Challenging the Narratives: Higher Education Institutions and agency in the Creative Economy

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ABSTRACT

This article is based on empirical research of both young people (Higher Education students in London) and representatives of industry. It attempts to assess the means by which current higher education institutions [HEIs] can work to challenge current conditions of employment in the so-called 'creative economy'. The article will first examine the background to this subject -- the current perceptions of labour and employment in the creative economy (this study is UK based, but its findings are relevant internationally). It will then briefly examine the role HEIs play as 'producer' of talent for this 'economy, and by drawing upon two projects that examine work placements and curriculum development for young graduates, the article will attempt to define how employment opportunities might provide agency for young graduates as they seek to develop a career in the creative economy. While the context and examples in this article are drawn from the UK, this article will conclude by highlighting how, given how 'creative economy' as a policy concept is becoming globally influential, these issues are relevant to HEIs internationally. In conclusion, the article will assert that we (education professionals) need to consider more reflexive and critical ways of preparing students for work in the creative economy, in the cause of social justice, development, as well as careers.

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Introduction

This article seeks to assess the possibility for contemporary higher education institutions (HEIs) to challenge current working practices in the creative economy. The article will first examine the current state and perception of work within the creative economy in the UK, before examining the role HEIs play as a 'producer' of talent for this sector, which is relevant globally. By drawing upon two projects that examine work placements and curriculum development for young graduates, the article will then show how there are opportunities to provide some form of power and agency for young graduates as they seek to develop their career in the creative economy. While the context and examples in this article are drawn from the UK, this article will conclude by highlighting how these issues are prevalent in the creative economies accross the world, and will assert that we (education professionals) need to consider alternative ways of preparing students for work in the creative economy, in the cause of social justice, development, as well as careers.

Introduction: work in the Creative Economy within the UK

In recent years, culture has been understood and used by governments around the world as a tool both to bolster economic growth and advance social development. The potential for culture via the creative economy was formally recognised back in 2008 by major the United Nations agencies, for example where the *Creative Economy Report* 2008 (UNCTAD, 2008) stated that "the creative economy has the potential to generate income, jobs…while… promoting social inclusion, cultural diversity and human development" (p. iii). This belief has been reiterated in 2013 with a special edition of its *Creative Economy Report* (now jointly published by the UNDP and UNESCO), and which highlights how the creative economy is not only "highly transformative…in terms of income-generation, job creation and export earnings", but investment in this sector can also contribute to the "overall wellbeing of communities, individual self-esteem and quality of life, dialogue and cohesion" (p.10). The financial support of large-scale cultural projects around the world − from

cities such as Abu Dhabi and Singapore, to policy developments to allow for the creation of creative clusters in Shanghai and London − is testament to how this policy belief (without a huge amount of empirical evidence to back it up) stands as a firm political principle, where a "creative economy" is understood to be an engine of growth, and must be adopted at all levels of governance as a form of strategic development, particularly in the cause of reversing the decline of economies built on agriculture and manufacturing.

The rise of this "creative economy" has thus occurred alongside a positive notion of the type of work that this economy demands, or is available for would-be-creative workers, along with a positive notion of the way such work is structured, organised and managed in this new creative sector (or series of sectors − there is little consensus on how the creative "economy" is structured, whether in a city, or country, a region, or globally). Work in the creative economy is routinely understood to be 'creative' (again, another largely undefined term) and by this virtue is understood as particularly rewarding for the worker. Creative labour is where workers are to some degree autonomous and independent; they are more able to set their own working hours or indeed work in a variety of locations. In other words, the creative economy promises the opposite (an antidote to?) the alienated labour of industrial modernity. This comes with the irony that the above UNDP/UNESCO report is largely aimed at BRIC or emerging industrial countries, whose stage of development one could describe as 'modernisation'. Most importantly for us, however, is that the forms of work that are being generated and produced within this new creative economy are routinely portrayed as fun as much as personally fulfilling − they are attractive to a wide range of people, and particularly young people.

The positive image of what constitutes work in the creative economy has not gone unnoticed by young people globally, in part as the creative economy notionally includes a range of consumer goods, cultural products, design and entertainment, that typically appeal to younger people (from video games to fashion to magazines, and so on). What has ensued in recent years (particularly within higher education in the UK) is

a growing number of young people positively inspired and motivated to develop a career in the creative economy (dominated, it must be observed by the media and communications industries, including marketing, PR and advertising). In the UK, recent figures from the Higher Education Statistics Agency demonstrate that there has been a 5% increase in the number of undergraduate students who have applied for courses in the subject area of 'creative arts and design' (HESA, 2015). For graduates, it seems, being able to determine the very nature of work seems to outweigh more traditional concerns over the established professions and identities, security, pay and working conditions. However, the initial interest in developing a career in the creative economy might also demonstrate a lack of awareness of the actual, material working conditions that exist, where, for example, in many sectors of the creative economy there is a chronic shortage of stable employment opportunities, or where (in particular the publicly-funded arts and cultural institutions), there remains a state of severe budgetary pressures, particularly in their publicly-sourced revenues, and where the rise of private sponsorship or investment means that new pressures and limits are being continually introduced in relation to the opportunities for career development and progression. This paper will consider this current ensuing scenario – the seeming attractiveness and popularity of the new creative economy, whose actual conditions of labour are always partially (if not wholly) concealed from newcomers, are making young job seekers particularly vulnerable.

Higher Education and the Creative Economy

The often precarious and insecure working conditions within the creative economy has not gone unnoticed by scholars. One of the key areas of interdisciplinary research that has developed since the late 1990s in Western Europe has been the working conditions, expected behaviours, values, contractual terms as well as environmental conditions of workers within this new creative economy (see Ball, 2003; Gill and Pratt, 2008; Gill 2010; Bridgstock, 2011). The struggles of the new creative workers are being documented and recorded and a number of publications addressing issues such as inequality of

access, lack of diversity, exploitation and working hours, has steadily risen in the last five years – and can be seen as a manifestation of a growing 'social conscience' in the new economy as a whole (see Allen et al 2010; McGuigan, 2010; Social Market Foundation 2010; Ashton, 2011). What, however, has been less discussed across the emerging schoolarly currents is the role that higher education (particularly the large, wealthy, and established HEI institutions) play within the creative economy scenarios outlined above, though this is gradually changing with recent publications (see Ashton and Noonan, 2013; Gilmore and Comunian, 2016) as well as conferences such as the Higher Education & the Creative Economy conference held at King's College, London in 2015 (see Comunian and Gilmore, 2015). The HEI's, we may safely say, are part of the production process through which the creative economy develops. They are not marginal in their impact or role, and not somehow sealed within a hermetic sphere of social life called the 'public' sector: quite the contrary, in recent years their behaviour, values and operations of HEI's have taken after the pattern of American corporate strategic management, and their subsequent corporate interventions in industry and the careers' marketplace have been highly strategic and part of their overall delivery on their educational aims. The creative economy largely functions through a supply of suitable labour (labourers who are suitably already inculcated with the behaviours and values required for such labour – flexibility, adaptability, the acceptance of non-monetary rewards, individual 'trade-offs' of monetary reward for personal reward, and of course the availability of 'creativity', and so on).

These young creative workers are almost always educated at college of HE level, and are students when they encounter the creative economy 'imaginary'. The HEIs provide the training and qualifications of such graduates, but perhaps more importantly, it is within the education system that the notion of 'creative economy' as a desirable career destination is inculcated – even to the extent that other, potentially, rewarding careers (in Law, Medecine, and so on) are turned down in favour of it. To the extent that the HEIs, therefore, support the creative economy, what are their roles and responsibilities as they produce the

next batch of eager graduates keen to develop a career in this sector?

A critical reflection of the responsibilities of HEIs within this creative economy is a crucial step for scholars to undertake, for two reasons. Firstly, it is clear that young creative workers are reliant on a formal qualification to set themselves apart within a highly competitive sector, where employment opportunities are scarce. Statistics released by the UK Government Department of Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) in 2014, state that "more than half (57.7%) of jobs in the creative economy were filled by people who have a degree or higher qualification in 2013 compared to 31.1 per cent of all jobs in the UK" (2014: 13). This figure, it seems, has only risen within a year where the Creative Industries Federation (CIF) writes that "60.5% of creative industry workers are graduates compared to a UK average of 31.8%" (2015: 25). It is obvious that HEIs play a key role in providing what seems to be an endless resource for the creative economy in the form of a large number of young graduates "whose skills are generic and in constant oversupply" and who are therefore "forced to accept low pay" or no pay when they seek to develop a career in the creative economy (Arvidsson et al, 2010: 296). How then should HEIs think about their complicity in perpetuating to some extent the precarious working conditions in the creative economy itself?

Secondly, with the number of graduates greatly outnumbering available paid employment within the creative economy, an increasing number of unpaid internships or 'work placements' have emerged and are being assertively promoted by firms and public institutions alike, as well as NGO, development organisations and universities themselves. The rationale is (even) often charitable – as a means of a potential entry route into paid work. Within the UK, there is tacit acknowledgment among young graduates that unpaid work via these internships or work placements is one of the main ways, if not the only way, to securing future paid employment. It is often a standard requirement on a CV, and for many cultural institutions (or small creative agencies who operate on lean revenues) it consistently helps their lack of organisational capacity. Official guidance on how arts organisations should offer and offer internships, from

Arts Council England and Creative and Cultural Skills, is no doubt a sign of the widespread nature of this practice (see Arts Council England and Creative and Cultural Skills, 2011). Being able to 'work for free' thus privileges particular students and graduates, which, this paper contends, has resulted in inequality of access and a lack of diversity in the workforce in the creative economy. CIF highlights that while

> Public investment supports the identification, diversification and training of creative talent…92.1% of workers (in the creative economy) were from advantaged social and economic backgrounds compared to a UK average of 66.0%. In the creative media sector alone 14% of workers were educated in independent schools which represent only 7% of the population (2015: 25).

This lack of diversity is predictable, and furthermore it is not limited to the economic background of the worker but also to their social background. In their research on work placements in the arts and cultural sector, Allen et al (2010) would highlight how gender, ethnicity and disability play a role too in how students are able to access, obtain and conduct their work placements. The difficulties they face are reflected in the percentage of women and black and minority ethnic workers within the creative economy. Here women hold "36.7% of jobs compared with 47.2% in the whole UK economy" and the percentage of black and minority ethnic workers only represent only "11.0% of the creative industries workforce, compared to 14.1% of the overall population of England and Wales and 40% in London where there is a high concentration of creative industries" (CIF, 2015: 25). What is clear is that there are structural inequalities with regards to work in the creative economy. There is a need to combat the effects of the 'neo-liberalisation of work' where young workers now believe that success is predicated on what they do and that they are therefore "personally culpable for their own failures" (McGuigan, 2010: 328). Is there scope within the curricula of HEI courses that address these issues – or should students be left to think that success in the creative economy is predicated simply on their own personal self-sacrifice, on hard work and passion,

which (they are told) will overcome any barrier? This is a central research — as much as a policy — question. And it is a question, which openly discussed, will have political as much as economic implications for the growing dominance of Western HEIs in the global landscape of education provision for young aspiring professionals.

This paper's current parameters are, however, more limited. The issues above are not easy ones to consider outside the large survey-derived economic and employment data, of the kind only large (and often government-sponsored) research agencies provide. What then is possible for the individual cultural policy or development researcher? When viewed, partially, within the current state of higher education in the UK today, it is not difficult to observe that HEIs are under increasing pressure, as such 'pressure' tangibly impacts HEI employees themselves. The changing spectrum of responsibilities now required of the 'scholar' or 'university academic' would attest to this. As would the appearance of careers centres in every university, and the uses of careers 'rhetoric' as a means of advertising a given course (indeed, a few decades ago, that courses would need to be 'advertised' would seem bizarre; that education would need always to be justified, and evaluated, by and within the context of prospective careers, would also seem ridiculous). Research evidence — albeit again of a general observational kinds — can also be derived from government reports (such as the Review of Business-University Collaboration published in 2012, henceforth referred to as the Wilson Review) to produce 'employable' graduates through working with businesses to provide appropriate work experience for their students. This 'skills' agenda has now become a global trend among HEI providers — it is a part of the 'export' factor of UK (and European) domestic policies. The introduction of tuition fees by UK universities, of up to £9000 a year (and double or triple for international students), has also entailed a political mandate for institutions to demonstrate that the courses they offer not only justify the cost of this tuition but that the course itself is calculated as an investment that can and will lead to individual monetary gain through future employment. The introduction of Key Information Sets (KIS), where universities routinely tabulate the number of students in employment six months after completing their studies (including data on how much their graduates are earning), are directed at potential applicants and envisage opportunities in the labour market. Investment-style information for potential students is becoming a routine way in which HEIs are engaging with the wider employability agenda, and justifying the public funding of education.

It is thus important here to think about how HEIs can challenge both the current narrative of work in the creative economy, as well as the wider employability agenda and its set of political madates. Is it possible for HEIs to nurture their students' interests of work in the creative economy while also preparing them for the realities of this work (and its ideological significance in the HEI sector itself)? Is it also possible for HEIs to challenge and problematise the 'employability agenda' where students are expected to be able to find work as quickly as possible after graduation? Is there space within HEIs to think about what other skills and knowledge are needed by young graduates that will allow them to develop a long-term sustainable career? My study below seeks to examine if HEIs could, firstly, potentially disrupt or change their role within the creative economy by challenging what skills and knowledge its graduates should possess, and secondly, by problematising the employability agenda. In what follows, I will draw upon reflections of two projects in which I was involved in as a tutor and researcher. The projects sought to determine what the gaps were within the the ways that work placements were being offered and organised, and in the syllabus that was currently being provided within the courses of HEI departments. I was able to develop a curriculum framework that would address the issues articulated above. These two projects involved working with students, industry professionals and arts organisations, and my account below will aspire to reveal how it is possible to open up avenues for challenging the current narrative of work in the creative economy as well as the employability agenda, and do so through the creation and provision of a space that allows for reflection and discussion so as to enable all participants to think about the state of the creative economy today and their role within it.

Challenging the Narrative of Work Placements

In an attempt to understand how 'work' is perceived and understood from various perspectives within the creative economy, I presided over the organisation of a roundtable and a workshop session, where students and industry professionals were invited to discuss and share their thoughts concerning the prospect, nature and meanings of 'work' in the creative economy. This was structured with a focus on three themes: recruitment, skills and knowledge and expectations. It was clear from both discussions that the reason why work within the creative economy is precarious, low paid and exploitative, can be identified in the way the creative economy is structured – in terms of how people access work in its sectors, and how successful people working in these sectors perpetuate structural inequalities, and perpetuate a professional rhetoric that conceals the nature of structural inequalities (sometimes by way of representing those inequalities as themselves professional challenges).

One of the many of structural inequalities identified is the plethora of recruitment processes across the creative economy's various sectors. While it is acknowledged that work placements and internships form a part of an identifiable problem, other issues point to less visible phenomenon, like the lack of 'standard' recruitment processes and the tendency for networks to act as intermediaries of recruitment forming a kind of 'hidden jobs market'. The existence of networks was not so much an issue of social justice. It was occasion for advice provided by industry professionals on how students could attempt to access such networks, ranging from the setting up of their own networks, or volunteering and undertaking various kinds of work placements that in turn allowed them to access certain networks. A deeply uncomfortable dimension of such advice was the range of established assumptions on students and graduates, that they would possess not only the financial means but also the time to seek out such opportunities, notwithstanding their social ability to negotiate closed professional networks. Evident also in the ensuing discussions was a critical lack of reflection from industry professionals of the interconnection between the current lack of diversity in the workforce and the potentially exclusionary practices endemic in the networks themselves. Why is a 'network' a natural or acceptible phenomenon in the creative economy? What was even more troubling was the evident lack of understanding between the participants – between the young graduate working for free in order to develop their career and a well-established company board member who was, at this stage in their career, able to volunteer their time routinely for a variety of activities. As one participant, a former industry professional, stated "Unpaid work will happen throughout your career...there are people at the top of their profession who are doing things for free" (Industry Professional, 2014).[1] What this participant failed to take into account was how they belonged to a "small elite that can command high levels of market power" and thus enjoys a position where he or she is already well-remunerated for other work that they do" (Arvidsson et al, 2010: 296). This points to another structural inequality, where the working patterns of a small group (of mature and well-established professionals) set up and establish as norm an horizon of expectations, in turn which is imposed on large numbers of young workers, most who do not enjoy the financial security or privileges that enable them to participate at all. At the crux of these two issues is the lack of power, and the form of agency young graduates possess when it comes to forging a career in the creative economy.

One small way in which my colleagues and I have sought to address the question of power, agency and the structural inequalities that are so embedded in the discourses and professional thought-processes that determine life in the creative economy is the offering of work placements within our own HEI courses. By bringing together organisations and universities that offer work placements, along with students who had undertaken them, a series of 'ethical' work placement contracts were drawn up (see Hope and Lim, 2014), and they were drawn up in a way that attempted to address exclusionary and exploitative dynamics that so

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[1] Participants in the project chose to remain anonymous. The industry professionals that took part included a HR and Recruitment Consultant in the film and media Industries, a former Arts Council England employee and Freelance Arts Consultant, a TV and Film Journalist, an employee within an arts organisation, and a founder and owner of a non-profit arts venue.

often emerge when unpaid labour is involved, and to provide a cognitive context for understanding such dynamics.

Within this new improvised contractual framework, students were encouraged to think about what they hope to achieve while undertaking the work placement, and how the work placement would help develop or address a gap in their current skills and knowledge. In addition, students were asked to think on what they can reasonably expect of a work placement with regards to supervision, training and learning, and how the dynamics of power impacted upon them. It became apparent how, for many organisations, an immediate question arises, concerning that if what is being offered is a genuine work placement, where there are specific learning outcomes and proper training and supervision provided, or not. In fact, what is a genuine work placement? And where are the lines between instruction, valuable work experience, and exploitation?

Most importantly, how can HEIs play a role in mapping this terrain, defining these lines, and challenging the way the recruitment of its students into the creative sectors currently takes place? HEIs are asked, in our contractual framework, to ensure that students are conscious that the aim of their work placement is to extend their academic development – and is not a 'magic ticket' or simply way into future paid work in the creative economy. As currently constructed by the creative economy, the very concept of a 'work placement' is inherently exclusionary and exploitative (it is free labour and only admits certain types of person), we have sought to mitigate against this to some degree through the mechanism of the contract – addressing a source of exploitation. This source is the learning outcomes of the placement (where often there is a complete lack of genuine learning outcomes, as the work placement role is often itself motivated by the operational avoidance of hiring a paid worker or member of staff to fill a gap within the organisation's operations). By therefore making 'learning' the contractual aim of the very offering or undertaking of a work placement, we seek to locate the conditions of agency in the free labourer. We ensure that the student is able to locate themselves in

a situation of relative power, by ensuring that they are aware of the reasons why they are providing their labour for free, and they assess their own expectations of what the work placement will provide by way of adding to what they have gained in their studies. The contracts sought to challenge the current narrative of work placements as a form of free labour for organisations and recast the work placement as a process of critical reflection on the intellectual conditions of labour in the creative economy. Gaining work experience beneficial to their own personal circumstances, and enabling the student to develop their career, is freed from the instrumental conditions that require the student to undertake work of no benefit to themselves and at their own expense.

In other words, the balance of benefits are contractually weighed in favour of the student: where the organisation is taking on a worker without sector-specific skills and is required to invest time and money in that worker's training, the worker in turn delivers work that is both of benefit to the organisation yet also instrincially developmental. The critical component is therefore development – the contractual negotiation of the exploitative work placement mechanism is by way of an investment in human development. The student is awarded a sense of agency through the way the work placement opportunity extends their capabilities (Cf., Sen, 2004).

Challenging the Employability Agenda

Another outcome from the roundtable and workshop discussions were our identifying the forms of skills and knowledge students should possess when they graduate. The outcomes of this discussion is critically engaged with the highly politicised 'employability' agenda, typified in the Wilson Review. The Review states that one of the ways in which universities can 'contribute' to society is (not only through their research, but) ensuring that "the enterprise and entrepreneurial culture…is developed amongst its students.[…]. and the applicability of the knowledge and skills of all its graduates" (Wilson, 2012: 13). The Review is a conduit for a predictable political rhetoric, where the central task of public universities is the production of graduates able to secure jobs upon graduation as they have the appropriate skills that

businesses or organisations at that particular time require. Or, if they are unable to find such jobs or roles in industry, that will are able to be "enterprising" and create their own jobs or role in the marketplace.

While this neoliberal logic seems (in the contexts in which many of us work) so fair and reasonable, among the many things it misrepresents and fails to acknowledge is the basic working conditions within industry (particularly in the creative economy), which not only differ widely (and sector by sector), but are changing rapidly, and that often lack recognised and stable lines of progression into work. Many sectors even lack fair regulation of access and equality through an application process and an interview assessment. The Review also fails to acknowledge that given the lack of regulation, most workers in the creative economy already are or have to be entrepreneurial by default, given the precarious nature of creative work itself and the exemption of so much of the creative economy from unionisation and standard labour laws. I would suggest that the very concept of 'employability' needs to be reconsidered in this context, and a properly critical consideration could begin with the joint report *Working Towards your Future: Making the Most of your Time in Higher Education* produced by the National Union of Students (NUS) and Confederation of Business Industry (CBI).

In this report, employability is defined as "a set of attributes, skills and knowledge that all labour market participants should possess to ensure that they have the capability of being effective in the workplace" (NUS and CBI, 2011: 12). The inclusion of the word "attributes" not only, sensibly, highlights that different types of work would require different qualities in a person, but that it points a critical failing in the politically motivated rhetoric around he discourse on employability in education. It also allows for a broader theoretical integration of education aims with the Human Development 'capabilities' discourse. It widens the understanding of what 'employability' could entail – and this is centrally concerned with the agency of the student. What 'attributes' are needed to successfully negotiate and develop a career (in the creative economy or elsewhere) must concern the specific requirements a student must possess in facing an industry or marketplace of complexity, structural

inequality, closed or concealed networks, lack of legal scrutiny and regulation, and where the line of progression is not clear. In other words, the student faces the conditions for disempowerment and a self-de-valuation. The first stage in developing attributes suitable to a neoliberal economy should therefore be – as noted in our project exercise above – a critical self-understanding of one's motives, position, resources and abilities in relation to the uncompromising systemic frameworks of work and the work place. It needs to proceed to a developing of an understanding of the processes of work, (which refers to the HR dimension of work as related to values, as much as the commodification of 'creativity' itself as related to the cognitive implications for the worker) and what the organisation may demand in terms of individual commitment or expenditure of personal welfare. They then, and only then, progress to developing an explicit understanding of the modes of intelligence, thought and practical application suited to a specific industrial field, or sector.

Such industry-specific attributes required for young graduates (specifically to develop a career in the creative economy) were identified in the above discussion with industry professionals. While the participants acknowledged that cognitive skills (reading and writing well, analytical skills, and so on) were taken for granted, young graduates needed particularly to learn how to deal with professional rejection and failure. This apparently psychological phenomenon, it was noted, possesses a profound socio-economic dimension, where in the creative economy the potential of failure is high, and where rejection can often feel deeply personal (almost penetrating a person's sense of identity) due to the extensive subjective investment that creative labour involves. Here industry professionals wanted universities to be places where students could experiment and fail, outside of the pressures of the industry – where failure would not obviously mean a huge loss of income or the breakdown of professional networks and relationships. Universities should be a place where failure could be explored, and where failure could become learning opportunities in an industry where second chances are few and far between.

Interestingly, that despite the specific demands of

the various creative sectors for specific skills, the student participants too were not centrally concerned with the 'tool-kit' approach to learning and 'being equipped' for industry. There was scepticism all round at the assumption that being in possession of the supposed necessary skills on an arbitrary careers 'skills list' entailed success in obtaining a job in the creative economy. Rather, their interest was stimulated foremost in information (where they can find access information on the inner workings of a particular industry or field) and secondly, the need for a space to develop the facility of self-reflexivity and self-evaluation – so as to become more aware of how they presented themselves, their communication styles or body language, for example. Students articulated a need for opportunities in role-play, (presenting a pitch to a potential producer, or how to network, or how to engage in conversation socially), and other issues to do with the internal dynamics of self-presentation within the job process. Students were interested in being provided opportunities where they could think through potential responses from a variety of situations, and their suggestions articulated what in effect needs to be challenged within the politicised employability agenda and its focus on skills and knowledge. The issue of "attributes", central to a person's sense and activation of their own agency, is something that requires further research investigation (and integration into our conception of skills and knowledge). We surely require a broader notion of what kind of experiences, qualities and individual characteristics, young graduates could cultivate that would allow them to confidently face the uneven landscape of the creative economy and maintain a stable sense of self and potential development.

To achieve this, my students and I developed a curriculum that would provide them with opportunities for 'Reflection', 'Expression' and 'Experience'. Here students devised topics and tasks that they felt would feed into these three themes. Some of these involved reflecting on the way their personal and professional identities were interconnected, and also questioning the notion of 'work' and what 'success' means within the creative economy. Tasks included developing a personal pitch and practising this pitch with their fellow students, and conducting interviews with industry professionals to find out more about their career trajectories. This again is a small step in challenging the current rhetoric dominating how students need to be in employment within six months of graduation – in a sector where the notion of 'employment' is fraught with ideological complexities and assumptions on the nature on the global economy and its trajectory. What this curriculum frames is skills development process in which knowledge as self-knowledge is embedded and empowering. A sense of agency is afforded the students through establish them in the understanding that the embedded social inequities of the economy does not reflect negatively on them – the system's unequality should not inculcate a value judgement on their individual sense of worth and potential capability. In helping them develop the capability for specific tasks and activities that allow them to address the particularities and dilemmas embedded in the creative economy, we develop a social consciousness of the dysfunctional dimensions of that economy. It is clear from how this curriculum developed, that students wanted an opportunity to examine issues of employability within the wider framework of what it means to make a living within the creative economy, as well as the nature of 'success'. Being able to 'make a living' would thus encompass more than just being employable, but also include other aspects of 'work', which in turn would require a critical engagement with issues on cultural labour, managing the different aspects of one's professional and personal life when they became increasingly merged, and of learning different coping mechanisms when things go wrong or remain precarious. Being able to provide a space for students to engage with these issues challenged the rhetoric and assumptions of the employability agenda, but more than that, it allowed the process of constructing employability a creative process of critical thinking and inquiry, building a range of attributes in a student's sense of agency in the face of a success-obsessed labour market.

Further Challenges and Future Directions

Access to work in the creative economy is exclusionary and to a large extent tends to benefit the socially and economically advantaged. The current

composition of workers across the creative sectors is testament to how opportunities for career development are so skewed towards the economically and socially privileged. However, this is not specfic to the creative economy in the UK. Research conducted on creative labour in America, Italy and China, among other countries in the world highlights how these conditions are prevalent globally (see Frenette, 2013; Arvidsson et al, 2010; and Kanngieser, 2012). Such working conditions are consistent with our understanding of the neo-liberal direction of the global economy, which brings into question how these two UK specific projects would be able to challenge current working practices in these sectors in other countries. One must not underestimate the influence and impact of the UK with regards the various policies and strategies undertaken by different countries around the world as they seek to develop their creative economies. The widespread adoption of the UK Government's 1998 Creative Industries Mapping Document (DCMS, 1998) in various countries in Europe and Asia is one such example of the global knowledge flows of policy, strategy ideas, along with their embedded values. In addition, the large number of students from Asia (and other parts of the world) coming to the UK to obtain their higher degrees in areas associated with the creative economy also point at how their understanding of the creative economy has the potential to influence the way they work when they return to their home countries. The increasing mobility of young workers and the ways in which technology allows for international collaboration on multiple levels also continually blurs the lines between the creative economy jurisdictions of nation state labour markets. There are commonalities within the creative economies in various parts of the world that make it possible to see how the projects I have discussed could give young graduates the ability to challenge or disrupt the way these sectors function and are structured, wherever they choose to work in the future.

There are, of course, inherent limitations to these projects and their practical investigations. Firstly, any such project schemes work within current prevailing conditions and practices – cognitive as well as professional – with the creative economy as it is

currently constituted; and secondly, they only address one part of the creative economy, largely with regards to the 'production' of talent – not the technical creation and production of cultural goods. Overriding both these issues is the idea that the creative economy is a positive force for good due to the way it is currently measured and quantified by governments: it is 'good' because it is an engine of economic growth, thus all aspects of the economy from production to consumption should be nurtured and supported, be they HEIs producing the students, to the creation of creative clusters to generate cultural products and the liberalisation of trade laws to promote consumption of such.

There is an opportunity here for HEIs to question and open up the notion of what constitutes a 'good' creative economy. Is there another way in which a creative economy could be measure and quantified, which moves beyond the economic as currently defined? What other kind of contributions could a creative economy make if it offered access of opportunity so as to ensure diversity within its workforce? This is important to consider given how the types of products produced by the creative economy provide people with "recurring representations of the world...constitute our inner private lives and our public selves' and 'contribute strongly to our sense of who we are" (Hesmondhalgh, 2007: 3). It is thus vital to ask not only what economic impact this sector has but also what kind of social impact it could have and in what shape and form. Attempting to deal with these issues would mean offering alternative narratives that are currently being presented by governments and institutions. Perhaps the biggest challenge for HEIs would be how to investigate and effect any findings or suggestions within the present pressure of meeting the aims of the employability agenda. Yet, to continue on the existing path runs a risk of forgoing an opportunity where HEIs could do more than just be a 'producer' of talent for the creative economy (and in so doing exacerbate some of the worst aspects of the global neoliberal economy). Instead, we could locate ways of effecting real change, so as to be able to address the structural inequalities of the sector and develop an economy that is genuinely creative.

Challenging the Narratives: The Role of Higher Education as agents in the Creative Economy
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