

# **The talent problem: The policy-framing of media education and skills training for television production in the UK**

**Paper for Global Media Education Summit 2023**  
**Simon Fraser University, Vancouver, Canada: 2nd - 4th March**  
**(presentation made within virtual panel from UK)**

Richard Wallis, *Faculty of Media & Communication, Bournemouth University, Bournemouth, UK*

This paper is focused on the framing of what I'm calling the UK's 'talent problem' – by which I refer to apparent skills shortages within the television industry. I'm not questioning the fact that skills shortages exist. What I'm critiquing is the idea that education in general, and Higher Education in particular, is the primary cause of this state of affairs. More importantly I want to suggest that the real reason for skills shortages is that the industry has a *retention* problem, and I will briefly outline some of the factors that my own research suggests may be the cause of this. I will then finish with a provocation in the form of a question about where all this leaves us as media educators.

I want to start my story in September 2017 when Sir Peter Bazalgette - then President of the Royal Television Society - published his *Independent Review of the Creative Industries*. The context here was the need to strike a 'sector deal' (ie Government investment in, and ongoing support for), the Creative Industries as part of its post-Brexit Industrial Strategy.

This report, commissioned by the UK's Department for Digital Culture Media and Sport (DCMS), was to address (and I quote) '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.'<sup>1</sup>

In his *Review*, Bazalgette sets out the enormous economic potential of the Creative Industries as a sector, but warns of the dangers of underinvestment in skills, and describing the challenges he sees in ensuring an adequate 'talent pipeline'.<sup>2</sup> He asserts (and I quote):

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.<sup>3</sup>

Although there is this cursory reference to ‘continuing development’ it’s not actually a theme Bazalgette develops at any length in his report. The primary focus of his discussion of the reasons for a skills shortage is *entry-level supply*: and he highlights poor information, and poor-quality education.

He recommends (again. I quote) that:

‘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’<sup>4</sup>

This picture of a sector with an entry-level supply problem is an odd one! The Creative Industries generally, and the film and television industries in particular, have always been characterized by stiff competition, entry-level over-supply, and high levels of wastage<sup>5</sup>. Bright and ambitious young people seek work in these industries in very large numbers. They come from undergraduate and post-graduate university media programmes and film schools; from 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.<sup>6</sup> To my knowledge there is no credible evidence that even *since 2017*, demand has begun to out-strip supply. So what precisely is going on here?

That was the essential question that my research partner, Christa van Raalte and I decided to investigate, and in our recently published paper, ‘Britain’s Got Talent?’ we analyse the evidence that the *Independent Review of the Creative Industries* cites for its various claims. Let me briefly summarise our findings.

First, we found as we drilled-down that the evidence was heavily reliant on a very narrow research base (which in some cases was methodologically questionable). What looked to be a large body of evidence, on closer inspection, turned out to be a lot of circular referencing of very few (and often poor quality) studies. We have called this ‘an epistemic echo chamber’.

Secondly, we noted that in much of this evidence, there was a looseness in terminology and categorisation. So in a classic example of this, figures relating to particular skills shortages in the games industry (which is often hunting for very specific software-related skills) were conflated with TV production, inevitably leading to a very distorted picture.

And the third feature of this evidence was an often naïve or disingenuous interpretation of what it presented as data – simply a failure to adequately contextualize its findings.

I don't have time to develop these themes in more detail here, but the article is available open access should you be interested. It's a piece of work that, I think, raises important questions beyond this immediate issue of skills shortages: a salutary warning for those of us that engage in policy-related research. This is a classic case of evidence-based policy being railroaded by policy-based evidence.

So... Why does all this matter? What does it signify?

The reason it matters is that all the time that the skills shortage problem is framed in terms of the inadequacies of the education system and entry-level supply, it obfuscates the far more serious problem of industry retention. Most importantly, it prohibits a serious discussion about why people leave.

In an earlier study of our own graduates at mid-career, half of those we spoke to had *left* the industry by their early 40s. This feature of widespread attrition is common in the literature. In presenting the skills crisis primarily in terms of a problem of entry-level supply, the real problem – the problem of *retention* – is never properly addressed.

In our recent study of the UK's unscripted TV workforce – undertaken as we emerged out of Covid – the picture we have found is of an industry characterised by long hours, difficult working conditions and insecurity.

Let me summarise, as succinctly as possible, the main findings of this work:

Management is generally thought to be poor, attributed (in part) to the absence of management training.

There's a **lack of effective communication**, feedback and support, which of course impacts on staff wellbeing and, in particular, on **mental health**.

**Recruitment is informal** and heavily dependent on networks. This makes it difficult to broaden experience. Opportunities for **career progression** are largely dependent on personal relationships. For freelancers (who are the majority in this industry), there are very limited opportunities for training or professional development of any kind.

Employers expect an almost infinite degree of **flexibility** yet offer almost none in return.

Collectively, these practices limit the possibility of **equality and diversity** in the industry.

And then further inequalities result from a **lack of transparency around rates of pay and terms of employment**.

All of these factors create a set of conditions within which discrimination, nepotism and bullying thrive and indeed are normalised as **"just the way the industry works"**.

Is it any wonder, then, that there should be a brain drain of key skills and experience by mid-career (particularly acute among women)? You can begin to see how very much easier it is to blame the quality of education, and the inadequacies of entry-level talent, than it is to begin to address the complex and systemic problems within the industry itself – problems that by mid-career, make people ready to look to pastures new.

Policy interventions and commentary from those who are far removed from the coal-face of education can be difficult to take. But putting indignation to one side, the talent problem, and the underlying reasons for it, do raise serious questions for us as educators.

How do we best prepare our students to navigate the uncertain and shifting terrain of media employment?

How do we prepare them for careers in an industry where work is often unstable, short-term, and offers little by way of structured career progression?

How do we avoid simply condoning a problematic status quo in the name of 'employability'?

For the media educator it is here - I suggest - where the challenge of the so-called talent problem really lies.

---

<sup>1</sup> Bazalgette, “Independent Review,” 5.

<sup>2</sup> 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.

<sup>3</sup> Bazalgette, “Independent Review,” 42.

<sup>4</sup> Bazalgette, “Independent Review,” 48.

<sup>5</sup> 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*, Skillset, London. p.1.As the

<sup>6</sup> Irena Grugulis and Dimitrinka Stoyanova, “‘I don’t know where they learn them’: skills in film and television,” In *Creative Labour: working in the creative industries*, ed. Alan McKinlay and Chris Smith. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 135-155.