.

3.1 Birth

In the late 2000s, in the north of Portugal, various dynamics converged to promote the creation of a favorable CCI support ecosystem. According to EXP, a worker in Porto's local authority encouraged its cultural sector to push for a funding strategy and an agenda for the CCIs that could serve to lobby the authorities for a dedicated fund within the 2007-2013 European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) for the Northern Portugal region. The fund for CCIs within the ERDF. It was used mostly by municipalities in the north that had managed to recover buildings and old factories, and to create entities that looked like creative hubs, without yet being called so. The fomenting of this favourable environment for CCIs was followed by the establishment in 2008 of ADDICT Creative Industries Portugal, a government-funded agency for the development of CCIs and the increase of their economic contribution to the regional and local economy. By the early to mid 2010s, the buzz generated by the European Capital of Guimarães 2012, a city next to Porto,

and the inclusion of culture in municipal strategy also contributed to a CCI-supportive ecosystem in Porto. Thus, the city became a place in which "entrepreneurship and resources co-evolved with available funding, policy attention, and networks of entrepreneurs and other actors and advocates" (Loots et al, 2021: 652).

At the same time, the British Council (BC) in Portugal was exploring alternative spaces of creativity which had the characteristics of what would soon be called creative hubs. The British Council Global had already started working with various hubs across the world in 2012, promoting them as "lighthouses for the new urban economy" (Dovey, Pratt, Moreton, Virani, Merkel and Lansdowne,, 2016: 2) and co-developing support programmes with their conveners and members. In this context, they commissioned various research projects which could be of use to policymakers, and which would provide a better understanding of the value of hubs in the wider CCIs ecosystem. They also assembled practical tools for hubs to use in identifying and articulating their assets and impact. After several visits and exchanges with ADDICT's leadership, by means of which they tracked the evolution of these organisations in Northern Portugal, but also across Europe, in January 2015, the British Council partnered with ADDICT and Lisbon City Council, having obtained the support of the European Creative Business Network and Creative England to organise a meeting convening hub initiators and managers from all over Europe. This first European Creative Hubs Forum, largely funded by the ERDF and the city of Lisbon, brought together over 200 hubs from 22 countries, to share insights, tools and resources to support the resilience and growth of hubs.[2] A Manifesto[3] was launched that explicitly mentioned the intention to create a European Creative Hubs Network. The Network would contribute to understanding the role of creative hubs in the wider creative economy (and beyond) and provide support to hubs through various means. These would include learning opportunities, training programmes, orientation for business models development and access to information on funding opportunities to support hubs' pathways to sustainability. Beyond this, such a network would be enable hubs and groups of hubs to advocate and lobby for support at the local, national, and European levels.

In parallel, a mapping exercise was launched by the BC and ADDICT with the support of the Creative Business Network. This mapping (as mentioned in the survey itself) was designed to

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[2] The programme and reports from that meeting are still available online at the following address: https://www.creativehubs.org/en/echf-lisboa-2015/ (Date accessed 19/03/2023)

[3] https://www.creativehubs.org/en/echf-lisboa-2015/the-lisbon-manifesto-draft/

further understand and chart the European landscape of creative hubs and to support them through "establishing a community, attracting the deserved recognition so as to access support and funding." A Hubkit was also published, directed at those "considering setting up a new creative hub, hub managers looking for alternative business models, or a funder who is exploring the different financial structures of hubs" (British Council, 2015: 3). This resource, based primarily on UK case studies, gave insights into the role of creative hubs. It provided information on the skills that creative hub managers need, as well as tips on developing a strategy, a creative hub's ethos, and a pathway towards sustainability.

All the interviewees who at that time in the early 2010s had started the process of creating a space that could be called a creative hub, said that support from their local, regional, or national authorities was almost non-existent, especially in regard to funding. The major difficulty in accessing funding that interviewees faced at the time (and in many cases, still do) is summarised in this quote from one of the interviews:

> *The big problem is that there is no funding for the things that we are doing. We are considered too business-oriented to be in the creative sector and too cultural and creativity-driven to be in the business sector.* (MEM1)

Besides funding issues, there was still ambiguity at the time about the nature of these enterprises. Interviewees frequently noted that nobody could give them advice on which direction to pursue, what kind of legal structure to set up or how to deal with infrastructure or communication, as illustrated by the following:

> *I went to the local authorities to register my company and they didn't know which professional category to include me in. They were asking: "but what exactly will you do?* (MEM21)

Another interviewee said that although she and the colleagues with whom she was setting up a new space were excited to be creating something new, they desperately needed new knowledge and were trying to learn as much as they could about other practices.

> *It was before Instagram and Linkedin. Everyone looked up to us locally. At one point we had to educate ourselves and raise awareness about the value*

of our work to those around us, and also to be business oriented and able
to provide services that clients and a community would pay for. (MEM14)

As Mack (2015) writes, during the birth period of an EE, few people distinguish themselves in terms of their ventures, as well as their engagement and efforts towards building an entrepreneurship-oriented support infrastructure. Accordingly, some of the creative hubs that participated at these early meetings pushed for the idea of establishing a transnational exchange network.

A turning point occurred at this stage, thanks to policy interest shown by the European Institutions. This was a key factor in the mobilisation of the ecosystem. A European Commission official participated in the second Forum organised in Portugal, which experience opened up for her the vast potential that these initiatives had for innovation and support of the CCIs on the European continent. As BC2 stated, inviting the European Commission was critical to the development of the ecosystem, as the person invited recognised that:

> *there was this massive body of new innovative organisations that nobody is talking*
> *about. But what a force they could be if they could interact with the EU and local*
> *authorities with a common voice.* (BC2)

In 2015, a call was launched by the European Commission's DG for Education and Culture (European Commission, 2015). It emphasised new experimental business models in the cultural and creative sector, and the need to disseminate their knowledge. It specifically called for a project that would set up and support an EU-wide network of creative hubs and co-working spaces for cultural and creative professionals and entrepreneurs. The call envisaged numerous activities. These included the mapping of creative hubs and co-working spaces in EU countries; the development of virtual networks that would include information on the EU; national and local funding opportunities for the CCI sector, a closed digital platform for members of the network as well as physical people-to-people exchanges, networking meetings and thematic workshops, and a closing event that would take place in Brussels. The call placed particular focus on the coaching and business support training that would be needed, as well as the peer learning opportunities that should be facilitated. It was positioned within the wider framework of the Creative Europe Annual Work programme for 2014-2020 that included a cross-sectoral strand providing for the establishment of a Guarantee Facility targeting the cultural and creative sectors, and for the

development of transnational policy cooperation measures. Accordingly, the Creative Europe 2015 work plan envisaged a call for proposals to build on experimental business models by "supporting organisations capable of selecting relevant experiments, coordinating their in-depth analysis, and disseminating results so as to expand these innovative approaches" (European Commission, 2014: 65).The action was based on two policy frameworks. First, the Communication from the Commission on promoting cultural and creative sectors for growth and jobs in the EU (European Commission, 2012). This had already paved the way for a multi-layered strategy based on key policy drivers identified, such as addressing changing skills needs, improving access to finance, enlarging the marketplace through new partnerships and business models, and expanding international reach and cross-sectoral fertilisation. Secondly, the Europe 2020 strategy that focused on smart, sustainable and inclusive growth (European Commission, 2010).

3.2 Growth and transition phase

The call was won by a partnership led by the British Council in collaboration with six creative hubs: Bios in Greece, ADDICT in Portugal, Betahaus in Germany, Kulturni Kod/ Nova Iskra in Serbia, Creative Edinburgh in the UK, Factoria Cultural in Spain and the European Business and Innovation Network. The project was very much focused on connecting hubs across Europe and enabling them to collaborate through a series of encounters and focused training.

The Network's project phase was pivotal in shaping the path to the consolidation of the ecosystem. Various hubs at the European level were engaged throughout the process, including the training, meetings and conferences organised by the project. For most of them, this period was significant as it was the first time they received any kind of support, as suggested here:

> *At that time, when the BC started the network as a project, I think it was the first real support we got from another stakeholder because they put us in a situation in which we met our peers from Europe and we started to explore the experiences of those peers in these spaces and share knowledge with each other* (MEM16*)*

As Rolja Bobic writes in *How work works* (2016), which was published within the framework of the ECHN project, those who were involved in and mobilised by the project felt that they were "at an interesting point" being involved in what he calls the "hub eco-system". He wrote:

"It is a great privilege to be feeling the pulse of this new and exciting eco-system we are a part of, a world of collaborative organisations that feed on openness, creativity and multidisciplinarity, and which seem to be responding to contemporary challenges faster and better than any other type of organisations."

Indeed, the role played by the project at that time contributed to the crafting of a creative hub manager ethos and identity. As MEM5 explained, participating in these early activities and encounters with peers made her shift from a co-working approach to a creative hub approach :

> *The idea of making the transition from thinking about your project as a space, to thinking of it as a project and as a way to collaborate with people, came when I met the Network. I realised that I can't live off from [renting] 12 desks, it's not enough [...]It's when I understood that it's OK that you don't focus on the space but the projects around it- you're not doing anything wrong, it would be better for you and our community, you're helping them get more work, more projects...*

Here, the formation of an identity was positioned as both shaping the identity of the space itself- which often evolved from a co-working space to something different, more socially and community engaged- to also creating a transnational community identity. During this period, numerous documents were produced regarding creative hubs, which contributed to the circulation of the term across a wider terrain (British Council, 2016; Dessein and Faini, 2018). For those hub managers who were part of the managing team of the project in this phase, the adoption of this vocabulary gave them a sense of a common purpose. This is the case even though the terms mostly did not have a direct translation in their local context.

As with skills, during this project period, interviewees underscored the learning that occurred thanks to the exchange visits that were supported by the project. Peer-learning in particular was described as of foremost importance, as suggested here:

> *I participated in all of them and gained very practical skills. I met other people who were in the same situation and needed a support network. I was building a space that was hybrid and not envisioned within the economy back then.* (MEM1)

The profiles and initial starting points of those who set up creative hubs varied. However, pivotal to the development of the ecosystem was the construction of an entrepreneurial self, built around an understanding of the role of the creative hub founder and manager as a cultural entrepreneur who addressed the "fundamental individual-collective-societal triptych" (Sinapi, 2021). The

majority had identified a need within the community of creatives in their location. For most interviewees, setting up and running hubs involved a great investment of personal time and money, as well as juggling other jobs. At the same time, their role as connectors, enablers and activators for their local ecosystems gradually became more visible. As their hubs grew, in part thanks to the support and visibility that they gained through the ECHN project, their social role also became more accentuated. Some stressed that they reached a point of exhaustion

> *Most of the hubs were small teams, only a few people, and we had to do so many things, to run our own organisation, to be helpful to our local community, to try to educate and emancipate the community.* (MEM14)

Here, a hub founder reflects on the social responsibility that the growth of the hub entailed for her:

> *Many things started happening in my city because we existed. I reached a point where I said, I've had enough of this, I can close down, but at that point I realised that I have a social responsibility with the business I created. [..] this was a turning point for me: by the time I realised my responsibility, I knew I needed to run my business well. If I'm failing, I'm failing a lot of people.* (MEM2)

Finally, as the ecosystem approached a growth phase, successful creative hub founders and managers also started to act as role models (Mack, 2015) for nascent hub founders, and emerged as key actors in the wider entrepreneurial support ecosystem for CCIs. In parallel, a narrative started being produced around the value of creative hubs and the role they play for the economy. This articulation process was curated to a certain extent by project partners and led by the British Council. However, it also emerged through a bottom-up process that gave voice to several hub founders and managers who shared their stories among themselves and also with wider audiences. This is reflected here by a former staff member of the British Council:

> *One of the things we managed was to stay true to the idea that creative hubs are bottom up structures. […]. I think we kind of led the project with that ethos, that the creative hubs movement had to be grassroots led.* (BC2)

As the end of the European Creative Hubs Network project approached, people expressed a desire to continue working together and to sustain this newly emerged ecosystem. A few creative hubs took over coordination of this transition phase which lasted until the Network held its first General

Assembly and completed its legal registration in Greece.[4] As stated by MEM6, many of the members who were active during the project phase remain members and are still engaged with the Board today. MEM6 also added that this "keeps me inspired and also gives me a reason for being in this business."

During the transition period, and with a new legal structure, ECHN continued functioning and providing services to its members, and widening its membership to include other actors which were not necessarily hubs. To maintain the momentum and continue cultivating the ecosystem, ECHN got involved in other European programmes and in many cases even led them. In addition to securing funding for the ecosystem, these programmes allowed exchanges amongst ECHN members to continue, and new partnerships to be built. The ecosystem was enlarged thanks to especially Creative Europe funded programmes such as Divercities (2016-2020), or pilot policy projects co-funded by the European Union, such as MakersXexchange (2020-2022) and Creative FLIP Preparatory Action.

The value of the emerging ecosystem's peer support element during Covid-19 was also underlined by some interviewees. From sharing experiences, organising virtual meetings and exchanging practices around how to deal with the restrictions imposed by the pandemic, the ecosystem of peers functioned as a resource and stimulating actor. One interviewee who at the time was merely intending to set up a hub explains the importance of accessing valuable information on how to address the challenges posed by the pandemic.

> *In the summer of 2020, I called people who by that point had become my friends and said: 'I want to set up the house rules, can you share your rules?' [...]. They were open to sharing things with me, their protocols for Covid, their responses to people's fears. When we opened in October 2020, we were prepared [...]. For me, we filled that void through these kinds of conversation.* (MEM15)

Another member recalled that financial support received through ECHN at the time was also crucial for the survival of their creative hub:

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[4] The names of those hubs and specific individuals who took the lead in this period are mentioned in the Creative Hubs 2022 publication.

> *In 2020 we were part of the ECHN ambassadors of change program [...].*
> *It was a micro fund of 2.000 euros, but this little inflow of cash -when people*
> *were not coming to our space- meant a lot to us. During that time, which*
> *was a life or death period for us, it helped us get through a time of financial*
> *uncertainty.* (MEM12)

Both quotes illustrate how importance of this peer-support ecosystem that allowed creative hub managers to address various challenges in relation to their entrepreneurial activity.

3.3 The consolidation phase

Since 2022, the ECHN has been receiving funding from the networks strand of the Creative Europe programme which co-finances 37 pan-European networks of culture and creative organisations and allowing the Network to enter a phase of "systemic sustainability".

In 2020, a community manager position was also introduced in the Network. As explained by the person currently holding this role at the time of fieldwork, the role consists in understanding "how many pain points we have in common within our members" (NET). Needs identified revolve around the following four areas: a) how to develop a business structure that works in a sustainable manner, b) how to guarantee sustainability in relation to each hub's real estate, c) how to access funding, especially at the European level and f) community management. This feedback then allows them to curate targeted webinars or trainings.

During this period, one can also observe the consolidation of the Network's peer-to-peer support which nurtures the entrepreneurial ecosystem. This was facilitated by a series of programmes put in place and curated by the Network and supported financially mainly by EU projects and Cultural Networks funding, such as P2P learning program focuses on setting off new innovative collaborations among hubs, staff exchanges, specific workshops organised and offered by members to members and other communities within the wider CCIs ecosystem, as well as a Hubs alliance label that allows those who work in a single creative hub member of the alliance to work from another creative hub of the Alliance receiving a grant to cover travel and accommodation for up to five days. As NET said:

> *from the outset, mobility has been at the core of the ECHN, and it's still one*
> *of the most important actions and one of the most effective ways to bond*
> *and learn from each other.*

This is in line with what Werthes et al (2017) have already pointed out: to be successful, support programmes for CCI entrepreneurs should offer participants the opportunity to communicate with other entrepreneurs, to engage in self-reflection and to recognise their own core values. Supporting mobility opportunities in such a transnational EE is necessary and it is important to underline that ECHN is the only cultural network to my knowledge that provides fully funded mobility opportunities to its members.

In parallel, an important development during this consolidation phase, one already initiated in the previous phase, is that new players get connected with the wider ECHN ecosystem. For example, ECHN allows other organisations which do not have creative hub characteristics, to join the network as associate members (for example, regional and local authorities supporting CCIs such as Creative Kosice or TNT Innovation) or university-based hubs. Although I did not interview any associate members, nor map connections between them and creative hubs, this mix of profiles contributes to establishing a wider ecosystem around creative hubs. Furthermore, calls for projects such as Twin Hubs "create benefits for the members and also for entities that are outside of the Network" (MEM15), thus enlarging the scope of stakeholders within the ecosystem.

Another development during the consolidation phase are the stronger links that are forged with university actors and research projects who themselves contribute to the consolidation of the EE through knowledge production. ECHN for example is a partner of a Marie Curie ITN action CORAL, which focuses on collaborative working places in rural areas and includes various research institutes and public authorities. Also ECHN is a partner in CENTRINNO, a Horizon funded project on historic industrial sites that are being transformed into creative spaces and brings together a consortium of 26 partners from 10 countries, including municipalities, research centers and other creative industry organisations. These kinds of projects both provide financial resources for the ECHN, and opportunities for its members to serve as case studies, service providers and disseminators of research findings. In addition, members can use the materials produced for their own advocacy and storytelling within their local CCI ecosystems.

ECHN's role as a consolidated player in the wider CCI ecosystem in Europe is also confirmed by the existence of various other initiatives (most of them EU funded) that have been enabled through the Network's involvement. More recently, ECHN participated in a project that offers CCI

professionals a service through the Creatives Unite[5] platform which aggregates online information on creative opportunities[6]. Launched at the end of 2022, it provides three online resources focused on funding searches (So You Need Money), intellectual property issues (My Intellectual Property) and mobility opportunities (Mobility Search) that are available not only for hub managers, but all CCIs professionals.

During this consolidation period, the peers involved in the Network have different levels of engagement. Some said (MEM2; MEM8; MEM10) that they were not really following the monthly virtual activities organised by the Network, or that they didn't have time anymore to devote to following developments in the Network. Others (MEM15; MEM22) commented that the ecosystem allowed them to identify partners for other projects. It also enabled them to create sub-ecosytems around a specific cultural and creative industry that a number of creative hubs are working on in order to propose new targeted projects for creative professionals in a specific field with which ECHN is associated, as for example a pan-European project around fashion incubators that a number of members were at the moment of the fieldwork developing (MEM11).

4. Discussion on key attributes of the entrepreneurial ecosystem and their interactions

Spiegel argues that "entrepreneurial ecosystems are combinations of social, political, economic, and cultural elements within a region that support the development and growth of innovative startups and encourage nascent entrepreneurs and other actors to take the risks of starting, funding, and otherwise assisting high-risk ventures" (Spigel, 2017: 50). In the remainder of the findings section, I explore in our case study how each ecosystem attribute proposed by Spiegel interacts under the three primary subdimensions: cultural, social and material factors that help reproduce the ecosystem over time.

4.1 Cultural factors

According to Spiegel, cultural factors are related to the underlying beliefs and outlooks about entrepreneurship in a specific geography and these can be divided into two main attributes, namely cultural attitudes and histories of entrepreneurship. In the case of the transnational EE that I am exploring here, it is difficult to identify these concretely for the different locations, however some

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[5] https://creativesunite.eu/

[6] The platform was created with other partners such as the Goethe Institut, IDEA Consult, Unternehmensberatund 3ms and Intellectual Property Institute Luxembourg

observations can be drawn in regards to the attitudes around entrepreneurship during the period that the ecosystem started emerging. As already mentioned above, the relationship between culture, creativity, and entrepreneurship was widely accepted in policy circles early in the 2010s, notably as a remedy for the European economic crisis that erupted between 2008 and 2012, affecting countries in the south in particular. During this period, we observe a normalised outlook about risk taking, innovation and entrepreneurship making it seem a standard part of a person's career path, and in many countries cultural entrepreneurship was positioned as well as a pathway for people working in the sector. Still today, one would say that entrepreneurship in the CCIs and especially when it comes to setting up and running creative spaces is not closely considered as entrepreneurial activity which tends to focus more on technology or innovation related. Interviews also revealed that there were different levels of cultural attitudes to entrepreneurship depending on the country and location in which each creative hub was located: attitudes were more positive and encouraging in the North of Europe and not contested, while for hubs located in the South interviewees explained that it took them a lot of effort to fit into the conceptions around entrepreneurship in their local contexts. After the financial crisis in Europe, while different initiatives arose as new working practices unfolded, most of them inspired by the co-working paradigm, they remained quite isolated and did not attract significant interest. Interviewees generally described a shift in how different local populations saw the creative hubs as a new emerging form of work and as a service to the wider CCI ecosystem throughout the years.

Histories of entrepreneurship

Spiegel argues that cultural outlooks are also formed by prominent histories of entrepreneurial success. Here again interviewees shared different experiences depending on where they came from, that were also related to the overall cultural attitudes around entrepreneurial activities in their specific location. What is however interesting is how creative hub success stories 'traveled' on a transnational level. MEM21 for example explained how when she started setting up the hub she was looking on the internet for other collaborative creative spaces, especially in Berlin to get inspiration and even travelled to other cities to observe such places and meet those people who had set them up on her own initiative. MEM8 explained that her working experience in The Netherlands was pivotal in creating an entrepreneurial mindset formed by those histories she was observing there that she then transferred to her country of origin, Greece, when she moved back in the middle of the crisis and set up a co-working space for creatives. Most interviewees

mentioned that when it comes to local histories of entrepreneurship, they were actually the ones that gave birth to them, especially in the CCIs field as they provided a space for such stories to develop. As already mentioned above, some of the interviewees mentioned that they evolved lighthouses in their local ecosystems for the CCIs communities and played a key role in transfusing a cultural entrepreneurship ethos. And as their proposal was unique for their local environment, they needed to search for similar entrepreneurial histories in other geographies, on a pan-European or even international level.

The ECHN project phase created a narrative for creative hubs and their contribution to the growth and resilience of the creative sector and the economy in general. As Roundy (2016) explains, narratives- like the ones produced from the project during that period, whether in the form of handbooks and toolkits, conferences, best practices or case studies- aim to persuade other actors about the entrepreneurial ecosystem's significance and potential benefits, and the role that it plays for the economy and region. As I already mentioned above, this articulation process was curated to a certain extent by project partners and led by the British Council but it was mainly nurtured by the creative hubbers themselves that found a fertile ecosystem to share them with.

4.2 Social factors

Social networks

Literature in the CCIs already underlines the importance of networks and social capital as well as the role of intermediaries (O'Connor, 2015; Mathews and Smith Maguire, 2014). Again I would underline here the role of organisations such as ADDICT, the British Council and the European Commission in facilitating the creation of such social networks on the transnational level. They acted as intermediaries that allowed the free flow of knowledge and skills and created the necessary platforms for such social networks to emerge.

Another element that should be considered in the case I am exploring is the creation of sub-social networks and ecosystems that develop within ECHN based on specific affinities. As the creative hubs definition allows for a conceptual stretch in the typology of spaces that fall under this category, the members of the network are also varied. For example, MEM17, founder of a co-living space in a rural area explained how specific network connections occur with other members of the ecosystem that also define themselves as co-living places. ECHN also gives opportunities for small sub-projects to develop and support such sub-ecosystem formations, for example through

a grant for organising tailored seminars addressing the needs of specific hubs, in this case co-living spaces that organised a rural hacking working session during the month of March 2023. In general terms, the ECHN as an EE itself adopts an approach to creating entrepreneurial communities (Markley, Lyons and Macke, 2015) to support the EE.

Mentors and role models

Interviewees and documents reviewed did not use the term mentor, but stressed more the peer-to-peer learning happening at various levels, regardless of the level of experience of some creative hubs versus others. Inevitably some hubs function as role models (Mack, 2015) and stand out either because of the breadth and success of their activities or because of their incredible story of "making something out of nothing" and often in a place where no one would have expected that such an enterprise would be successful (MEM15). In the case of ECHN, the role models also emerged as part of their level of engagement within the ecosystem and their will to take things forward. In such ecosystems of entrepreneurial support organisations, some leaders emerged (Harper-Anderson, 2018). We see that for example those hubs that were involved at the beginning of the project, such as BIOS and Nova Iskra, emerged as key actors in the wider entrepreneurial support ecosystem for CCIs in their region but also on the European level and have also been among those hubs that have taken the extra mile to put in place conditions for the sustainability of the ecosystem. Another important point that needs to be underlined is related to the point about histories of entrepreneurship mentioned before and how success is perceived in the ecosystem. Although two interviewees (M14; M16) for example mentioned that they look up on the work undertaken by a hub in Turkey when it comes to their expansion (creation of new creative hubs in Dubai) and the development of unique services (creation of a digital platform functioning as a digital creative hub), others (M12; M15) valued the transformational capacity of a creative hub founder in a small town in Portugal that managed to create a vivid community around the hub and contribute to local development. Many of the interviewees (M3; M7; M12) underlined that something that was successful for one creative hub does not necessarily mean that it can work in another location.

Novice creative hub managers are particularly focused on articulating their personal identities via broad interactions within social groups (Gur and Matthias, 2021), such as the ones offered through the ECHN. More experienced hub managers devote more time to their businesses and less time to social groups, but they value the targeted collaborations that are enabled by these social groups

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and try to promote the cause of creative hubs at the policy level. Overall, an ethics of care is also observed as a binding mechanism within this peer-support entrepreneurial community.

Investors

Although this aspect was not explicitly part of the interview script with creative hub representatives, many interviewees underlined that their engagement within the ecosystem improved access to funding coming from their local- regional level for them. Most of them underlined the visibility that their engagement on an international ecosystem had on their reputation and raising their profile at the local level. One of the consortium partners of the first pilot project explained:

> *I still believe [our participation in the pilot project] was an important element for our growth. We used it as one of the descriptions of our hub, that we were and still are one of the initiators of this- it helped us leverage our work and position ourselves in the wider region even more than in our local context. (MEM14)*

As CCIs are a particular segment of economic activity, investments should be understood also as national/state funding from central or decentralized agencies or semi-public actors (e.g., regional or local governments, agencies of territorial development). The variety of funding sources cannot be tracked in the framework of this research, although interviewees underlined the limited resources coming from such institutions on the local, regional or national level. The research points to the pivotal role of European Institutions in this sense, that have 'invested' in the ecosystem through various programmes (pilot project for the creation of the ECHN, Creative Europe networks funding and other Creative Europe and research project funding). The EU funding reached the members of the ecosystem either through ECHN funding, but also through the development of the skills and networks to apply for and manage European funded projects. This element was underlined by most interviewees, as both an outcome of their involvement in the ecosystem when it comes to skills development as well as a motivation to be part of the ecosystem as it facilitates access to European funding.

Worker talent

According to Spiegel, worker talent and skilled employees are a necessary precursor for success in the modern knowledge economy. In the case of the creative hub founders and managers

interviewed, the profiles are varied. All of them had high level academic studies and a rich working experience both in their country but also in many cases abroad. While some were coming from a background in the CCIs, as for example M9 who was a graphic designer, or worked around creative professionals, as M2 who was working in communications for creative industries, others came from a more business background, such as M16 and M21. Others came with a strong background in music and event production (M4, M6), while others did not have any experience in the field before, as for example M3 who was trained and used to work as a phycologist or M17 who was a developer. They all however underlined that they developed their skills by doing, and often by doing wrong. Another element to consider is the flow of people and talent within the ecosystem, that also reflects the mobility reality within Europe. For example, M15 left Spain in the middle of the crisis and moved to Romania where, as he said, he put a space together that he would not have managed to do back home.

Finally, Spiegel also argues that workers in EE must have similar tolerance for risk as entrepreneurs themselves in order to thrive in the chaotic environment of new entrepreneurial endeavours. This was confirmed from interviews I did with people that are working and managing the hub that someone else has set up (MEM13; MEM19). But this entrepreneurial and risk taking spirit was also observed among interviewees that set up creative hubs within other structures, such as MEM4 that works for a creative hub set up by a workers cooperative and MEM7 that set up and runs a fashion hub within an educational institution.

4.3 Material factors

The material attributes of an ecosystem according to Spiegel should be traced in those with tangible presence in a region, such as universities, support services and facilities, policy and government and open markets. Although EE literature underlines the tangible presence of these in a specific region, examining a transnational EE through this lens poses an analytical challenge for two reasons: firstly, the varied local realities in which the hubs emerged and operation and secondly, the recognition that the creative hubs themselves are part of the material attributes of their own local ecosystems, as knowledge and services providers.

Moreover, EE literature emphasises the role of policy as an important attribute of regional entrepreneurship. Stam (2015) underlines that the framework and systemic conditions of the ecosystem lead to particular entrepreneurial activities as output of the ecosystem and new value

creation as outcome of the ecosystem, positioning entrepreneurs as important players themselves in creating and sustaining the ecosystem. M9 underlined that this is the direction that ECHN has been taking during the last years but also the arena in which it should invest in the future, especially as the ecosystem is more consolidated. Providing evidence and encouraging policy transformation in regards to creative hubs, but also the wider CCIs sector and building on advocacy is at the core of ECHNs work, both on the European and the local level. For example, M3 and NET underlined that organising one of the ECHN annual events in a specific city provides an opportunity for mobilising actors on the local level and doing some advocacy on the creative, economic and social impacts of hubs. We also saw that a favorable local environment, as was the case in the city of Porto, enabled the emergence of a resilient ecosystem in the CCIs and therefore for creative hubs as well.

Higher Education Institutions are also considered among the important material attributes of an EE, both fostering the creative talent and training new entrepreneurs and producing new knowledge spillovers. In the case of ECHN, interviewees mentioned various interactions with universities in their local environment that cannot be traced in the scope of this researcher. However, what is important to underline is the role of universities as knowledge producers around the value of CCIs and of creative hubs in particular that served as evidence for further advocacy actions and policy developments. For example, EXP, a commissioned study to the university in Porto made the case for the role of CCIs in local development and this enabled the creation of a specific funding line within ERDF. Further, within the project phase of ECHN, the British Council commissioned various researchers that highlighted the role of creative hubs in the wider economy and social life. The involvement of ECHN in research related projects during the last years (eg, Marie Curie INT funded CORAL project and Horizon funded GLAMMONS project) demonstrates the need of nurturing these interactions for the consolidation and sustainability of the EE. This evidence produced a more favorable policy environment at various levels, as I have mentioned already above, in general around entrepreneurship in the field of CCIs, as well as the emergence of specialised service providers for entrepreneurs for CCIs. This can also be observed on the European level where during the last 10 years many programmes, not only specifically arts and culture related but also education and regional development related, have supported the development of support services, physical infrastructures, university programmes in the field of CCIs, including the recently announced Knowledge and Innovation Community (KIC) on Culture

and Creativity of the European Institute of Innovation and Technology (EIT) that underlined the need to examine novel practices in order to unlock the CCI's innovation potential to promote a sustainable society, as well as to contribute to their growth and recovery following COVID-19. Many of these developments emerged in parallel with the creative hubs activities in their specific locations that functioned as intermediaries with the wider CCIs ecosystem.

Conclusion

The results show that the establishment of this network is the result of various processes that can be considered similar to the emergence of an entrepreneurial ecosystem. However, although the ecosystem emerged as a convening practice mobilised by a large extent by actors such as the British Council, ADDICT or the European Commission that brough together isolated creative hubs across Europe, today, after the establishment of the legal entity of the network, this ecosystem has evolved into a peer-led entrepreneurial support organisation itself for those setting up and managing creative hubs across Europe and beyond. Overall, the research points to the fact that the ecosystem needed these actors in order to consolidate itself, but in its actual phase, ECHN allows creative hubbers themselves to define their support needs and collectively conceive and implement supporting mechanisms by defining the perimeter of such hybrid and emerging structures in the cultural and creative field and articulating their needs towards different levels of decision-making (from local to European). But CCI ecosystems are very different from those of other industries. This is because of the micro and meso-level idiosyncrasies of entrepreneurs in the CCIs, and the involvement of third parties, such as gatekeeper communities, funding organisations and the state (Loots and van Witteloostuijn, 2018). However, this research also showed that ecosystems cannot be created only by top-down processes. Instead, they emerge through individual and collective action (Spigel et al, 2020) that is motivated by the agency of entrepreneurial actors - as organisational, innovation and community leaders- to create and transform their own contexts (Wurth, Stam and Spiegel, 2022). This also explains the evolution of the EE into an entrepreneurship support organisation itself.

Besides these limitations, this article has shown that the application of the EE concept in the CCIs has the potential of yielding new perspectives in our understanding of how these CCIs ecosystems work and how they can be best supported. The analogy between entrepreneurial and biological ecosystems allows to better understand CCI entrepreneurial ecosystems and the role of different

actors and could provide a framework for policy makers and practitioners in entrepreneurship (Brown & Mawson, 2019) by pointing to systemic change and innovation in creative economy policy itself (Comunian et al, 2021: 4). Hopefully, the findings discussed present an opportunity to develop EE theory, making it more practical and valuable to the CCI sector and considering translocal actors in their development, while calling for a vocabulary that also fits the sector.

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