

Student Voices: Are creative jobs closed to new members, or can employability be acquired through the undergraduate degree experience? (0059)

Research Strand: Learning– Changing student experiences of higher education and evolving identities of students

The Creative Industries (CI) were coined by New Labour to represent the creative sectors that were identified as having economic value to Britain and with development for further economic growth. The Department of Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) established the “creative industries” as a new collective (1998). This collective had 13 sectors (DCMS: 2001):

Advertising, Architecture, Art and Antiques, Computer and Video games, Crafts, Design, Fashion, Film and Video, Music, Performing Arts (including Dance and Drama), Publishing (including journalism), Software and Computer services, Television and Radio.

The creative industries grew at an average of four percent Gross Value Added (GVA) per annum between 1997 and 2006, compared to three percent across the economy as a whole (London Government Association 2009). A new Coalition Government highlights the creative industries as a growth area in rebalancing the economy (Cameron: 2010). “Creative industries” and the “creative economy” are used synonymously and do not have definitive definitions (BOP Consulting 2010). In 2006 the Labour government began to formally refer to the creative industries as the creative economy. The creative economy term reaches out to recognise the wider importance of creativity on both the economy and society as a whole, shaping policy in the UK and internationally (ibid).

British government have also worked progressively to shape policies around employability in the UK’s education system. Since the Dearing Report (1997), there has been increasing pressure on higher education to address overtly its relationship with the national knowledge economy and the career aspirations of fee-paying undergraduates. The recent global recession has intensified this government pressure and media scrutiny.

In 2009, New Labour stated that the purpose of higher education was “Civilisation and Competition” and through a ten year strategy pushed British universities to address this agenda (BBC 2009). Under Mandelson’s drive, higher education institutions were being pressured to ensure undergraduates acquired employability, in order to gain graduate jobs. Although this strategy was short lived, under the new Coalition Government, the drive of competition, gathers momentum. The Browne Review (2010) and White Paper (2011) calls for universities to link their courses directly to graduate jobs and show evidence through published material, that courses develop students’ employability for specific graduate work. It advises universities to:

- increase the vocational skills elements of courses

- demonstrate a student's potential return on investment for their undergraduate degree
- provide placements
- provide high quality specialist career advice and job seeking skills
- offer courses to better reflect the needs of industry and include more industry relevant content
- provide evidence of graduate employment and salaries

Consequently all universities have to explore how best to address employability explicitly in the student experience.

However the agenda appears to be driven by British business (CBI 2009, BIS 2009, Highfliers 2009), and the British government, a Labour one, then Coalition one, rather than the student body themselves. Although The White Paper claims it puts "students in the driving seat" (2011:2), there seems little evidence of current research with a student population focusing on their expectations and definitions of employability or students' perceptions of their needs in the future. Nor is there evidence of any substantial research with students about their actual experience in relation to their own definitions of employability and their impressions of what is successful in their programmes.

Seeking students' views about what emphasis employability should have in their undergraduate programmes and whether employability can be acquired, would be useful to those working in higher education and shaping courses for changing times. The voices of the student body should be a significant contributor to this debate. Otherwise, political pressure may be encouraging universities to create new clothes for the emperor, new courses but with little substance.

This research brings together both the Creative Economy and Employability agendas. It interrogates the concept of employability in CI degrees, unpacks the multiplicity of meanings and investigates its place in the undergraduate experience. It asks the questions:

- What is employability in CI?
- Can this employability be "acquired" in the undergraduate experience?

A guest blog for "The Guardian" (2010), "Facebook" and first destination surveys, were utilised to engage with recent graduates (2006-2009 from UK universities) from 13 undergraduate creative disciplines. Grounded Theory (Charmaz 2006) was used to analyse the qualitative data of 68 undergraduate experiences of their degrees.

The findings of this stage can be summarised as follows:

- Graduates, to find work in any of the creative industries, need most of all to gain confidence. This confidence gained through believing themselves able to work within their industry of choice.
- The graduate's notion of employability in their undergraduate experience has both external and internal perspectives. The student must look out to

understand how specific creative work operates and is accessed, while looking in, to understand their value as creative workers.

- The graduates identify successful, key factors in both the curricular and co-curricular undergraduate experience, which they believe developed their creative employability.
- Creative work is moving to a career for the privileged. Graduates identify lack of personal, industry contacts and money, as being the main obstacles to accessing and sustaining creative employment. Personal contacts are needed to fight competition for opportunities. Money is needed to finance long periods of unpaid internship or work experience. Cash flow is needed to sustain a career of contract working, portfolio working, project working and sole trading.
- To increase the likelihood of a graduate gaining potential work in the creative industries, a graduate needs to have had meaningful engagement with the industry they aspire to work within, coupled with opportunities to gain an understanding of their own worth within it. This understanding gained through reflection on their identity, attributes and agency for potential work in that area.

The next stage will investigate current undergraduates' experiences in their creative degrees. The outcome will be a contemporary student voice currently lacking in CI and employability research and informed understanding of ways to facilitate creative learning and engage with future undergraduate students.

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