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Experiencing Employability – first and final year undergraduate perspectives of “The Employability Agenda”.

Category: Student Experience

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“Employability, a relatively obscure concept a decade ago, now commands a central place in labour market policies in the UK, many other European states and beyond”.

(McQuaid and Lindsay 2005;199)

This study interrogates the concept of employability in creative industries degrees from the viewpoint of students and graduates. It unpacks the multiplicity of meanings of employability and investigates employability’s place in the undergraduate experience from the undergraduate perspective. It asks the research questions:

- ◆ What constitutes employability in the creative industries?
- ◆ Is there evidence that employability can be “acquired” in the undergraduate experience?

The ongoing research seeks to capture the experiences of current students studying on undergraduate degrees in the creative industries and of those that have recently graduated from these courses.

This stage of research takes a grounded approach (Charmaz 2006) to gain meanings of “Employability” from first and final year students of architecture and dance undergraduate degrees in a post 1992 English institution. Architecture and dance can be seen as very distinctive. Architecture has a professional body but dance does not. Architecture has narrowly defined graduate employment roles compared to the plethora of graduate employment destinations which come from the discipline of dance. Anecdotal evidence from lecturers of pre and post 1992 British programmes, report that more middle class students are taking degrees in architecture than before. Architecture attracts many international students with aspirations for the Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA) status. Architecture degrees are attracting less working class students than in the past as they are long courses and expensive to self-fund. Dance degrees attract a mix of both working class and middle class students who are passionate about dance and want to continue the subject post 18. In dance, women are the dominant gender in university degrees but do not maintain this dominance in senior employment roles in the discipline. More women are being attracted to studying architecture at university which has a history of being a male dominated discipline. Creative subjects are taught

predominantly in colleges and post 1992 universities. Only architecture and music have a strong presence in Russell Group universities (Comunian, Faggian et al. 2011). Architecture graduates are more likely to be employed after graduation than dance graduates (Comunian, Faggian et al. 2011).

The first year undergraduate views of Employability – an overview

The first year students' concept of employability mostly fits with British government definitions of employability; successful employment six months after graduation and being the kind of employee that global employers are looking to hire (Browne 2010; Wilson 2012; Department for Business Innovation and Skills 2011). However, first year student William, distrusts the "Employability Agenda" and Veejay and Saverio, feel they do not experience it in their own countries.

Most of the first year students want to work for themselves. This may be because they are entrepreneurial or are being pragmatic in hard times, seeing the need to create their own work. The first years' conceptualisation of employability are very different to the third year undergraduates' perceptions which seem less mainstream, being related to who you know, money and privileged connections. The first years talk about employability as being "attractive" to the employer and being a "good employee". The first years perceive current working relationships as unequal because the employee needs to fit and be constantly compliant to meet the needs of the employer. Students' preoccupation for creative self-employment could be a rejection of this working relationship.

Third year undergraduate views of Employability – an overview

The third year undergraduate 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 to constantly "keep up" their discipline specific skills and technique
- ◆ An acceptance that a creative career has many different paths within a global marketplace
- ◆ A view that creative life is experiential and involves action
- ◆ A need for work experience to gain industry contacts
- ◆ A reliance on university tutors to give industry contacts
- ◆ A need for money to manage the vulnerability of creative work where payment can be sporadic

Student perceptions within the two disciplines widens by the final year. 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 but contemplated other non-related dance jobs to subsidise creative living.

Architecture students accepted they may not end up exactly where they aspired to go, yet they all wanted to be architects in some capacity. They would have to adapt to where work took them, however they all viewed not becoming an architect as personal failure. All these students perceive global work experience as necessary to getting to the next stage for qualifying and building their networks of industry contacts.

In summary, final year students from both disciplines, view well paid, graduate creative work exists only for a privileged few. All first year students talk about future debt, rather than graduate salaries. The first years aspire to self-employment showing a rejection of an “employer/employee” working model and a desire for creative autonomy.

These findings are part of three stages of research (with first years, final years and graduates) to capture contemporary student voices about the place of employability in higher education to engage with future undergraduates and to shape more meaningful models for creative employability.

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