

Britain's Got Talent? A Critique of the "Talent Pipeline" Crisis in the UK's Film and Television Industries

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Abstract

Prior to the pandemic of 2020, what was being described as 'the Netflix effect' had brought a significant boost to the UK's film and television industries. However, a significant increase in the amount of commissioning of 'high end' television production had been accompanied by widely reported concerns that these new opportunities were in danger of being lost due to an insufficient supply of new talent. It was argued that only a major investment in entry-level recruitment for an expected 30,000 new jobs would avert a "talent pipeline" crisis. In this article we question the accuracy of these assertions by reviewing the key evidence on which they were based. We examine how concerns about skills gaps and shortages came to be framed as a problem of pipeline supply, rather than as a problem of leakage, thereby avoiding more challenging and systemic retention issues related to employment practices within these industries. The article highlights the dangers inherent in policy research where there is a gravitational pull for evidence-based policy to be overridden by policy-based evidence.

Keywords: screen industries, media careers, creative industries, talent, skills

Introduction

The effect of the Covid-19 pandemic on the UK's film and television workforce was immediate and devastating. As early as April 2020, it was being widely reported that these industries were likely to witness a mass exodus of talent, with one major survey of television freelancers finding that half of its respondents were considering leaving the industry for good¹ – a potentially crippling loss to a sector that had already been reporting a looming skills crisis. Yet the nature and extent of these long-term skills shortages was far from clear. As we will demonstrate, some of the work commissioned to investigate the sector's concerns did more to obscure than to illuminate the underlying issues.

The development of the Creative Industries since the introduction of that sector category by the incoming New Labour government in 1997 had been celebrated as one of the UK's economic success stories, with the film and television industries firmly at its heart. Within ten years, the sector was being hailed as comparable in size and significance to the UK's financial services industry.² Tax incentives were encouraging UK-based film projects, so that at the point of the relatively sudden increase in the commissioning of content by new streaming video-on-demand (SVOD) services pioneered by Netflix in 2012, there was a sense that Britain's film and television industries were in the vanguard of a new era. SVOD investment increased through the decade such that in 2017 one national newspaper described 'a wall of money flowing in from the likes of Netflix, Amazon and Apple . . . cascading down the food chain, providing more work than ever before.'³ However, these lucrative opportunities with global media brands, it was argued, were in danger of being lost for want of sufficient talent. If the UK did not 'step-up', then other countries would. What was dubbed the "talent pipeline" crisis⁴ could be averted only through a major investment in new talent recruitment.

The idea that economic success is constantly at risk from a shortage of skilled workers is hardly a new one, or unique to the film and television industries. Yet its discursive role in policy petitioning within these sectors from around 2016 came to present a distorted picture of the extent and nature of such shortages. Robust research was thin on the ground, and much of the evidence for this looming 'crisis' remained anecdotal: the production manager who unsuccessfully followed up 15 contacts looking for a first assistant director;⁵ the film project unable to secure a suitable production accountant; the camera technician who had to be flown in from Italy because nobody suitable was available in the UK.⁶ To these were added tales of 'show jumping': crew members leaving projects before completion, due to the offer of higher wages elsewhere.⁷ If hard evidence was more elusive, however, so was the basis for the solution devised to address the crisis. In 2017, supported by significant government funding, the British Film Institute (BFI) launched a major entry-level recruitment drive – this despite the prevailing reputation of these industries for having a surfeit of young aspiring talent and high levels of wastage. How did concern about high-level skills shortages come to be characterised in terms of a dearth of suitable new entrants?

In this article, we review the key evidence that proved instrumental in framing skills gaps and shortages as a problem of *supply*, despite the preponderance of scholarship suggesting that the problem is one of *leakage*. This framing is significant because by suggesting that such a crisis was due to a shortage of suitable young people coming into the industry, the more

challenging and systemic retention issues related to these industries' deeply rooted employment practices were deftly elided. We have explored some of the features of the 'leaky pipeline' problem at greater length elsewhere.⁸ Our primary focus here is on the nature and role of the research that came to be used in this framing of a talent pipeline crisis.

John Kingdon⁹ has described the way in which policy is made at moments when 'policy windows' open. Far from policy being the rational implementation of an evidence-based initiative, *problems, solutions and politics* exist as three separate 'streams'¹⁰ which converge at critical moments. Such moments can be triggered by the appearance of 'compelling problems' or political events. In this case, the 'political stream' was bringing significant funding opportunities in the form of the government's Industrial Strategy. Skills shortages provided a useful 'problem', to which an entry-level recruitment drive became a common-sense, manageable and convenient 'solution': one that would play to a set of pre-existing expectations, appear to demonstrate that diversity problems were being addressed and avoid the need to address the systemic issues considered by many to be 'just the way the industry works'. At such moments, the gravitational pull towards 'evidence' that supports the chosen solution can be irresistible.

In what follows, we review the key policy-framing documents that led to the launch of an entry-level recruitment drive. A report produced by The Work Foundation (TWF) for the BFI in June 2017 entitled *A Skills Audit of the UK Film and Screen Industries* emerged as of particular significance in being either the source or the main conduit of third-party claims made in relation to the skills problem.¹¹ We therefore examine this urtext, as it were, in particular detail, identifying three features of specific concern: overreliance on a very narrow (and in some cases methodologically questionable) research base, creating an epistemic echo chamber; language that conflates and confuses different, often overlapping, categories and uses distinct terms interchangeably; and the naïve or disingenuous interpretation of data that fails to adequately contextualise findings.

Although our analysis here is of a particular set of research and policy documents mobilised to justify one specific policy initiative, we suggest that these findings have implications beyond the issue of skills shortages and with inferences not confined merely to a UK context. They raise important questions for the burgeoning academic subfield of media industries studies and offer a salutary reminder of the perennial dangers of evidence-based policy transmuting into policy-based evidence. Scholars must exercise and advocate for vigilance and rigour, particularly in those areas in which the line between scholarship and policy-led research is blurred.

The Emergence of the “Talent Pipeline” Crisis

In the summer of 2017, the BFI announced a £20m investment in its Future Film Skills initiative to tackle the need for 10,000 new entrants 'to keep the UK in the vanguard of global film production'.¹² The figure of 10,000 was advanced as the requisite number of new entrants necessary to meet the demand for the 30,000 new jobs expected over the following five-year period: 'a huge opportunity to bring thousands more into this dynamic industry'. The BFI's

new Film Skills Strategy to address this challenge was unveiled to a gathering of press and film professionals at a House of Commons launch on 28 June of that year. The then Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport Karen Bradley used the occasion to hail the sector as ‘one of our biggest success stories’, and Bond producer, Barbara Broccoli, who had fronted a high-profile campaign for this investment, announced that industry, education and government were ‘united’ behind the initiative.¹³ The ‘prodigious amounts of drama being made in the UK’¹⁴ were leading to ‘widespread industry concern that future growth is unsustainable without increased investment in skills and training’¹⁵ – hence the imperative to target new entrants in a recruitment drive, with a commitment from the BFI to ‘demystify getting into the film industry for young people with easy to access career advice and guidance on the right courses’.¹⁶

Three months after the BFI announcement, Sir Peter Bazalgette, former chair of the Arts Council England, published his *Independent Review of the Creative Industries*. As part of the UK’s post-Brexit Industrial Strategy, Bazalgette had been commissioned to undertake a review into ‘how the UK’s Creative Industries can help underpin our future prosperity, focussed on developing new technology, capitalising on intellectual property rights and growing talent pipelines’.¹⁷ This report was intended to inform the development of a ‘sector deal’ for the Creative Industries. Given that the government had already identified skills development as one of its priorities for boosting productivity and competitiveness,¹⁸ it was inevitable that Bazalgette would address this theme. In the *Review*, he sets out the enormous economic potential of the Creative Industries as a sector but warns of the dangers of underinvestment in skills, describing the challenges he sees in ensuring an adequate “talent pipeline”.¹⁹ He asserts:

Growth and greater productivity in the talent pipeline for these industries are held back by two main factors: social and informational barriers to entry; and quality, consistency and availability of post-secondary education and training, which includes further and higher education, and continuing development.²⁰

Despite his cursory reference to ‘continuing development’, this is not a theme Bazalgette develops at any length, and his primary focus is fixed on entry-level supply. This may seem a surprising diagnosis of a skills shortage about which there was such ‘little granular evidence’ at the time.²¹ Nevertheless, sharing the BFI’s approach, Bazalgette boldly recommends:

Industry should develop a national careers ‘attraction strategy’, including a communications campaign, supporting online advice and information centre and curriculum materials to broaden and deepen the talent pipeline that starts at school.²²

The spectre of a sector at risk of being brought to its knees for want of new entrants stands in sharp contrast to a long-held view that the Creative Industries generally and the film and television industries in particular are characterised by stiff competition, oversupply and high levels of wastage.²³ Far from an entry-level talent shortage, these industries have long had a vast supply of ambitious young entrants to draw on. Aspiring media workers come from undergraduate and postgraduate industry-oriented film schools and university media programmes; from an extensive range of science, humanities and social science degree programmes; and from direct entry routes, through placement opportunities and targeted

schemes of various kinds, including from a number of specialist secondary education providers.²⁴ Despite significant increases in the amount of production work in consequence of ‘the Netflix effect’,²⁵ there has been no credible evidence that by 2017 demand had begun to outstrip supply. Indeed, scholarship focused on this labour market has consistently suggested that those who are ultimately successful in acquiring entry-level work and sustaining it in these industries are expected to undertake the most menial of tasks, be subject to insecure (often informal) contract arrangements and work long hours, in exchange for poor (and sometimes even no) pay; yet such is the allure of these industries and the attraction of work associated with creativity and self-actualisation, the unremitting stream of highly motivated young people willing to self-exploit and be exploited in the pursuit of a media career barely ebbs.²⁶ Given that these are unlikely symptoms of a labour market suffering a crisis of under-supply, it is necessary to examine closely how the talent pipeline crisis came to be framed in the way it did.

Bazalgette’s remit was to review the whole of the UK’s Creative Industries sector, comprising nine subsectors identified by the Department for Digital Culture Media and Sport (DCMS).²⁷ However on the question of talent, he chooses to take the ‘screen industries’ as his prime example. In so doing, he draws extensively on the BFI’s manifesto: *Future Film Skills: An Action Plan*, the same document that formed the basis for the Film Skills Strategy. This industry-facing brochure presents a somewhat selective distillation of TWF’s *Skills Audit*. These high-profile publications, together with the considerable press attention they enjoyed, created the impression of a groundswell of opinion reflecting diverse sources of evidence – when the reality more closely resembled an echo chamber effect whereby data was recycled and amplified – sometimes to misleading effect.

The *Skills Audit* is a document of some 50 pages that sets out the case for why ‘rapid growth and technological change are contributing to skills challenges and shortages, threatening the continued prosperity of the sector’.²⁸ It presents the findings of original research but also draws extensively on existing research – mostly commissioned by Creative Skillset or the BFI. In many ways a comprehensive study offering a useful industry overview, the audit’s use of terminology, methodology and contextualisation of data give rise to a number of concerns. These are only magnified by the presentation of its findings, stripped of detail and nuance, in the *Future Film Skills* action plan²⁹ which formed the basis for the BFI’s £20 million initiative, launched the following month and awarded to Creative Skillset (CS) in December of that year.

Ambiguities of Terminology and Categorisation

In our consideration of the ambiguities of terminology and categorisation used within the *Skills Audit* document, we focus here particularly on the use of the term ‘screen industries’. This aspect of our analysis, however, needs prefacing with some background and a broader context. Ambiguities of terminology and categorisation are endemic in the field of media industries research, where diverse perspectives and agendas are reflected in competing and often overlapping definitions. Such ambiguities are highly susceptible to political context, as evidenced in the first attempt to map the UK creative industries, undertaken by the DCMS

in 1998.³⁰ The aim of the *DCMS Mapping Document*, revised in 2001, was ‘to raise awareness of the industries, the contribution they made to the economy and the issues they faced’.³¹ It identified 13 subsectors of the newly conceptualised ‘Creative Industries’, based on the Standard Industrial Classification of Economic Activities (SIC), of which three relate to what is now sometimes collectively referred to as ‘the screen industries’: Film (updated in 2001 to ‘Film and Video’), ‘Television and Radio’ and ‘Leisure Software’ (primarily referring to games). These mapping exercises were subsequently replaced by a set of annual ‘Economic Estimates’, which by 2014 had been updated to reflect nine broader subsectors, including ‘Film, TV, video, radio and photography’ and ‘IT, Software and computer services’ – the latter capturing all forms of interactive entertainment.³² Such shifting categorisations render it difficult to make cogent historical comparisons. They can also cause a degree of terminological and statistical confusion when referring to an issue such as the ‘skills gap’, although arguably fewer than the notoriously slippery term ‘screen industries’.

The term ‘screen industries’ originally emerged alongside the development of a new set of categories introduced by the HMRC Creative Industries Tax Unit. Tax incentives for film production were introduced to the UK in 2007 and extended six years later to include ‘high-end’ television, animation and videogames, adding children’s television in 2015.³³ The term is utilised from the 2000s onwards in the context of the Canadian, Australian and New Zealand industries – all early adopters of tax incentives³⁴ – but is rarely used in the UK before 2015, when the BFI adopted the term to report on the impact of tax relief on production activity.³⁵ As a strategy for highlighting the industry’s economic benefits, the advantages of closely associating film with related subsectors are self-evident. The terms ‘screen sector’ and ‘screen industries’ therefore have since become widespread, although used more for expediency than for accuracy, sometimes referring to film and television, sometimes to the subsectors identified for tax credits (thereby excluding many areas of television production), sometimes referring to an alternative combination of activities. Thus, for example, ScreenSkills (reconstituted as such in October 2018) currently describes itself on its website as ‘the industry-led skills body for the screen industries’,³⁶ which, at the time of writing, it divides into film, television (including children’s, *unscripted* and high-end), VFX (visual effects), animation and games, adding two additional categories (italicised here) to the HMRC list.

Given the potential for confusion, research purporting to provide a comprehensive audit of skills in this sector might have been expected to take special care with its categorisations and terminology. However, the *Skills Audit* embraces the problematic term ‘screen industries’ without reservation and utilises it entirely inconsistently. It defines the ‘film and screen industries’ as a collective reference to the UK film industry *together with* its ‘adjacent’ screen-related industries³⁷ (the latter being specifically identified here as high-end TV, videogames and animation – a tax-based categorisation already two years out of date in 2017³⁸). This collective term ‘film *and* screen industries’ (our emphasis) is used more than 30 times throughout the document. By contrast, the ‘[UK] film *industry*’ is referenced 15 times. This specific reference to the (singular) film industry – by implication, a categorisation distinct from its three ‘adjacent’ industries – mirrors similarly specific references within the document to the term ‘screen industries’ (some 40 mentions). Whilst the latter might, therefore, be assumed to indicate only the ‘adjacent’ industries, in fact, the term is frequently used as a shorthand for the collective, as implied in the paper’s opening sentence: ‘The UK screen

industries are of huge economic and cultural benefit to the economy, from Film and Television to Animation and Visual Effects.³⁹ Furthermore, the singular term ‘the screen industry’ (12 mentions) is sometimes used as a shorthand for the collective (as in the need for the training of ‘prospective entrants to the screen industry’⁴⁰) and sometimes as synonymous with the singular term ‘[UK] film industry’ (as in ‘the screen industry’ not operating in isolation from its ‘adjacent industries’⁴¹). Peppered throughout this audit are also references to ‘film and video production’, further complicating an already perplexing picture. Given this elasticity of language, it is plain to see how easy it might be to double-count, incorrectly assign the features of one subsector to those of another and interchange categorical terminology. Hence the ambiguities in an assertion such as ‘From 2010–2015, the UK screen industry (combined with the music industry) saw the value of its output increase by 60%. . . .⁴² The film, TV, video, radio and photography sector is estimated to have grown by nearly 14%.⁴³ Hence also the level of slippage with regard to employment in the four ‘sub-sectors’ of the ‘film’ industry,⁴⁴ where the authors list the numbers of companies involved in film production, distribution, exhibition and post-production – without making it clear that the figures given for the latter subsector actually include companies involved in post-production activities across all areas of film, television and video.⁴⁵ However, perhaps the most problematic terminological confusion in relation to the ‘skills gap’ relates to the conflation of the traditional film and television industries with animation, VFX and games. Skills shortages specific to the computer games industry, in particular, are all too easily attributed to the ‘screen industries’ in general, creating a highly distorted picture of the sector. It is concerning that a report that makes specific and significant claims in this respect does so without clearly distinguishing between the very different subsectors that make up the UK’s ‘screen industries’.

Research Reliability, Transparency and Uses of Secondary Sources

The *Skills Audit* states at its outset that it draws upon both its own original research (interviews, focus groups and an expert Delphi panel are all mentioned) and previous work in the field. However, it includes little methodological detail, and none of its primary data is in the public domain. With regard to extant publications, moreover, the *Skills Audit* does not always subject data to critical examination before reproducing it. A key example in relation to the ‘skills gap’ concerns the ‘three recent studies’⁴⁶ cited as the sources of claims about hard-to-fill vacancies in the industries. These ‘studies’ were all produced by the then Sector Skills Council, Creative Skillset:⁴⁷ its *Employer Panel Film Report*;⁴⁸ its *Creative Media Workforce Survey Report*;⁴⁹ and its *UK Film Skills Fund (Supported Programmes) information*.⁵⁰ However, the latter is not a ‘study’ at all but a webpage listing various training programmes that CS was supporting at the time, leaving the two reports as the secondary sources that had previously ‘identified multiple areas of skills shortages and skills gaps, which risk getting worse if not corrected’.⁵¹

The *Creative Media Workforce Survey Report* summarises the results of a large survey carried out in the final quarter of 2014 and published in May of the following year.⁵² Areas covered by the survey included the respondent’s post-16 qualifications, their career development

and their current employment, including a question about their perception of their own skills needs (i.e. not a survey designed to identify or quantify 'hard-to-fill vacancies'). The *Employer Panel Film Report* dated March 2014 is based on three online surveys of the film industry (and notably, not the related subsectors). Participants were asked their views on matters ranging from skills gaps and training to the future needs of the industry and included a specific question about vacancies proving hard to fill. There is no information about the profile of individuals taking part in this 'panel', or the companies that they represented, while the average sample size across three surveys seems to be 35: an untenably small number for what purports to be a quantitative study. Nevertheless, the report's most striking claim – the top bullet point of the executive summary – is that '79% of companies/productions reported that they do not currently have any vacancies that are proving hard to fill, compared with 18% that do'.⁵³ Thus, a study concluding that a significant majority of respondents did not struggle to fill vacancies is cited as a key source within a document explicitly describing 'critical skills deficiencies that threaten to undermine the future success of the film and screen industries'.⁵⁴

Given the difficulty of finding a consistent definition of the 'film and screen industries', it would seem critical that researchers provide a clear rationale for the selection of samples used in their own primary research. Instead, the *Skills Audit* merely states that it draws on

evidence gathered from the expert panel, employer and stakeholder interviews (42 individuals including representatives from across the value chain) and industry and workforce roundtables (four roundtables with a total of 53 attendees) as well as a follow up qualitative survey of women in the workforce (11 responses).⁵⁵

No further details are provided of the subsectors represented by the latter two sets of respondents, but a table of 41 'stakeholder' interviewees is provided.⁵⁶ Given the division of industry-based participants into production, post-production, distribution and exhibition (categorisations specific to film and previously mentioned in those terms), and given the 'types of stakeholders' listed against each heading, it seems that these panellists were selected to represent the film industry, as opposed to the wider 'screen' industries. This is not made explicit, however, and there is no suggestion that the spread of respondents across the subsectors is in any way proportional.

What the table of stakeholders does is enable the reader, by a process of elimination, to deduce that representation from the education sector is minimal.⁵⁷ This would not be problematic in a report focusing only on industry, but the audit includes an entire chapter on the UK education system and the extent to which it does or does not address the supposed supply-side needs of the industry. The lack of expert input here results not only in some eccentric interpretation (discussed later) but also in an attempt to bridge the data gap with speculation, in particular on the subject of career information for young people. Some industry-based respondents express concerns that young people lack 'a good awareness of the industry'⁵⁸ and that schools may be ill-equipped to address this,⁵⁹ while a number felt that educators needed to do more to manage young people's expectations – yet no evidence is provided of the actual quality of career advice available in educational institutions.⁶⁰ The subsequent survey of Higher and Further Education sectors includes no examination of career

provision or of learners' decision-making. This does not prevent the authors from concluding that there is 'a clear need for better careers information advice and guidance'.⁶¹ While good career advice is undoubtedly beneficial, career trajectories in film and television are notably ill-defined and unpredictable. It is in fact by no means clear on the evidence presented, whether improving information on 'career opportunities and pathways'⁶² would encourage or dissuade more young people from wanting to enter these industries. Neither is it clear how this would result in addressing the particular skills shortages the report highlights.

Issues of Interpretation and Contextual Understanding

Notwithstanding some methodological concerns, the findings from primary research presented in the *Skills Audit* undoubtedly have value. However, there is a lack of contextualisation and triangulation at times, which leads the authors to some questionable conclusions. This is particularly notable with regard to the nature of educational provision and the apparent deficiencies of new entrants to the industry. A survey of learners studying relevant subjects in Higher and Further Education (FE) establishments finds 'significant numbers' to be studying on vocational programmes, but also 'a substantial proportion' studying subjects that are not vocationally orientated and do not deliver technical skills.⁶³ This is framed as inherently problematic. There is no acknowledgement of film studies or communications studies as long-established academic disciplines at degree level; there is likewise no recognition that the primary purpose of A-levels (which account for most, if not all, 'non-vocational' delivery in FE) is not to deliver technical skills nor to prepare students for a career in a specific area. Inexplicably, there is no breakdown of FE learners into those studying A-levels and those engaged in vocational programmes. We do learn, however, that 60% of the 59,400 learners studying relevant subjects in HE *are* on practical programmes. The suggestion, then, that industry skills shortages result from the existence of 'more general provision' alongside vocational programmes⁶⁴ seems to betray some confusion on the part of the authors. However, there is no evidence presented that young people themselves are confused about the difference between an A-level and a BTEC, or that universities are failing in their (legally enforced) obligation to provide clear and detailed information about their offerings. No mention is made in this context, moreover, of the various accreditation schemes provided by industry bodies⁶⁵ intended to ensure those programmes which do claim to prepare graduates for careers in the industry are meeting expectations. Again the picture of a system that fails to attract sufficient young people into high-quality vocational education is not supported by the data presented here.

This exercise in 'supply-side provision mapping'⁶⁶ seems itself to arise from a more fundamental misapprehension, leading the authors to focus their energies on the wrong section of the "talent pipeline". Striving to explain the incongruity of 'a large potential supply of available labour' existing at the same time as skills shortages, the *Skills Audit's* authors suggest that this is evidence of 'a mismatch between skills needed by employers and the skills provided by the education system'.⁶⁷ The implication that the industries' difficulties have come about because the high numbers of young people aspiring to work in these

industries lack the requisite skills indicates a problematic absence of contextual understanding. Putting aside other inconsistencies, almost none of the various roles identified in this report as ‘hard to fill’ are those that would ever be associated with entry-level talent. The *Film Report* expressly identifies employer demand for ‘experienced’ workers.⁶⁸ The implication that new entrants with the right skills might be offered such roles as script-editors, producers, production accountants, prosthetists and so on entirely fails to appreciate the long-established culture of ‘paying one’s dues’ – indeed the *Audit* itself emphasises the commonly held view that young graduates should expect to start ‘right at the bottom’.⁶⁹

Career progression within the film and television industries is haphazard, determined by the specific work opportunities that happen to arise for an individual over time and frequently more dependent on who than on what they know; thus, the preparation of new talent for key specialist roles is liable to be circuitous and patchy at best. It requires the individual to navigate a system that eschews standard recruitment practices (such as advertised work opportunities or a transparent interview process) and instead relies upon networks of personal trust, the recommendations of people ‘who can be relied on’⁷⁰ and ‘friends of friends’.⁷¹ It is a system that depends as much on social and cultural capital as it does on technical skills or creative talent. As a result, these industries have had a long-term problem with their lack of workforce diversity: ‘Women, disabled workers, workers from working class and ethnic minority backgrounds, carers and individuals living outside London/South East England are significantly less likely to establish and maintain a career in the UK screen sector.’⁷²

There may be a further reason why, in 2017, an entry-level recruitment drive was seized upon by industry leaders and policy-makers for its expedience. Conscious of a poor track record on diversity – despite multiple initiatives over two decades – and increasingly out-of-step with public feeling, it was an opportunity to highlight this as an industry priority: an explicit demonstration of commitment to a future wider talent pool. Yet the lack of success of numerous previous interventions targeted at underrepresented groups had long indicated that recruitment-based initiatives resulted in limited success. As the *Skills Audit* itself reports, ‘the potential pool of labour is very diverse’.⁷³ Ethnic minorities, for example, are identified as well represented among young people aspiring to a career in the ‘screen industries’,⁷⁴ indicating that a lack of representation further along the ‘pipeline’ is a result of structural barriers. As TWF found: ‘A number of participants from ethnic minority backgrounds stated that when they went for a job, they were quite often offered traineeships/professional development despite in some cases having over 15 years industry experience.’⁷⁵ For many individuals and groups, the barriers they face within this system, which prevent them from fulfilling their potential, have more to do with getting on than getting in.

Conclusion

In setting out to examine the talent pipeline crisis within the UK’s film and television industries, we have analysed the various ways in which a pipeline leakage came to be framed

as a problem of talent pipeline supply. We have suggested that the UK's newly introduced Industrial Strategy opened – in Kingdon's terms – a 'policy window': an opportunity for which it was expedient for a 'problem' (shortage of skills) to be aligned to a convenient and easy-to-fix 'solution' (entry-level recruitment). This alignment required 'evidence' that we have shown to be less than robust. We have identified an overreliance on a narrow and methodologically questionable research base; a conflation and confusion in language and categorisation; and a naïveté and lack of contextualisation in the interpretation of data. We have noted how secondary sources are at times used uncritically with problematic results, while some conclusions are based on assumptions unsubstantiated by the evidence presented.

Whilst the *Skills Audit* is by no means the worst offender in this respect, our findings raise real concerns about the efficacy of research on which influential and sometimes highly consequential recommendations rely. In particular, we question the ethics of an 'attraction strategy' aimed at massively increasing the number of young hopefuls entering a sector where exploitative employment practices, a dearth of development opportunities and an institutionalised disregard for equitable recruitment will inevitably render many of them casualties of the leaky talent pipeline.

It is the *Skills Audit* that we have foregrounded in this article to demonstrate how easily highly problematic 'evidence' can become the basis for significant and consequential policy decisions; however, its problematic features are not atypical of policy-driven research in the field. Thus, the importance of independent and critical scholarship of the kind represented by this journal cannot be overstated. Indeed, academic endeavour in this field has had some cumulative effect, and there has been a gradual recognition of these structural issues, at least in some quarters. TWF/ScreenSkills' report of August 2019⁷⁶ on the state of skills in the screen industries makes an explicit distinction between skills' gaps and skills' shortages and has a greater focus on the need for development. Systemic employment-related issues – barely acknowledged previously by many industry decision-makers – have since been highlighted by the Covid-19 crisis and openly discussed in a number of fora.⁷⁷ Nevertheless, the problematic conclusions of the 2017 report have an insidious half-life. For example, the 2019 report, having presented evidence for skills gaps in areas associated with experienced professionals (with management and leadership topping the list), goes on to reference the 2017 report by adding: 'Part of the problem is perceived as being the lack of work preparedness of new labour market entrants.'⁷⁸ While the reference to 'perception' here demonstrates a rather more critical stance towards the material than previously evidenced, the earlier discourse continues as a persistent echo. It is evident in industry commentary⁷⁹ and even recycled in academic publications.⁸⁰ Policy-makers, of course, will always prefer evidence that supports their own solutions and ignore that which does not. However, academic integrity is compromised at the point at which the research itself becomes policy-driven. It is this danger that we wish to bring to the particular attention of fellow scholars within the burgeoning media industries studies community: a field experiencing increasing pressures on research funding, making policy-based evidence-gathering a real and present danger.

The authors note that some of the specific issues raised have begun to be acknowledged in industry reports and initiatives produced since 2020 when this article was written.

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- ⁹ John W. Kingdon (2003), *Agendas, alternatives and public policies*. New York: Longman.
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 166.
- ¹¹ Heather Carey, et al. (2017, June), 'A skills audit of the UK film and screen industries'. *The Work Foundation*. <https://www.lancaster.ac.uk/work-foundation/publications/reports/>
- ¹² BFI. (2017, July 6), '£20m BFI National Lottery investment kickstarts Future Film Skills action plan'. BFI. Retrieved October 3, 2018, from <https://www.bfi.org.uk/news-opinion/news-bfi/announcements/bfi-national-lottery-future-film-skills>
- ¹³ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁴ Pippa Considine (2016), 'Bridging the skills gap in the television industry'. BAFTA. <http://www.bafta.org/television/features/bridging-the-skills-gap-in-the-television-industry>
- ¹⁵ Jon Creamer (2017, November 23), 'Skills shortage looming due to 'FAANG effect''. *Televisual*. https://www.televisual.com/news/skills-shortage-looming-due-to-faang-effect-_nid-6843/
- ¹⁶ BFI 2017.
- ¹⁷ Bazalgette, 'Independent review', 5.
- ¹⁸ 'Building our industrial strategy (2017, January)', *HM Government*, 45. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/611705/building-our-industrial-strategy-green-paper.pdf

- ¹⁹ General concerns about skills shortages in the UK go back (at least) to the 1990s, with the anticipation of a coming ‘global knowledge-based economy’ widely embraced by policy-makers at the time. Success within this post-industrial economy, it was argued, would depend upon the continual upskilling and ‘lifelong learning’ of a flexible workforce. Economic success, both at an individual and at a collective level, required constant scanning for missing skills. The ‘skills agenda’ quickly assumed an almost totemic importance across industry and within the education sector, reflected in multiple policy initiatives up to, and including, the 2017 Industrial Strategy.
- ²⁰ Bazalgette, ‘Independent review’, 42.
- ²¹ Cath Sleeman, & Windsor, George (2017, April 18), ‘A closer look at Creatives. Using job adverts to identify the skill needs of creative talent’. NESTA. <https://data-viz.nesta.org.uk/creative-skills/index.html>
- ²² Bazalgette, ‘Independent review’, 48.
- ²³ As the sector skills agency has been warning prospective new entrants since the organisation’s earliest days: ‘thousands of people each year consider entering a career in media—far more than there are jobs available’. Skillset (1996), *A career in broadcast, film and video* (p. 1). London: Skillset. As the
- ²⁴ Irena Grugulis, & Stoyanova, Dimitrinka (2009), ‘“I don’t know where they learn them”: Skills in film and television’. In Alan McKinlay & Chris Smith (Eds.), *Creative labour: Working in the creative industries* (pp. 135–155). New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- ²⁵ ‘The Netflix effect’ is a term generally used uncritically, mainly to refer to growth in production. It tends not to imply any cultural or industrial understanding of the company’s particular internationalisation model (such as those discussed by Cunningham and Scarlata, 2020).
- ²⁶ In this respect, research into the experience of work in film and television reflects the patterns to emerge from research into other subsectors of the Creative Industries. See, for example,; Helen Blair (2003), ‘Winning and losing in flexible labour markets: The formation and operation of networks of interdependence in the UK film industry’. *Sociology*, 37(4), 677–694; John T. Caldwell (2008), *Production culture: Industrial reflexivity and critical practice in film and television*. Durham: Duke University Press; Doris Eikhof, & York, Charlotte (2016), ‘“It’s a tough drug to kick”: A woman’s career in broadcasting’, *Work, Employment and Society*, 30(1), 152–161; David Hesmondhalgh, & Baker, Sarah (2001), *Creative labour: Media work in three cultural industries*. Abingdon: Routledge; Richard Paterson (2010), ‘The contingencies of creative work in television’. *The Open Communication Journal*, 4, 1–9.
- ²⁷ At the time of writing, the UK’s DCMS categorisations of the Creative Industries contains nine sub-groups: advertising and marketing; architecture; crafts; design: product, graphic and fashion design; *film, TV, video, radio and photography*; IT, software and computer services; publishing; museums, galleries and libraries; and music, performing and visual arts. Bazalgette’s references this categorisation in a footnote (4) on p.11 but misrepresents the subsector as ‘film, TV and radio’.
- ²⁸ *Ibid*, i.

- ²⁹ ‘Future film skills: An action plan’. BFI, June 2017. <https://www2.bfi.org.uk/sites/bfi.org.uk/files/downloads/future-film-skills-an-action-plan-2017.pdf>
- ³⁰ E.g. Jonathan Gross (2020), ‘The birth of the creative industries revisited: An oral history of the 1998 DCMS mapping document’. London: King’s College London.
- ³¹ ‘Creative industries mapping documents 2001’. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/creative-industries-mapping-documents-2001>
- ³² The principles of this revised mapping are explained by the DCMS in their 2014 report: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/271008/Creative_Industries_Economic_Estimates_-_January_2014.pdf. This document explicitly draws on work commissioned from Hasan Bakhshi et al. by NESTA the previous year, which differentiates the creative industries from other areas of economic activity in terms of ‘creative intensity’.
- ³³ ‘Television production company manual’. April 13, 2016. <https://www.gov.uk/hmrc-internal-manuals/television-production-company-manual/tpc40050>. VFX is also prioritised because it represents a significant spend within incentivised productions.
- ³⁴ At the time of writing, The Global Incentives Index (Olsberg-SPI, 2019) lists 97 such schemes competing for film business across the world.
- ³⁵ ‘The economic contribution of the UK’s film, high-end TV, video games and animation programme sectors’. BFI, February 2015. <https://www.bfi.org.uk/industry-data-insights/reports/economic-contribution-uks-film-high-end-tv-video-games-animation-programme-sectors>
- ³⁶ ‘What we do’. <https://www.screenskills.com/about-us/what-we-do/>
- ³⁷ Carey, Skills audit, 1.
- ³⁸ The audit draws here on a report (Olsberg-SPI Feb 2015), which precedes the extension of tax incentives to Children’s TV in April 2015. <https://www.bfi.org.uk/industry-data-insights/reports/economic-contribution-uks-film-high-end-tv-video-games-animation-programme-sectors>
- ³⁹ Ibid., i.
- ⁴⁰ Ibid., 11.
- ⁴¹ Ibid., 3.
- ⁴² This figure was sourced from the *Guardian* newspaper but can be traced to the ONS figures for SIC 59, which includes all television and video production, but excludes the rapidly expanding computer games industry—thus the definition of the ‘screen industry’ here is significantly different from the definition of ‘screen industries’ given elsewhere in the document.
- ⁴³ Carey, ‘Skills audit’, 3.
- ⁴⁴ Ibid., 5.
- ⁴⁵ The audit erroneously cites the BFI 2016 Employment survey here, but clearly the figures originate with the ONS and are thus determined by the SIC categorisation. The Office for National Statistics’ (ONS) SIC system currently includes three sub-categories for production of ‘motion pictures’, video and television respectively (59.11/1; 59.11/2; 59.11/3) and a discrete sub-category for ‘motion picture projection’ (59.14)

but a single shared category for post-production irrespective of format (59.12) and another single category for distribution (59.13) making it almost impossible to offer accurate statements about work patterns in the British film industry, for example, based on ONS figures.

⁴⁶ Carey, 'Skills audit', 5.

⁴⁷ Subsequently renamed, ScreenSkills

⁴⁸ 'Employer panel film report', March 2014. https://www.screenskills.com/media/1557/employer_panel_film_report_march_2014.pdf

⁴⁹ 'Creative media workforce survey report 2014'. ScreenSkills, May 2015. https://www.screenskills.com/media/1559/creative_skillset_creative_media_workforce_survey_2014-1.pdf

⁵⁰ Referenced in the audit as Creative Skillset; UK Film Skills Fund. Retrieved March 2016, from http://creativeskillset.org/who_we_help/creative_professionals/funding_for_film_training, this site is no longer available.

⁵¹ Carey, 'Skills audit', 5.

⁵² The report includes statistics broken down into: animation; digital; facilities; film; games; radio; television; and VFX – a set of categories apparently invented for the purpose.

⁵³ 'Film report', 2.

⁵⁴ Carey, 'Skills audit', 5.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 13

⁵⁶ Ibid., 47.

⁵⁷ We are informed that the area of 'Education/Prof. development/Prof. body' is represented by five individuals drawn from 'Colleges/Universities; BFI; Creative Skillset; Production Guild'. Assuming one individual per named body that leaves a maximum of two representing the entire breadth of secondary and tertiary education in the UK.

⁵⁸ Carey, 'Skills audit', 16.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 28.

⁶⁰ Apparently a majority of respondents were concerned about careers advice more broadly, but it is not clear to what extent this pertained to advice for young people still in education, or for themselves as working professionals.

⁶¹ Carey, 'Skills audit', 42.

⁶² Ibid., 30.

⁶³ Ibid., 31.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 42.

⁶⁵ E.g., CS, NCTJ, JAMES, IMIS.

⁶⁶ Carey, 'Skills audit', 30.

⁶⁷ Ibid., ii.

⁶⁸ 'Film report', 15.

⁶⁹ Carey, 'Skills audit', 28.

⁷⁰ Arne Baumann (2002), 'Informal labour market governance: The case of the British and German media production industries'. *Work Employment Society*, 16(27), 37

⁷¹ Grugulis & Stoyanova, 'I don't know where they learn them'.

- ⁷² CAMEo (2018), 'Workforce diversity in the UK screen sector'. CAMEo Research Institute, 6. <https://www.bfi.org.uk/education-research/film-industry-statistics-research/reports/workforce-diversity>
- ⁷³ Carey, 'Skills audit', 42.
- ⁷⁴ Evidence presented shows that 'The percentage of BAME students enrolled onto film and associated screen industry courses is considerably above the all subject average of 17 per cent of students' (Carey, 'Skills audit', 35)
- ⁷⁵ Carey, 'Skills audit', 15.
- ⁷⁶ ScreenSkills (August 2019), *Annual screenskills assessment*. <https://www.screenskills.com/media/2853/2019-08-16-annual-screenskills-assessment.pdf>
- ⁷⁷ Edinburgh TV Festival (2020), *Time for action: Three online roundtables*. Retrieved November 10, 2020, from <https://www.thetvfestival.com/whats-on/digital-weeklies/>
- ⁷⁸ *Annual screenskills assessment*, August 2019, 44.
- ⁷⁹ As in Lesley Giles's blogpost published by the Creative Industries Policy & Evidence Centre in 2019. <https://www.pec.ac.uk/blog/driving-more-successful-creative-industries-through-diversity-and-investing-in-talent>
- ⁸⁰ As in Carl Schoenfeld's 2018 article on the professional education of film and TV. <https://doi.org/10.1080/25741136.2018.1467682>

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