

What is a degree for? – Using students' contributions to explore meaningful models of employability for creative degrees, creative aspirations and creative work.

Research Strand: Academic Practice, work, careers and cultures.

Government proposals (The Browne Review :2010, White Paper :2011 and Wilson Report:2012) advise universities to develop their programmes to relate directly to graduate work, to better reflect the needs of industry, and to provide evidence for a return on investment for undergraduate students. Both New Labour and Coalition governments have shaped similar conceptions of employability. The dominant models of employability reveal little difference between the governments in relation to the purpose of higher education. Both governments have bought into:

- human capital theory which links government policy and higher education together, with employment growth
- Seeking employers' definitions of graduate employability and employers' views about the quality of current, undergraduate provision
- Viewing higher education as skill acquisition to meet employers' needs
- Measuring graduate employability through graduates first employment destinations, only six months after graduation
- Promoting internships, placements and work experience as the key requisites for graduate employability
- Espousing higher education and industry collaboration on university degree programmes
- Viewing the student as consumers or in the driving seat, determining choice in university provision

However both governments have undertaken very little research with the student themselves by actively seeking the student voice. Both governments have been preoccupied with valuing only the employers' voice (CBI 2009, BIS 2009, Highfliers 2009). An employer's voice may pragmatically seek "oven ready" graduates, able to slot neatly and cheaply into their company, with little need for further development.

Seeking the students' views on employability and its place within university programmes would be useful for those working in higher education and shaping the future of university provision. The National Union of Students (Ali: 2012) is now lobbying the British government to reject the metaphor for students as consumers or customers. Instead NUS asks government to seek the student voice, to consult with them, empower them, support students to be involved in the future of higher education in Britain.

This research began in 2009 and contributes to addressing this gap by investigating the contemporary student voice. It interrogates students' concepts of employability and explores the undergraduate experience to seek evidence of whether employability can be acquired through the university degree. This paper investigates in particular creative degrees and creative work, sectors that do not fit comfortably with government dominant models of employability relating to a sole graduate job. Creative graduates have portfolio-style working lives where they work in different

ways for many different clients. There is no fixed career route for creative graduates and finding work opportunities takes time and experimentation.

Stage one of the research findings (Higdon: 2011) used a guest blog for “The Guardian” (2010), “Facebook” and first destination surveys, to engage with 68 recent graduates (2006-2009 from UK universities) from 13 undergraduate creative disciplines (DCMS: 2001). The findings reveal that graduates identify self-confidence and industry contacts as the main requisites for employability in creative work. The graduates identify successful, key factors in both the curricular and co-curricular, undergraduate experience, which they believe develop their creative employability. Lack of personal industry contacts and money is identified as the main obstacles for both accessing and sustaining work. These graduates perceive evidence that creative work is moving to a career for the privileged.

Stage Two of the research, interviews final year students on creative degrees in UK universities. The initial stages of research demonstrate that the dominant, government models of employability have little relevance to these students’ experiences. A grounded approach (Charmaz 2006) was taken to analyse detailed, transcribed, narratives of final year students’ experiences of architecture and dance undergraduate degrees. The first ten transcripts, five students’ experiences from each discipline, found similarities in the concepts of employability within both creative subjects. Students believe to access and sustain creative work, creative workers need to have:

- An element of luck in relation to being “in the right place, at the right time” and making the most of chance meetings
- A personal network of industry contacts
- A tenacity to continuously network within work and personal life
- A passion for their discipline that drives them to work creatively and create work, without the motivation of monetary payment
- A need for ongoing personal development, self-drive and self-motivation
- A need to constantly “keep up” their discipline specific skills and technique
- An acceptance that a creative career is a journey, that takes many different paths with many different destinations
- A view that creative life is experiential and involves action
- A need for work experience that gains industry contacts
- A reliance on university tutors to gain industry contacts

There were differences between the two disciplines. Dance students viewed work experience as important only to make industry contacts. Work experience was mostly at entry level and was not perceived as relevant in skill development. Dance students talked of “a normal job” to support their unpaid or low paid creative work. A lack of money was accepted and students showed they were versatile in finding ways to support their creative work. The dance students saw part-time teaching as a means to support creative work, while keeping up technique and skills.

However, architecture students varied significantly to dance students in terms of seeing the destination in their careers. These students accepted that the career destination and environment may be different to what they envisaged and they were

resigned to being adaptable about where they would end up working. However, they all wanted to be architects in some capacity. They all viewed not becoming an architect, as failure or a waste of their degree. All these students perceived work experience as necessary, to get to the next stage for qualifying and to build their networks of industry contacts. These students all referred to architects needing to travel globally to find work and the implications this had on personal life, for example keeping links with their religious communities or being able to have a family.

Final year students from both disciplines, viewed well paid, graduate, creative work, as only for a privileged few. These privileged few were perceived as:

- having the money and connections needed to succeed
- were “the stars” of the degree, identified early as having star quality and were personally mentored or given special attention to succeed during and after university
- were more skilled in making the most of chances in life and were seen as lucky

The final stage of this research will investigate first year undergraduate aspirations and expectations of employability in creative degrees as they begin their university experience. Contributions from undergraduates as they enter and leave university and from graduates as they experience work, can be used to shape more meaningful models for creative employability. The outcome of the three stages of research will be a contemporary student voice about the place of employability in higher education to engage with future undergraduates.

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