

**If industry-oriented degrees are the answer, what are some of the questions?
How do students attribute value to their undergraduate experience from the
perspective of post-university employment?**

Guest analysis for WONKHE

Richard Wallis & Christa van Raalte

There's an irony in the fact that the more industry-oriented and practice-based degree programmes thought to be necessary for rebuilding our economy, are among those that present most challenges when it comes to reimagining HE for a post-Covid-19 world. How do you teach the practical elements of a subject area like Media Production, if social distancing continues? How do you hold onto those things that make creative education such a transformative experience for so many? In having to review what we teach, and how we teach it, we have inevitably found ourselves returning to more fundamental questions of purpose and value. It's amazing how recent assertions about 'low-value' degrees, based on graduate earnings, have seemed so strangely anachronistic on a Thursday night in 'lockdown Britain'.

It was an attempt to learn more about the long-term value and purpose of our Media Production degree programme that led us (prior to the lockdown) to undertake a study of graduates at the point of mid-career. How do they think about, and attribute value to, their undergraduate experience, from the vantage point of post-university employment? Our work focused on a cohort who graduated from Bournemouth University in 1995. Our findings, to be published shortly, led us to identify a number of insights that that might help others in this period of reimagination.

The primacy of transferrable knowledge and skills

The media work that our graduates aspired to, and in most cases went on to pursue professionally, was often not the career they were pursuing at the point we spoke to them. It was apparent that the long-term value of their degree lay primarily, in having learned transferrable knowledge and skills, and in the confidence that came with learning them. [Many had left media work behind](#), and our sample represented a broad range of occupations (including the headteacher of a comprehensive school; a senior civil servant; a classic vehicle restorer; and a homeopathic healer!). Specialist technical skills had

certainly proved to be useful in their transition from university into a first job, but it was when such skills became applicable within another context, and with another set of technologies, that their lasting value was realized. The more transferrable the knowledge and skills acquired, the more valuable in the context of a wider work environment defined increasingly by the need for flexibility and adaptability. The current crisis has tested the flexibility and adaptability of both academics and students to the limit. It is imperative that we don't lose sight of the true value of our students' education amid the scramble to rethink delivery and assessment of core disciplinary learning outcomes.

The value of a 'practical' programme

For many graduates, their industry-oriented degree was especially valued as having provided a route into Higher Education that was tailored to the way they learned. Our interviewees often described themselves as practical rather than 'academic' people; their thinking seemed to be that a practical programme was more appropriate for practical people who learn in a practical way. The programme's 'vocational' orientation facilitated student engagement, with a close alignment between media projects and their personal passions. Without such a problem-based, and project-led approach to learning, many implied, HE would have been closed to them. As we have discovered over recent weeks, the online environment is particularly challenging for the teaching, learning and assessment of practical craft skills. In an uncertain future, it is critical that universities, and policy makers, don't lose sight of what it is that makes vocational and creative programmes such a valuable part of the HE offer from a student point of view.

The holistic nature of the student experience

The vast majority of our sample considered their undergraduate experience to have been highly formative, both personally and professionally. However they found it impossible to disassociate the experience of their degree programme from their broader experience of university and campus life - a multifarious educational and developmental journey that, for many, amounted to a rite-of-passage. Recent political and public debate has often been conducted as if a university programme is a discrete entity, exclusively concerned with a defined body of knowledge that can straightforwardly be 'delivered' as a product, irrespective of the broader context. The reality for the majority of the graduates we spoke to suggests that this is simply not the case. If current programme redesigns require a greater level of remote learning, universities will need to consider how we continue to provide the opportunities for personal and professional development that are so integral to the student experience.

Promoting teamwork and people management

Our graduates attributed enormous value to the role of teamworking within their degree: the skills learned, the friendships made, and the networks developed. The depth and longevity of the relationships forged during their undergraduate years, both personal and professional, were attributed to the intensity of their teamworking experience - a feature that was integral to the structure of the programme that they had undertaken. Learning how to work with others and to develop skills as part of a team was recalled as a painful experience at times, but for many of our interviewees, as they reviewed their subsequent careers, it seemed to be one of the programme's most enduring legacies. Covid-19 has created some particular challenges in terms of maintaining what is often, somewhat reductively, referred to as 'group work' across our programmes, although it has certainly opened up some interesting opportunities as students and staff alike learn to collaborate across multiple online platforms.

Initiative, learning autonomy, and self-regulation

Educators and employers alike, in media as in the broader creative disciplines, put a high premium on students' ability to be proactive: to take initiative, and to gain experiences above and beyond the essential requirements of their programme. As well as helping learners develop autonomy and self-regulation in a more general sense, a degree of freedom within the curriculum allows for experimentation and exploring alternative paths for self-development – something not always possible within industry. However the importance of taking initiative and responsibility for one's own learning was generally better understood retrospectively. A number of our graduates felt that they had simply not understood these expectations, or had lacked the maturity to rise to the challenge of many such university-facilitated opportunities. As we review the structure and delivery of our programmes, we have the chance to reconsider how to promote and support the learning of these key skills of autonomy and self-regulation.

Facilitating a managed exposure to the workplace

Work placements were generally agreed to have been of enormous value, offering insights into professional practice, work culture, types of work opportunity, and work behaviours. In most cases, placements were recalled as positive, horizon-broadening experiences. Our study, however, raises two concerns regarding equality of opportunity with respect to work placements: on the one hand, our evidence suggests that placements are inequitably distributed, too often dependent on the economic, social and cultural capital of the

individual student; on the other, universities struggle to 'correct' this imbalance since work placements are in the gift of industry organisations. The availability of meaningful work placements can only be addressed with an active and coordinated approach to the educator-employer partnership. This has proved challenging at the best of times. [Early evidence](#) suggests that the impact of Covid-19 on the media industries is likely to be severe, predicated as they are on short-term and casualised employment arrangements. Looking ahead, work placements, together with employment opportunities for new entrants, may prove the most challenging area for media academics, students and graduates to address.

The challenge

For our mid-career graduates, then, the value and purpose of their degree was understood in the broadest of terms. This mature cohort seemed to consider the value of their industry-oriented, 'practical' degree course, in much the same way as they might have done had they pursued a programme that did not claim a specific industry orientation. The focus, clarity, and love-of-subject that was intrinsic to the overall pedagogical project had inspired and motivated them as undergraduates, and in the shorter-term the emphasis on vocational skills had helped them take their first step into the world of work. However their perspectives on the lasting value of their university education seemed to align less with recent directions in policy, and more with John Henry Newman's famous reflection on *The Idea of the University* succinctly summarised by Sonia Deboick in terms of 'the mark left on the alumnus's mind, which stays with them all their lives' ([Deboick, 2010](#)). The challenge for educators now is to find new ways of engaging with our students that continue to play to their strengths, to offer authentic learning experiences, and to help develop these valuable transferrable skills. We need to look for new opportunities, without losing sight of the value and purpose of such programmes as manifested in the lived experience of their graduates.

Full study (in press): [Wallis, R., Van Raalte, C.](#) and Allegrini, S., 2020. The value and purpose of a Media Production degree from the perspective of mid-career graduates. *Media Education Research Journal*, 9 (2).

Biogs:

Dr. Richard Wallis is Principal Academic within the Department of Media Production at Bournemouth University, and formerly Executive Producer at Twofour. His research has focused on media education, and the experience of working in the media industries.

Dr Christa van Raalte is Deputy Dean for Education at Bournemouth University. Current research interests include constructions of gender in science fiction and action films, narrative strategies in complex TV, and workforce diversity in the media industries.