UK Film: Digital Innovation and Creative Excellence Public Consultation

EM Media's Response to the UK Film Council

Debbie Williams
Chief Executive
EM Media

General comments

For almost a decade, EM Media, an on the ground development agency has been supporting unique and distinctive talent locally. EM Media has played an essential role in the metamorphosis of the East Midlands, now home to a vibrant and internationally renowned filmmaking hub.

EM Media's intervention strategy predicated on partnership, experimentation, integration and lateral working has led to key innovations such as, unlocking new sources of finance hitherto un-utilised for film investment; financing of over 35 feature films including *Control* for which EM Media was the only British financier, 36 live developments and 74 short films that otherwise would not have been produced. Without the contribution of East Midlands' talent British film would be the poorer. Further, we have had the opportunity to unearth a volume of upcoming talent yet to make its mark internationally.

In a region of early adopters we have innovated also in the area of audience access to digital content through the establishment of the nationally unique PBQ Consortium which now spearheads a network of 25 venues region-wide, interacting and sharing intelligence daily to the benefit of audiences across the piece. Further the region's rural touring programme is working to achieve self-sustainability. EM Media's work with the formal education sector has again produced ground-breaking results and our plans for the housing and public visibility of the Midlands venue-based archive service is nationally unique. The growth in the significance and substance of the East Midlands film offer has been less to do with luck and far more to do with the intelligence, thought and positive energy that a range of partners and collaborators have generously contributed to shaping its future.

Learning has taken place through ongoing, active R&D. However, we remain an under-utilised resource that could be of value to the UK Film Council in its forthcoming discussions.

Specific responses to the questions posed by the consultation document

1. ***Do you agree with our analysis of the challenges facing film? AGREE***

   We understand the challenges faced by UK Film Council in relation to the reduction in funding from DCMS from April 2010 and that this has necessitated a reorganisation in spending priorities (and a reorganisation of the UKFC itself to reduce overhead, which we understand to be beyond the scope of this consultation). We accept the analysis of the challenges that the operating environment is currently presenting.

2. ***Do you agree the UK Film Council has, in the main, delivered against the priorities set out in Film in the Digital Age, our current three-year plan? AGREE***

   In the main yes, although not all interventions or structures have been universally successful. For example, the separation of development investments from those in production creates a lack of coherence to the investment portfolio and, investment in individual projects rather than in growing sustainable businesses (beyond the notion of the super slate initiative) required review. We welcome the combining of the separate funds into a single fund to enable the UK Film Council to work to a single investment vision and strategy. Such a shift should also enable better quality and more meaningful partnership working between UK Film Council executives and Screen Agencies; a partnership which arguably could have been more effective than it has been in practice. We suggest that a review of investment in projects only rather than in business growth is also worthy of further investigation.

   In the last three years the UK Film Council has continued to achieve critical international success through its feature film investments. It is also a fact that regional investment funds have made a contribution to the diversity of British film voices and product currently in the international marketplace. It is likely that there will be a noticeable impact on this diversity of voices and product at least in the short term with the likely reduction in the number and range of regional investment funds in operation, next year.

   It has to be said that in the last period, potentially, there could have been greater progress towards a more diverse workforce; although it should be noted that geographic diversity was stimulated through the increased volume of work opportunities for crew based in the East Midlands and elsewhere. The challenge of achieving a more culturally diverse workforce will need a greater priority and planning into the architecture of the national skills and national talent development strategies from the start.

3. Do you agree with our proposed policy priorities for the next period? AGREE

Yes in broad terms. Presentationally however, a confusion is created in terming the BFI, Screen Agencies, diversity and inclusion and research and statistics and market intelligence as priorities which cut across multiple activity areas. This implies they are four priorities in addition to and separate from the six priorities laid out at the start of this section of the document. The fact that there is no acknowledgement in the text that the Screen Agencies contribute to all six priorities: supporting British film and filmmakers; nurturing skills and creative talent, encouraging innovation in the digital age; improving access to films for UK audiences; conserving and making accessible the UK's archive heritage and providing opportunities to learn about film, serves to considerably underplay their relevance and actual contribution to the delivery of the six key priorities. The lack of mention of this highly successful delivery network serves to undermine the partnership between the UK Film Council and the Screen Agencies.

4. Do you agree with our proposed funding priorities for the next period? AGREE

In relation to the challenge of identifying spending priorities on a reduced budget and balancing the books, then this has been achieved. The UK Film Council states clearly the action it has taken and where it will spend the finance available. The document is a solid response to reduced finance.

However given the vital role of the Screen Agencies not just to the delivery of the UK Film Council's six priorities in the next period but also to the delivery of initiatives and agencies such as First Light, Mediabox, the BFI (in terms of media education), the UK Film Council (in terms of talent development) and Skillset (in relation to skills development), it is arguable that the reliance on the existence and effective delivery of the Screen Agency network should be more fully acknowledged. The Screen Agency network is the mechanism by which the UK Film Council achieves national reach.

5. Do you agree we have struck a good balance between our international work and our work UK-wide? DISAGREE

The UK Film Council's UK work could be more clearly articulated and detailed. For example the relationship with the Screen Agencies is described in policy and strategy terms only. However the Screen Agencies are the UK Film Council's key delivery network; not only do they invest valuable finance in new talent but also have played a vital role in talent spotting, developing local agency partnerships e.g. across the cultural and creative sector, and with local authorities in setting up rural cinema services, location services and film friendly initiatives. They have tested out new and innovative approaches to film and media education, digital distribution opportunities as well as, in the case of the East Midlands, developing thriving and sustainable out of London film hubs. The Screen Agencies are investors, service providers and industry brokers; and certainly in the case of EM Media, play an incredibly active developmental role, rather than the more passive one suggested in the document. The Screen Agencies by nature are driven to be (mitigated) risk takers; whether in relation to new, untried talent or, in terms of reinventing relationships with the region's network of venues, for example. Much iterative experimentation and questioning takes place daily. The Screen Agencies are under-utilised experimental test-beds.

We are unclear of the reasoning behind the introduction of the 25% production quota although it is welcomed that this is perceived as a floor rather than a ceiling. We look forward to working with the newly appointed production staff at the UK Film Council on refining the definition and on the much needed national talent and skills development strategies.

Further, when the new national talent strategy comes into being, it would be helpful if it were actively connected to the UK Film Council export activity. This does not appear to have been picked up as a need in relation to any of the priorities. For example, in our experience, in relation to production investment in first- and second-time filmmakers, support beyond the finance is required. Help with distribution strategies, export and marketing tend to be as critical as the finance itself and it would be useful to factor in such support interventions. Again, the integrated approach demonstrated by EM Media may be of interest.

6. ***Do you agree our proposals reflect the importance we place on partnerships with the public, private and voluntary sectors? DISAGREE***

In our experience the UK film industry is not known for its engagement with the voluntary sector. The document does not detail these proposed partnerships therefore it is difficult to comment on their appropriateness. The document does however refer to particular initiatives where there is engagement with partners in the public and/or private sector. In positioning the UK Film Council to take advantage of partnerships in all three sectors the question of what kind of entity should a potentially merged UK Film Council/BFI be, arises.

7. ***Do you agree we have struck a good balance between prioritising the economic and cultural aspects of film? DISAGREE***

That the document acknowledges that culture and economics are not mutually exclusive is heartily welcomed. However the document still tends to polarise activities referring to them as either an economic activity or a cultural one whereas in reality, activities are less definitive having both cultural and economic purposes and outcomes. Further we would argue that, culture and economics are not so much opposite ends of a spectrum, more interdependent three dimensional building blocks which legitimately occur in different combinations in different projects for different reasons which lead to different outcomes.

8. ***Do you agree with our identification of the risks ahead? AGREE***

Beyond the management of the risks identified we would specifically comment on the following risks. In terms of fluctuating levels of recoupment income, in part this will be affected by volatile market conditions and failure to support successful projects, and in addition by prioritising investment in first and second time filmmakers, in the main not known for their global box office success (although there are exceptions). Clearly the balance between retaining this priority and investing in world class filmmakers will be a careful one to strike. Further, in terms of failing to keep pace with changes in technology, there is a further risk of lag in relation to innovations in the creation and distribution of digital content, in which film must be a key player.

Given the positive commentary in the document regarding the compatibility of culture and economics, it is disappointing to read a risk which talks of the failure to meet the needs of industry and culture, clearly and artificially separating industry from culture.

9. ***Do you believe that the UK Film Council's current remit should be extended to cover video games? AGREE***

There is some useful territory to explore that lies between 'covering or not covering games', in such absolutist terms. We understand the natural interest of the games sector in the UK Film Council's tax break expertise. However we would advocate a dialogue exploring mutual benefit that concerns the enhancement of the cinema experience e.g. through cinema gaming, building on the notion of real-time big screen group participation. Additionally, from an innovation perspective, ideas around open sourcing films are worthy of further exploration. These are just a few of the ideas we are currently exploring with a local producer.

EM Media suggests that there is potentially fertile ground to be explored in the digital domain beyond film in the traditional sense, creating mutual benefit and revenue streams for the film industry. The UK Film Council's remit could include investments in projects that go beyond the traditional boundaries of film where the benefits to the film talent and businesses working in the film industry are clearly demonstrated. It should also be borne in mind that in terms of technical training at HE level there is tremendous overlap in the technological skills required for the technical production of games and film production and post production.

In essence, given this natural skills overlap we suggest not ruling out connecting with the games sector per se and instead identifying areas of mutual benefit for further discussion.

10. Do you agree UK Film: Digital innovation and creative excellence has covered all the key areas? DISAGREE

In terms of articulating the UK Film Council's work plan and clarifying the level of finance that has been allocated against each priority for the coming period, the document is clear.

With regards to articulating the vision for the digital British film industry, the direction of travel and ultimately what the UK Film Council is looking to achieve, the document is less clear. In terms of technological and creative lag referred to earlier in this response we would suggest embracing the connection between film and other digital content as such a separation will become ever more artificial and work against the successful positioning of the British film offer.

Debbie Williams
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