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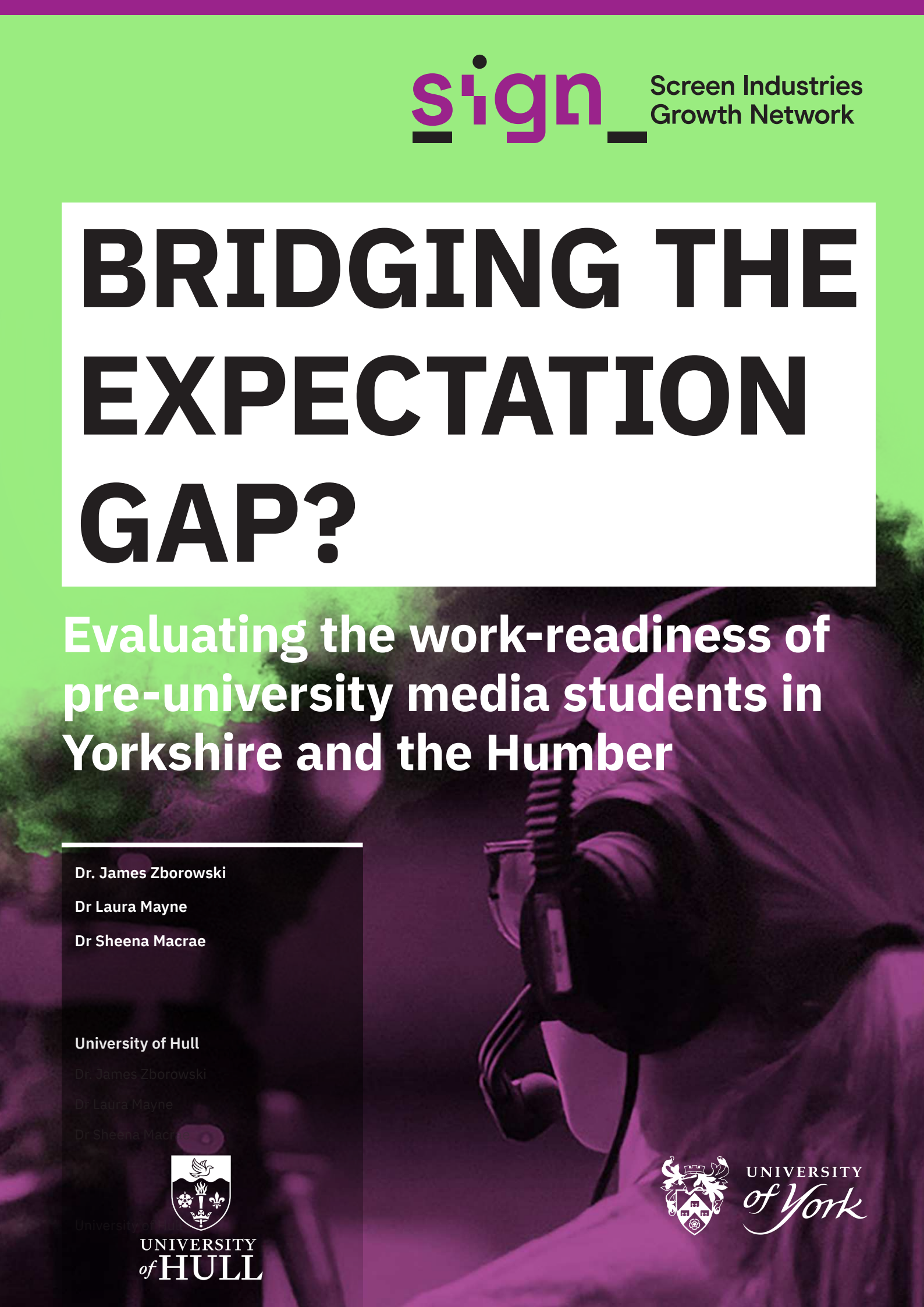
sign_ Screen Industries Growth Network

BRIDGING THE EXPECTATION GAP?

Evaluating the work-readiness of pre-university media students in Yorkshire and the Humber



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CONTENTS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

It is difficult for providers of pre-university media qualifications (such as BTECs, A-levels, Cambridge Technicals, and the UAL award) to meet the demand for work experience in the screen industries among their cohorts. This is a result of various factors, including the structure, working patterns, and insurance and confidentiality requirements of the creative industries. It has significant implications for the rollout of T-levels in the area of Media, given the emphasis of that suite of qualifications upon meaningful work experience opportunities. The substantial work experience component of T-Levels might be hard to deliver in the area of Media, and might therefore risk exacerbating regional inequalities.

Challenges to effective careers advice for students aspiring to careers in the screen industries include the use of informal hiring practices in the sector, which make professional networks as important to career entry and progression as formal qualifications. Reviewing screen industries hiring practices is one way of addressing this matter; another is to demystify professional networks for students and find ways to allow entry into those networks. This could take the form of coaching or mentoring.

The potential working realities of the creative industries, with respect to experiences such as freelance working and the associated long and unsociable working hours, irregular income and precarity that are experienced by many sector workers, are an insufficiently-developed part of pre-university media courses. Without this information, learners are making a less fully-informed choice about their career path, which may mean less scope to plan for career pathways and negotiate career progression. Such information and guidance ought to be a more prominent part of pre-university media curricula, alongside the existing worthwhile focus on criticism and creativity.

Projects in media qualifications often grant students a high degree of autonomy and authority, making them key creative workers within small groups. This is valuable as general skills development and as preparation for some screen industries roles, but it may leave students ill-equipped for, and inadvertently offer a misleading impression of, the demands of many entry-level screen industries roles.

Media Studies as a subject has promising educational benefits. The balance of creativity and technical skill in media and games courses meant the students were enthusiastic and engaged practical learners. Many students had discovered Media as a subject through the FE system without prior knowledge and had as a result completely changed their view of education.

Soft skills are important, but are potentially under-recognised and underutilised on pre-university media courses. Many media students do not fully appreciate the importance of networking to career access, and instead think a more instrumental skills-based CV will carry them through.

Acknowledgements

The report authors would like to thank the research participants who gave their time, ideas, and data to the project, and also thank the SIGN team and the University of Hull for their support.

About SIGN

The Screen Industries Growth Network (SIGN) is a unique, business-facing initiative supporting the TV, film and games industries in Yorkshire and the Humber. SIGN aims to make this region the UK's centre for digital creativity, and a model of diverse and inclusive activity. In order to do this, SIGN connects companies, support agencies and universities through a programme of training, business development, research and evaluation.

SIGN is a £6.4M project, starting in Summer 2020, and funded by Research England, the University of York, and its partners. The University of York leads the initiative, working with Screen Yorkshire and eight other Yorkshire universities. An extensive network of collaboration ensures that SIGN is equipped to deliver maximum impact across the region.

Report published, 2024.

INTRODUCTION

1.1. Careers advice: Bridging the resource gaps.

The screen industries are growing, and in particular the scale and scope of the Yorkshire and Humber screen industries is increasing rapidly: between 2015-18 the region grew by 116% compared to 11% nationally (Swords and Townsend, 2019: 6). The screen industries are important to the UK economy, and according to the Department for Culture, Media and Sport the UK's creative industries contributed £109 billion to the UK economy in 2021. However, it is also widely accepted among academic researchers and industry stakeholders that severe skills shortages threaten to stunt this growth, that education and training does not match pace of technological change, and that the regional screen industries, while growing at an impressive scale, remain inconsistent in terms of the training and opportunities provided for new entrants.

Carey, Crowley, Dudley & Giles sum up very well the challenges for new entrants to the screen industries: 'aspirational barriers; financial barriers; lack of networks; knowledge and information barriers; cultural and attitudinal barriers; geographic barriers; and, employer behaviour/lack of flexibilities' (Carey et al. 2017: i-ii). Carey et al (2017) found in consultation with stakeholders that lack of diversity is seen as the biggest challenge facing the sector, in particular 'Ethnic minorities, women and particularly those with caring responsibilities, those with disabilities and people from less advantaged backgrounds, were seen to face the biggest challenges in entering and progressing in the industry' (2017: i). Being geographically mobile, being able to weather the financial consequences of working precariously in a freelance industry, and having access to networks and knowledge of a sector which is seen as middle-class and overwhelmingly white, pose significant challenges for new entrants.

Despite these challenges, it is the case that young people from all walks of life do actually want to work in the creative industries. However, educational provision is fragmented, and understanding of the creative industries is lacking among young people (Carey et al. 2017). In 2022 the BFI/ERIC found that although as a demographic young people are big consumers of screen industries content, knowledge of screen careers and career pathways is relatively limited, and careers professionals also do not feel able to provide this: their resources are limited, as is access to up-to-date information (BFI/ERIC, 2022: 6).

On the subject of careers guidance, BFI/ERIC has published some useful data specifically around the status of careers provision in schools: they found that 45% of young people surveyed say they rarely or never receive guidance on careers, while 48% of schools surveyed say that have one member of staff giving careers guidance (average school pupil number is 952), and the average career guidance budget per student per head per year is just £4.99 (BFI/ERIC 2022: 9). BFI/ERIC highlights serious issues with staffing and resources, and also highlights one major issue: that in fact, while young people want to learn more, and career professionals want to know more to better signpost resources and equip students,

there is a lack of connection between the Screen Industries and schools, and this is especially problematic in light of increasing skills gaps and shortages in the screen industries (BFI/ERIC 2022).Compounding this is the fact that the pace of growth and technological change is continually increasing.

What do employers want? Data is mixed and at times contradictory. Recent research suggests that employers appear to value soft skills (Carey et al. 2017, 22). However, technical skills and work readiness are undoubtedly important to employers. A recent SIGN funded research project highlights different perceptions of what training actually is, and the difficulties defining training, noting that HEIs in particular offer varied training, from emphasis on practical industry courses to emphasis on creative theory-based training, and this is different from, say, upskilling the local workforce to meet local training needs in the short term (Jones, Brereton and Swords, 2002: 3-15). The way teaching is structured in FE and HE, with its focus on long term curriculum and module planning, suggest that further and higher education does not lend itself to short term apprenticeship style training, nor upskilling to address a local gap.

There is need for signposting about career pathways, and for clearly defined information about training availability and training pathways. The types of training available should be made more visible, and clarity should be provided around industry progression routes (Jones, Brereton and Swords, 2002: 3-15). One key finding from our own project is a distinct lack of clarity around specific routes into industry. We also found that there is lack of clarity about specific roles and what they involve. Jones, Brereton and Swords recommend a few ways to address skills and employment gaps in the Yorkshire and Humber regions including a regional signposting service which could collate data and provide info about skills gaps in region, as well as info about training provision and even careers advice. They also recommend exploring a "shared apprenticeship" model and how this could benefit the region, taking into account the needs of employers/industry and the needs of employees in the region (Jones, Brereton and Swords, 2022: 5).

Should the burden for addressing these gaps and shortages lie with local schools, colleges, and under-resourced careers advisors? Our research tells a story of media tutors in Yorkshire and the Humber working hard to signpost careers resources and to make the most of local initiatives, including connections with local organisations like Screen Yorkshire (who might provide, for example, masterclasses for students) and educational partnerships with HEIs like the University of Hull. We found that the issue is twofold: firstly, there is lack of provision around careers signposting and resourcing, and secondly, there is a distinct opacity of knowledge of what the Screen Industries are and how they work. We went looking for expectation gaps. We also found significant resource gaps.

1.2. Research aims

Our project aimed to investigate assumptions and expectations about the creative industries from the perspective of education providers (those who design and deliver formal media-related courses, e.g. BTEC qualifications, to 16-18 year-olds). We were also interested in the perspectives of Level 3/further education/'sixth-form' students in terms of their knowledge and assumptions about the realities of working in the media industries. A frequent complaint of film and TV industry employers is that new entrants to the industry lack a fine-grained understanding of

a) entry-level roles and what they entail

b) career progression paths

c) technical skills for roles with skills gaps (e.g., editing)

d) the contractual and financial realities of the sector.

We also aimed to investigate whether the way creative work is framed in popular discourse – and taught in Level 3 qualifications and beyond – can compound these assumptions by presenting a limited view of creativity which glamourizes high-level production roles and renders invisible the everyday realities of building career pathways through the sector. And as much recent research has indicated, the informal norms of hiring and progression in the sector favour people who are able to draw on reserves of economic and social capital ('the bank of mum and dad' and informal, often nepotistic professional networks).

By confirming the existence and extent of these 'expectation gaps', our hope is that our research can provide a basis for taking the first steps towards addressing them. Equipping young entrants to the industry with the knowledge and skills they need, as well as providing them with a clearer view of working conditions, barriers to entry and opportunities for progression, will ultimately result in positive implications for efficiency, productivity and social justice.

1.3 Methodology

Our research approach comprised:

- **Online qualitative surveys with media students aged 16-18**
- **Focus groups with media students aged 16-18**
- **Semi-structured interviews with Level 3 media tutors**
- **Analysis of qualifications paperwork**

1.3.1 Surveys

Our survey was aimed at 16-18 year-olds undertaking level 3 Media qualifications, and was designed to tease out their understanding of and expectations about work in the film and television industries (for example, by asking them to name an entry-level job, how they would seek employment, what their working hours and conditions would be...).

In our survey questionnaire we were interested specifically in the expectations of students in terms of 1. What they expected from media studies as a subject, and 2. Student expectations around media subjects as a starting point for exploring potential careers in the media industries. While our sample [n=133] cannot be considered representative of the career expectations of media students across the UK, the data provides some useful insights when we consider the sample as representative of pupils studying media subjects in the local Hull area. In terms of those students who expressed a desire to work in the screen industries, we were interested in their expectations of how the media industry works, their knowledge of particular jobs and roles, as well as their expectations around career destinations and progression.

1.3.2 Focus Groups

We followed up our survey by conducting two focus groups with two education providers who had distributed the survey to their students. While our survey data indicated a clear enthusiasm on the part of students to pursue roles in the media industries, the responses also indicated potential gaps in terms of the careers advice students had received, as well as revealing potential knowledge gaps between students' intentions to pursue a particular career path versus their awareness of the specifics of securing training and employment, and in building networks. Our focus groups enabled us to probe more deeply into these issues with the aim of further enriching our analysis.

1.3.3 Interviews with Media tutors

Staff involved in the delivery of level 3

Media qualifications were interviewed (some face-to-face, some online). These interviews were recorded and transcribed. Tutors were approached through existing networks between the University of Hull and regional sixth-form providers, and through Screen Yorkshire's Connected Campus network.

Semi-structured interviews, most approximately an hour in length, took place with sixth-form media tutors at institutions across Yorkshire and the Humber, with a majority of institutions in Hull and North Lincolnshire, and a further few in North or West Yorkshire. One additional interview took place with a regional screen agency representative responsible for coordinating liaison activities between the screen industry and further education providers.

1.3.4 Review of qualifications literature

A review of a range of level 3 (roughly speaking, qualifications typically delivered to post-16 students in a further education context, which many students use to qualify for higher education) media qualifications was undertaken. The overarching question was: 'In what ways do these qualifications provide students with information about and/or experience of work in the screen industries, and are there any notable gaps in what is covered?' This strand of the research mainly involved close reading of the specifications for different qualifications, as published on their providers' websites. Some of the questions asked to media tutors in the semi-structured interviews were designed to ascertain whether the curriculum on the page was supplemented in the classroom with respect to the particular matter of information about/experience of work in the screen industries (that is, we wanted to guard against the assumption that just because something did not appear on the curriculum, that meant it did not get covered in the classroom).

The qualification specifications reviewed were:

3 A-level Media Studies specifications (AQA, OCR, WJEC);

A selection of the numerous BTEC Media qualifications, with a particular focus on the most recently-dated qualification, Creative Media Practice (2019);

The Cambridge Technical Digital Media qualification;

The University of the Arts London Creative Media Production and Technology qualification.

The T-level in Media, Broadcast and Production has not launched yet, nor does a full specification exist for it, but an outline document has been published, and will be discussed towards the end of this report.

FINDINGS

2.1. Student expectations of careers in the media industries.

2.1.1. Why study media subjects?

Of 133 responses to our survey, 94 of our student respondents (or 70.7%) said that media studies was their main focus out of their current subjects, while 82 respondents (or 61%) chose the option "I want to work in media" when asked why they chose Media as a subject. 39 respondents opted to study media because they "like creative subjects", while remaining responses were "it worked with my other subjects" and "other".

In terms of what aspects of the subject respondents were most drawn to when selecting their course of study, there was a surprisingly even split between the production/practical elements and the more academic/theoretical elements of their courses, although more students found the practical elements of their courses to be the most engaging: of the 82 students who selected "I want to work in media" in response to their reasons for studying the subject, 46 found production/practice to be the most interesting element of the subject, while the rest of the respondents selected "media theory" and then practise/production as a secondary reason.

We were also interested in whether students' expectations of their media studies courses matched up with their experiences so far. In response to "so far has media studies been what you expected?" 121 said yes and only 12 said no. Students were also offered the option to respond with free text about their expectations of their courses, and in general students expected to learn a mix of practical skills and theoretical ideas about media texts, as well as learning about the workings of the media industry.

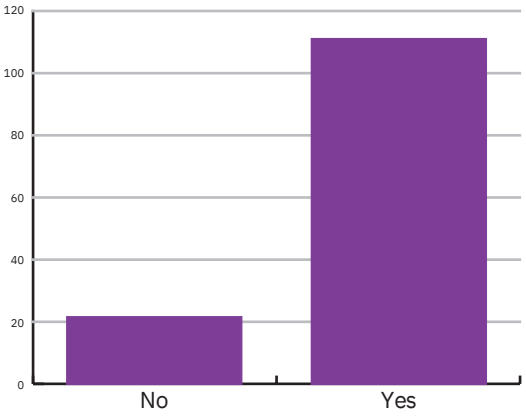

Figure 1: Do you see yourself working in a media-related job in the future? (n=133)

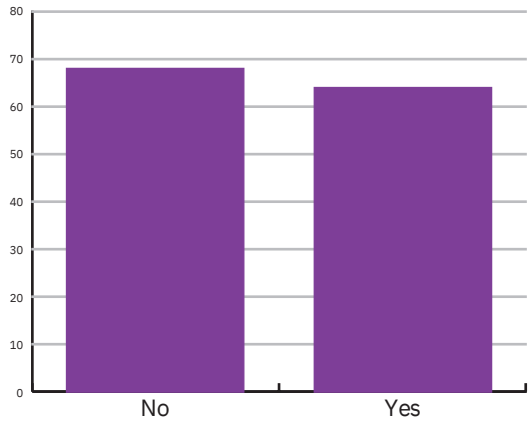

Figure 2: Do you have a specific role in mind? (n=132)

2.1.2. Planning for a career in the media

Of all respondents, 80 had received careers advice in school/college and a large proportion of those who had received careers advice said that they had discussed media careers specifically. While this number was more substantial

than we were expecting, in our free-text survey responses and in our focus groups students appeared to demonstrate a very general awareness of what might be important in terms of breaking in to the industry but a lack of specificity with regard to getting a job (e.g. a general awareness that networking is important but with little specific sense of how one might go about building connections).

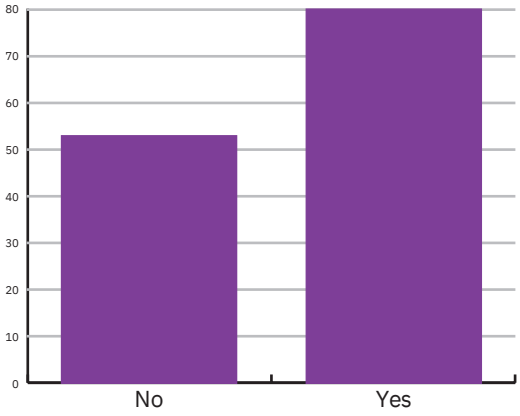

Figure 3: Have you had careers advice in school/college? (n=133)

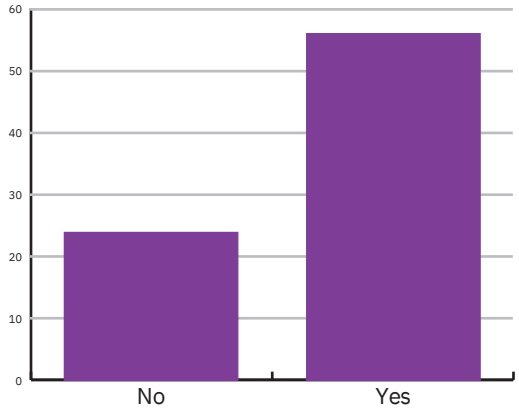

Figure 4: Those who answered 'yes', did you discuss media careers? (n=80)

Students were offered a free-text question inviting them to summarising the careers advice had received. 7 respondents mentioned discussing university as the next step, whilst other responses ranged from developing portfolios, applying for apprenticeships, working on CVs, and forging and developing connections. Asked if they had a particular role in mind, 48 respondents said yes and 30 said no. Of 48 respondents who have a role in mind, the most common roles mentioned were:

- Director (12)
- Editing for video/film (5)
- Game designer/developer (4)
- Film producer (3)

Some responses were vague, such as "creating entertainment for the media" "content creator" or "working in television". Other specific roles mentioned were cinematographer and graphic designer. A few respondents mentioned specific industry roles, for example "Stage management production / Live events practice" and "camera operator".

All respondents were asked how they would go about looking for a job in the media industries. 116 provided free-text responses. The most common words used are collated in the word cloud below.*

* The words 'look' and 'job' were manually deleted from the text responses while the software deleted common words like 'the'.

In our focus groups, Media students aspiring to careers in film and television tended to mention aspiring to a small handful of very rare, prestigious, 'above-the-line' creative roles, most notably writer and director. This potentially suggests a lack of awareness of the career path that might eventually lead to these roles, and,

simultaneously, insufficient awareness of the range of fulfilling junior and mid-level careers available within the creative industries (thus inhibiting career planning and generating unrealistic expectations). It may also be an unintended side effect of the small-crew, student-led projects that often characterise creative work on level 3 qualifications. On the other hand, games students in our focus groups appeared to be the most pragmatic and specific about their prospective career choices.

Across both focus groups students overwhelmingly appeared to prize the creative freedom and autonomy that a media industries career might potentially offer them. The freedom to create, autonomy in working life, and a sense that the industry is complex and potentially holds many different potential roles was evident across our focus groups. However, we also found a lack of specificity in terms of naming particular industry roles or progression routes. Students demonstrated awareness of the media industries as a sector which is subject to raid change, and there was a particular awareness of rapid technological change and the need to work on skills to keep pace. Again, however, while these issues were discussed in a general sense, there was a lack of specificity and examples in these discussions.

2.1.3. Networks and social milieu

In our online survey, 92 students responded to the question "What are your parent's occupations?" However, because of the free-text nature of the answer, and due to the fact that the survey did not collect other relevant data on income and occupation, we are unable to use statistically robust measures to say anything meaningful about the socio-economic breakdown of our sample. 130 of 133 participants responded to the question "did you/do you receive free school meals?" 25.38% said yes while 72.31% said no and 2.31% preferred not to say. This is only slightly higher than the national average of children in the UK who are eligible for FSM which was 23.8% of pupils in 2023.

All respondents (n=133) were asked if they know someone who works in the media. 88 said no, 43 said yes. 41 students responded to the follow-on question "if yes, please state their job/roles and relationship to you". Of these 41, 15 cited their teacher, 9 cited relatives (uncle/aunt/parent/grandparent). Other common responses are 'friend' and 'family friend'. What we found is that students tended to assume a greater degree of industry connections than was the case. This was also evident in our focus groups: some students were very aware of the need for connections and the need to build networks from an early stage, and focus group students also demonstrated keen awareness of the collaborative nature of working in the UK's screen industries, but this did not seem to translate to a defined sense of how to go about building those networks. In our focus groups there appeared to be an awareness that the industry was competitive, but little specificity with regard to building links with employers or networks.

The students in our focus groups displayed creativity, ingenuity, foresight, resilience and skill. They had a keen sense of community and exhibited real care in their answers and with each other. Here we identified a potential need for students to recognise their skills beyond their technical abilities. While students focused on technical skills and training, soft skills were not noted by the students as being of particular importance to the field explicitly, and it may be that soft skills need to be picked up on and emphasised in further education media courses. Educators must be mindful not only to impart knowledge and skills to students but also to focus on identifying these skills in young entrants and allowing them to see their worth to the industry.

2.2. Interviews with Media tutors

2.2.1. Work experience

One unanimous observation of sixth-form tutors was that very few of their students were able to undertake work experience opportunities during their courses of study. Often this was attributed to the low concentration of media production in the immediate region (although one tutor noted that sector colleagues in other areas with higher concentrations of media activity face similar challenges). It was also noted that the nature of employment and business in the creative sector is a barrier:

I was talking to, to Pete, who's in this local video production company, and he would give us work experience if he could. But he just said, 'look, it's me and two people who work for me. I can't afford to take anybody else with me and I've not got insurance.'

(These concerns echo commentary from the arts sector that accompanied the roll-out of other T-levels relating to the creative industries: see for example https://feweek.co.uk/concern-over-t-level-industry-placements-rises-as-employers-pull-out/ and https://www.artsprofessional.co.uk/magazine/314/feature/technical-route-arts.)

The dearth of personal professional networks that students could readily tap into was also highlighted by one interviewee:

If you come from a middle class, you know, family, they tend to know people in industry, they tend to have those connections up there and it's all or if they're already in that industry themselves, they're just... They bring you along and work experience. [...] They're like, "oh, come, come on set with me. [...] Come and help me at work." [...] And occupations around Hull and mostly you know manual so that the laborers so they're not getting the opportunity to explore a diverse range of opportunities that say, middle class kids from, you know London, might.'

One tutor highlighted that instead of focusing on work experience opportunities, they would point their students towards training schemes and short courses (for example, the BFI Film Academy, which runs annually in Hull). The relatively few work experience opportunities that the interviewees' institutions were able to provide often came through links with local businesses, and often involve media-facing roles in non-media-focused enterprises. Many tutors were aware of the phasing in of T-level qualifications, and all who were expressed concern about the ability to deliver work experience opportunities at the scale required by the qualification:

If they offer a T-level in creative media production, we've got to find and compete with those other institutions to get work placements and there's simply not work placements in [...] the creative industries around Hull like the would be in Manchester.

There was some speculation about the kinds of sub-optimal work-arounds that FE providers would be obliged to come up with:

So what we're gonna get is like, "Oh well, the hairdressers down the road needs a videographer. And that's all, that's all good and well, because they might do, but it's not on-set, practical creative media industries. It's: you're a videographer for a hairdressers. And that's ultimately what's gonna happen. And that's going to drive students away from the creative media industries because for whatever reason, they could have a bad experience doing that.

These regional variations affect the availability and provision of work experience, and this means that young people from Yorkshire and the Humber do not have the same access to opportunities as prospective entrants from areas of the UK with better infrastructure.

2.2.2 Careers guidance

BRIDGING THE GAP?

When asked about careers guidance at their institutions and the form that it took, the most common response from tutors was to make reference to institution-level careers fairs, and to visiting speaker events specific to the media industry. Many tutors made reference to Ofsted requirements and to Gatsby Benchmarks, and the associated requirement to have termly contact between their institution and employers and/or HE providers.

In terms of one-to-one, bespoke support for learners, interviews revealed that this was often supplied by a central careers team, but also by classroom activities and guidance from the tutors themselves. A few of the many media qualifications taught across the institutions surveyed require students to research job roles and produce CVs. Some tutors highlighted ScreenSkills as a valuable resource for role- and progression-mapping.

The integration of industry representatives into the curriculum was not universal across the tutors interviewed. Some institutions had relationships with local media companies that allowed for meaningful, longitudinal input to occur:

That ongoing relationship is something that we've got with [names particular local media industry contact]. He's now been in twice, but he's going to do a project with our BTEC media and C-Tech film students. Which will be about him validating their briefs. So we're going to give him some brief and he's going to kind of basically say "yes, that's the kind of thing that I would do with the client" or "no, you wanna think of this?".

The tutors interviewed were generally positive about their central careers teams, although not infrequently reservations were expressed about how well-resourced or well-integrated with the core curriculum the careers offering was: low staff numbers and/or high careers staff turnover were sometimes highlighted, as was a lack of full integration or sequencing with specific courses and their needs.

A near-universal observation among tutors was that at the point of entering the qualifications, students' aspirational career destinations were strongly focused upon top-level creative roles: firstly director, but also roles such as screenwriter and producer. Tutors noted that some broadening and diversification then occurred as part of the course, although often only into further high-profile roles such as editor and cinematographer. Although the tutors surveyed were predominantly engaged in teaching film and media courses, one interviewee was also involved in delivering game design provision and noted a much more fine-grained understanding of roles and division of labour among students on that course:

It's because they've often they've been involved in creating maybe 2D3D animation and then they've gone on like sites where they can trade it. So they kind of they're already kind of doing that in a sense, you know. [...] I think the trading sites that a lot of our game students are involved in are really interesting where it's not just sharing ideas or even like software or bits of code and so on. They're actually selling and buying things. And I've found that with the E Sports students as well, where they're all coaching each other and training each other. And I've got an E sports student [...] who's a coach for three people in America who play E Sports. But he also hires a coach in Canada who trains him on Overwatch and [...] they're in this kind of complex, you know, industrial relationship. Yeah. And it's more than just sharing and communicating. And it's a community, but it's financial and it's professional development and all sorts of things. It's really interesting.

When asked what proportion of their students they estimated aspired to a career in the creative industries, the response from tutors averaged out at around 50%. Tutors who taught students on both A-level media (and film) qualifications and other, often more vocationally-focused qualifications, believed that the proportion

of A-level students wishing to proceed to employment in the creative industries was somewhat lower than the proportion of students on other courses wishing to do so (partly because these students typically studied multiple A-level subjects, with Film/Media not necessarily being their principal focus), but was still substantial.

2.2.3. Qualifications delivered

Across the institutions of the tutors interviewed, a wide range of Media (and Film) qualifications were delivered, including A-levels, BTECs, Cambridge Technical qualifications, and a qualification offered by the University of the Arts London. Some tutors commented that their cohorts leant towards, and were most suited to, more vocational qualifications, which were interpreted as being not A-levels. Most tutors ran mixed portfolios of media qualifications, typically (though not universally) offering A-level Media courses and also either a BTEC, Cambridge Technical, or UAL qualification.

Tutors (many of whom had over ten years of experience in the FE sector) were used to adapting to the changing requirements of exam boards and qualifications, and many had recent experience of moving from one qualification provider to another. Typically, this was done for the more vocational qualifications, and was done in pursuit of greater flexibility. Some tutors felt constrained, and felt that students were not best served by qualifications which focused on evidencing steps in the creative process rather than the creative end-product itself, or which applied reductive design criteria too rigidly.

The above observations represent experiences and set-ups that were common across many of the tutors interviewed. Individual tutors also had several interesting individual perspectives which were more specific to them, and therefore harder to treat as indicative, but still perhaps worth reporting briefly.

A relatively recent shift away from a modular A-level structure to one based on final and exam-based assessment is less pedagogically sound and less progressive: it disadvantages students who benefit from a more creative curriculum, and rewards students with good memories who know how to play the game of sitting examinations.

The A-level Media Studies curriculum suffers from excessive incorporation of theoretical perspectives on the media, which stretches students thinly, and (in the view of one interviewee) were introduced as a way of reassuring course validators that the study of media was a serious, academic subject, rather than because such incorporation offered the best learning experience to students.

Qualifications being written predominantly by media educators rather than media practitioners, combined with long timescales for approval of course content (including case study films) makes it hard to keep media qualifications fully up-to-date.

2.3. Analysis of level 3 Media qualifications

2.3.1 A-levels: brief overview

The Office of Qualifications and Examinations Regulation, OfQual, sets out 'conditions and requirements' for AS and A-level subjects. The requirements for Media Studies were most recently updated in November 2021. They stipulate that 70% of the final mark of the qualification must come from assessment by examination, and that 30% must come from 'non-examination assessment' – in essence, 'creative'/'practical' work. (Students in Wales on the WJEC A-level Media Studies have 40% of non-examination assessment; however the top-level subject content is identical to English A-level Media Studies, and indeed WJEC offers a version of its A-level to English learners and institutions

via its subsidiary, Eduqas.) With respect to subject content, what is required by Ofqual remains unchanged from the Department for Education document published in 2016. This document identifies four main theoretical areas covered by the qualification: media language, media representation, media industries, and media audiences (Department for Education 2016: 6-10).

A-levels are typically and frequently framed as 'academic' rather than 'vocational' qualifications. In their aims and objectives and 'Why choose this qualification?' sections, the A-level specifications reviewed emphasise understanding and transferable skills, not work-readiness. Be this as it may, an A-level in Media Studies is part of the education of many students who do aspire to a career in media (as is indicated by our student questionnaire data), and who proceed from their A-level study of media to undergraduate degree programmes in media production. In light of this, it is worth noting that the way in which the four theoretical areas are conceptualised in the Ofqual document, and the theorists identified as key touchpoints, tend to emphasise deterministic forms of causality, which emphasise large-scale structures over individual agency, and are pitched at the level of, at a minimum, national media output. An unintended potential risk of this emphasis is that learners might fail to imagine or understand the processes of communication, decision-making, discretion, judgment, compromise, deployment of skill, self-reflection, negotiation, teamwork, innovation, and so on, that characterise what happens every day within the media industries.

2.3.2. BTEC, Cambridge Technical and UAL qualifications in Media

These qualifications focus principally on giving students practical and technical experience of creative activity in a range of media. Top-level aims and outcomes tend to emphasise skills and attributes that are applicable to the screen industries without being exclusive to them. For example, the 'employability skills' that the specification for BTEC Level 3 Extended Diploma in Creative Media Practice states that the qualification offers are as follows:

- cognitive and problem-solving skills: using critical thinking, approaching non-routine problems applying expert and creative solutions, using systems and technology
- interpersonal skills: communicating, working collaboratively, negotiating and influencing, self-presentation
- intrapersonal skills: self-management, adaptability and resilience, self-monitoring and development. (Pearson 2021:9)

The BTEC and UAL qualifications encourage but do not require industry engagement as part of the qualification's delivery. That said, working to an industry brief is a fundamental part of the BTEC qualification, and interviews with tutors delivering BTECs indicated that real-life industry briefs and feedback are often integrated into the delivery of BTEC qualifications.

The Cambridge Technical in Digital Media requires 'meaningful employer involvement' and offers examples of activities that meet this requirement:

- Learners undertake structured work-experience or work placements that develop skills and knowledge relevant to the qualification.
- Learners undertake project(s), exercises(s) and/or assessments/ examination(s) set with input from industry practitioner(s).
- Learners take one or more units delivered or co-delivered by an industry practitioner(s). This could take the form of master classes or guest lectures.
- Industry practitioners operating as

> 'expert witnesses' that contribute to the assessment of a learner's work or practice, operating within a specified assessment framework. This may be a specific project(s), exercise(s) or examination(s), or all assessments for a qualification. (OCR 2019:9)

What these qualifications appear to do well, and in detail, is to give students experience of planning, pre-production, and the execution of creative tasks across a range of media using a range of processes and tools. Students are made to think about audience and format, and often to work to specific briefs.

There is an almost-inevitable mismatch between the experience of an educational qualification in media and the working experience of many new entrants to the industry with respect to the level of creative control and the sizes of projects and teams. On their media qualifications, students will typically take leading creative roles on small-scale projects which they deliver as part of small or very small teams. This is good preparation for some roles in the creative and screen industries, but it is less aligned to many entry-level roles, such as a runner or a marshall on a large production, or a researcher for an independent television company or a broadcaster.

One key concern of this research is whether level 3 media qualifications contribute to an 'expectation gap' in their students with respect to the working realities of the creative sector, including freelance and precarious contracts, long working hours, and socio-economic barriers to entry and progression. A fair summary would be that in their content, the qualifications emphasise creative and technical skills over matters of, for example, economics and work-life balance. The specifications implicitly position the learner as an autonomous career-seeking individual, rather than as someone who will face different opportunities and obstacles based on identity characteristics, including region and socio-economic background.

To elaborate in relation to UAL and BTEC qualifications in turn:

The UAL qualifications top-level outcomes emphasise creative and organisational skills. Likewise, of its 14 units, only two appear to address what this research terms for shorthand 'working realities': Unit 3, 'Introduction to professional practice in creative media production', and Unit 11, 'Preparing for progression in creative media production.' The guidance for Unit 3 lists suggested activities, which 'might include':

- An introduction to the range of job roles and career opportunities in the sector
- An introduction to the **pros and cons of freelance working**
- Investigation of needs analysis and skills gaps in the sector
- Lectures and seminars exploring business models, entrepreneurship and management skills
- Recording of personal development e.g. blogs, showreel clips
- Accessing ebooks, journals and archive materials
- Industry visits
- Effective planning and time management strategies
- Individual, group and team activities e.g. interview scenarios
- Discussion groups to analyse the effectiveness of various techniques
- Peer and self-assessment.

(UAL Awarding Body 2022:20, emphasis added.)

On the BTEC Creative Media Practice, The assessment objectives for unit B1 (Personal Progression) are as follows:

- B1.1 Inform ideas for progression into a creative career
- B1.2 Apply problem solving practice

to develop a strategy for career progression

- B1.3 Create materials for career progression using technical practice
- B1.4 Demonstrate professional practice and behaviours in relation to career progression aspirations
- B1.5 Apply communication skills to support progression into a creative career (OCR 2019:30)

It is worth noting that this unit has a recommended 135 'Guided Learning Hours', one-third of the 405 GLH recommended for the companion unit B2 'Creative Industry Response'. There is a list of 'Informing ideas for personal progression' (32). In this top-level set of bullet points, items included that are relevant to our focus on 'working realities' are: 'types of employers and ways of earning'; 'entry routes and career paths [including] freelance work [and] internships'; 'networking and building relationships'. (32).

Under 'Problem solving for personal progression', the items listed are as follows:

- Identifying career aspirations and the skills required.
- Establishing references and contacts.
- Establishing short-, medium- and long-term progression aims.
- Relating practical skills to progression aims and identifying gaps.
- Identifying and using resources to improve skills.
- Establishing development routines to improve skills.
- Obtaining and acting on constructive feedback.

Any sense of systemic inequality of opportunity is absent here. The specification goes on to specify 'Technical skills' (35), 'Professional Practice' (36) and 'Communication skills' (37) in relation to personal progression. These items are managerial and technocratic, again positioning the learner as an autonomous career-seeking individual, rather than as someone who will face different opportunities and obstacles based on identity characteristics. Indeed, in the 'Communication skills for progression' section, there may be a classed norm implicit in the suggested attention to areas including 'verbal, written and body language' and 'appropriate personal presentation/appearance for role' (37).

The BTEC unit that comes closest to identifying some of the working realities that the present research in concerned with constitutes only 30 guided learning hours and is optional. For example, one of the bullet points under 'Making critical judgements' is the process of 'contextualising own practice in relation to industry/sector, social and cultural contexts, the work of others, contemporary and historical practices' (42).

2.3.3. What is the right balance, and the introduction of T-levels

It is unsurprising and in some respects salutary that learners in North London and North Lincolnshire are equal in the eyes of the qualification paperwork, even if their access to a professional media ecology may not be. It is also understandable that vocational media qualifications should focus principally on doing and creating, rather than identifying the economic circumstances under which this doing and creating occurs, and the regional and class-based inequalities (among others) in who has access to it. This research does not advocate for emphasis on the working realities of the screen industries to become anything like a majority component of the qualifications under consideration here.

When the matter of sector working realities was discussed with tutors towards the end of the interviews with them, tutors

generally agreed, when the question was put to them, that there ought to be more emphasis upon these working realities, to help young people make fully informed decisions about their futures. At the same time, many tutors indicated that elements of these working realities (especially around precarious and freelance work) were part of the general discourse and understanding shared between tutor and students, albeit more in the pastoral part of the relationship. Another frequent observation by tutors was that a countervailing consideration was that one ought not seek to stamp out entirely the youthful idealism of young people aspiring to media careers.

A-level Media qualifications tend to emphasise large-scale structural frames of explanation at the expense of smaller-scale analysis of the production of media as a real-life activity undertaking by decision-making human agents. 'Vocational' qualifications tend to emphasise creative and technical skills over working realities. It is too early to form solid parallel judgments on the forthcoming T-level in Media, Broadcast and Production. The structure and prevailing ethos of the suite of qualifications as a whole suggest that it will replicate the emphases and underemphases of the vocational qualifications explored here. That said, in terms of preparing students for the potentially freelance, precarious and nepotistically-networked aspects of the industry, there are some areas of core knowledge and understanding that suggest an attempt to address these areas, particularly within the section titled 'The individual in the creative industries', which includes the following 'content':

- Skills and attributes of the individual needed for different organisations including ideas-driven, collaborative/team worker, drive, resilience, entrepreneurial, commercial awareness, leadership and management.
- The importance of networking, "you make your own opportunities", self-marketing and presentation.
- Range of careers in the sector; progression and qualifications needed.
- Different modes of engagement and employment models: freelance/self-employed/employed; national and global mobility.
- The importance of financial acumen.
- An understanding of personal and business taxation including national insurance contributions and VAT.
- An understanding of portfolio career progression.
- Client relationships including customer service. (Institute for Apprenticeships & Technical Education 2020: 6)

3. RECOMMENDATIONS

3.1 Work experience

It is unrealistic to expect that there is the capacity in the sector for all level 3 Media students to receive lengthy and meaningful individual work experience in the traditional mould of integrated, on-site, full-time engagement over a period of two weeks or more. Thus, alternative ways should be sought of giving learners experience of the skills and ways of working required in the screen industries.

One promising potential model has been used by Screen Yorkshire in its work with sixth-form colleges. Screen Yorkshire organised and facilitated students working on short-term creative projects with local businesses, and in collaboration with working media professionals. The experience simulated professional work experience in terms of skills and timelines. However, the fact that this experience was designed for the learners allowed the opportunity for facilitators to be simultaneously inside the task, and to periodically step out to offer commentary and guidance. The fact that the experience was not a high-stakes production, in an environment where time is limited and expensive, allowed, in short, more space for learning. Such initiatives, as well as being free from the pressures of real productions, are free from the vagaries of media schedules, and are thus more amenable to the schedule-driven demands of education.

Other options that could be explored could include the use of 'recruitment and selection' style activity days, such as are run by broadcasters, delivered by screen industries employees responsible for training new entrants, delivered in a mock environment to cohorts of media students. This would offer valuable experience to learners, again in a cost-controlled, schedule-friendly manner.

3.2. Mentorship

The relatively limited access of many learners to professional networks is one finding of this research that replicates much recent UK-based screen-industries research that highlights class and region-based inequality in career opportunities and prospects.

Visits from industry professionals to educational institutions will almost always have some value, but if the engagement mainly involves the professional delivering a talk, that value will tend to be limited to the dissemination of information, and the raising of aspirations.

It is more difficult to use engagements of the kind described above to help students to understand how to equip themselves for the demands of the screen industries, and how to cultivate the kinds of professional networks that generate career opportunities. Coaching and mentorship – that is, one-to-one or small-group discussions between an experienced professional and a new entrant or junior professional – are one of the ideal ways of achieving such goals. However, once again the issue of scale (that is, cost) is the major obstacle. The safeguarding requirements of working with young people are also important to consider here.

The recommendation here is that educational institutions should make (or continue to make) the cultivation of networks with screen industries professionals part of their own objectives,

and to try to generate opportunities during the student-facing engagement of such professionals for students to, at the very least, understand the importance of networking, and how to begin to go about it, even if the industry professional is not in a position to themselves facilitate students' entry into professional networks.

3.3. 'Working realities'

Education should not only be about developing habits and skills in learners that allow them to enter the workforce and contribute to the economy. It should also be about empowering individuals to make informed choices about their lives and careers. In the case of the screen industries, it is particularly important to observe that against the appeal and rewardingness of creative work must be balanced the long working hours and precarity of much work in those industries. Likewise, learners ought to be aware that the level of creative control and the modes of working that they experience in their creative practice during their media qualifications may differ significantly from those in their first screen industries jobs (or indeed, their first several jobs).

In short, when curricula are devised by qualifications providers, and delivered by institutions and their tutors, the working realities of the sector, positive and negative, ought to be a clear and visible part of what students learn. Through some existing curriculum content, through careers advice, and through the combined educational and pastoral roles of tutors, these working realities are communicated, but there is still scope, this research argues, for these working realities to receive further emphasis.

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APPENDIX:

Tutor semi-structured interview questionnaire:

Tutors were asked the following questions:

Which Film and Media courses are you involved in delivering?

What proportion of the students you teach appear to want to pursue a career in the screen industries?

For the students who do express such interest, what key advice do you tend to offer to them?

For those that do want to pursue a career in the screen industries, what kind of jobs/ roles do they aspire to?

How many of your students go on screen-related work placements?

What's the careers guidance structure at your institution?

In the process of making the syllabus etc a classroom reality for the students, what are some the key issues that you face?

(The above questions were supplied in advance, but this question was asked at the end of the interview without having been supplied in advance.) Do you think there should be more focus placed in the curriculum on the working realities of the sector, in terms of things like freelance employment, long working hours, potential precarity, and so on? What do you think is the right balance to strike between not putting students off, and preparing them for the realities so that they can make an informed decision?

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