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Higher Education and the screen industries in the UK: the need for authentic collaboration for student progression and the talent pipeline

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ABSTRACT

The relationship between the UK's screen industries and its Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) is frequently claimed to be important for creating a sustainable talent pipeline for this sector. Yet little significant advancement has been made over many years. This position paper explores the persistent barriers to effective partnership, identifying and expounding six myths that undermine progress in this area. These are that: 'universities exist primarily to serve the needs of employers'; 'the screen industries do not require a graduate workforce'; 'media work specifically requires media graduates'; 'the value of a media degree is determined by how well it prepares students for entry-level media jobs'; 'practice-based and "practical" courses exist to produce "set-ready" graduates for specific industry roles'; and 'universities are a barrier to industry diversity'. The authors deconstruct each of these in turn arguing that they represent fundamental misunderstandings about the nature of these sectors. Successful collaboration must be built on mutual respect and understanding between HEIs and industry, recognising their distinct roles. The article concludes by posing questions about how to develop a sustainable, national vision for effective collaboration, acknowledging the need for local initiatives and recognising systemic issues within the industry's current employment model.

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Introduction

In November 2023, a British Film Institute (BFI) report entitled *A Sustainable Future for Skills* set out a new vision for the development of a skilled workforce for the UK's 'screen sectors' calling for a renewed partnership and collaboration with the education sector. It is a call that has been sounded at frequent intervals since the mid-1990s by academics and media professionals alike. Yet, over three decades, there has been little meaningful progress made in this direction and for the most part, the media industries and Higher

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Education Institutions' (HEIs) media faculties and departments have co-existed with only limited realisation of the acknowledged value to each of closer partnership with the other.

The overall potential value of HEI-industry partnership and collaboration is, of course, far wider than simply to help ensure a skilled sector workforce. Partnership for enterprise remains significantly underdeveloped in relation to the UK screen industries, as does the contributory role that universities play in the production and dissemination of new sector knowledge through research and development.¹ Nevertheless, educating the future screen industries' workforce² – and indeed its future visionaries and leaders – remains one of HEIs' key functions, and it is the focus of this position paper.

Over the past three decades, successive UK government administrations (and their respective agencies) have striven to improve the efficacy of partnership between HEIs and the screen industries as they pertain to the development of skills and the talent pipeline³. Yet with each new attempt, certain problems and pitfalls have remained remarkably constant. Misunderstanding and confusion about aspects of these sectors (even among some who should know better) have frequently gone uncorrected. Likewise, there has been a counterproductive tendency to emphasise the imagined needs of industry at the expense of the needs of students. The effect has been that each new attempt to envision what collaboration and partnership could look like has been derailed, while initiatives for change have largely failed to create the kinds of partnerships envisaged, either by improving the student experience or by solving the screen industries' ongoing challenges with skills development and talent retention.

The recommendations of the BFI report are welcome. They invite fresh thinking about what we mean by 'industry relevant learning and skills development' (2023, 28) and what a credible idea of partnership and collaboration between these two important sectors could deliver for both the student experience and for workforce provision. The report has prompted the authors of this article to provide what we hope to be a timely intervention by 'clearing the ground' of the *mythos* that has too often dominated HEI-industry partnership discourse. In this way, we hope to provide some clarity about the operation of both the Higher Education and the screen sectors respectively and contribute to a better quality of discussion about future collaboration and partnership. While this position paper speaks explicitly to the UK context, it is our hope that the underlying arguments will be of relevance and utility for scholars, educators and practitioners working across a range of national contexts.

In evoking the notion of 'myth' we wish to highlight a number of prevalent but ungrounded assumptions that, although sometimes contradictory, have tended to go unchallenged and that have collectively had the discursive function of shoring-up certain attitudes and beliefs about how the screen and HE sectors work, whilst overlooking or ignoring others. These have been evident in policy discourse (such as within parliamentary committees, government and government agency commissioned reports and the like), within industry (for example in relation to various studies of employer 'needs'), from within HE (including among some media educators) and of course, widely reflected by the popular press (Macdonald 2000). These myths are not necessarily complete falsehoods – they contain grains of truth. However, their collective effect has been to over-simplify and thus distort the picture of what is realistic and desirable when imagining possibilities for the future. We express these myths in the following six statements which we will go on to elaborate: 'universities exist primarily to serve the needs of

employers'; 'the screen industries do not require a graduate workforce'; 'media work specifically requires media graduates'; 'the value of a media degree is determined by how well it prepares students for entry-level media jobs'; 'practice-based and "practical" courses exist to produce "set-ready" graduates for specific industry roles'; and 'universities are a barrier to industry diversity'.

The deconstruction of these myths is intended to be an aid and provocation for those wishing to seriously engage with the challenges and opportunities of more effective collaboration between HEIs and the screen industries particularly in relation to the talent pipeline. In examining and contesting in turn these six persistent misunderstandings, we are suggesting that there is a need for greater honesty and pragmatism about two important but distinct sectors, and for recognition of their respective contribution to a mutually beneficial partnership that will both contribute to the industry's talent pipeline and support universities in their responsibility to develop the career readiness of their students.

Myth 1: 'Universities exist primarily to serve the needs of employers'

The assumption that universities exist only to service the immediate needs of employers is one of the least helpful features of recent policy discourse about HEI-industry partnerships (Collini 2012). In fact, universities serve a *range* of stakeholders and beneficiaries including their students and alumni, their faculty and staff, their civic community and local businesses, employers and industry partners more broadly, as well as government and wider society. What is undoubtedly true is that universities put considerable energy and resources into their role of improving their students' chances of finding suitable work. Indeed, the notion of 'employability' has become a watchword across Higher Education (Wallis 2021). This, however, is first and foremost, for the benefit of the student: the university's prospective graduate. It is they who are the university's first priority, if for no better reason than on the grounds of market logic, since in most of the UK, students pay fees. Providing employers with an appropriately skilled and prepared workforce, therefore, is primarily a means to this end.

To insist on a clear distinction between the interests of the employer and those of the student in this way, may seem pedantic if we assume that employment is one of the aims of most students. Yet, to conflate their respective interests is to fail to recognise the extent to which the model of employment has changed over recent decades. Today's graduate is unlikely to be heading for a stable, consistent, long-term occupation. Work in film and TV is particularly uncertain, based mainly on contingent and individualised work arrangements (Eikhof and Warhurst 2013). This fundamental shift in the employer-employee relationship, in which loyalty is confined to the immediate terms of a (limited) contract, is reflected in the duty of the university to prioritise the needs of the individual student. The ubiquitous term 'employability', then, is useful primarily when interpreted as *career readiness*: the development of a broad range of abilities (or 'capitals') preparing graduates to manage an individual career over time (Tomlinson 2017; Wallis 2021). In this context, the university must insist on prioritising the needs of its students.

Distinguishing between employer and student (or indeed graduate) interests is also important when looking to universities to help resolve specific industry skills gaps. The discourse around the preparedness, or otherwise, of media graduates often slips into

this mode as industry representatives emphasise the need for qualified production accountants, media lawyers, electricians, hairdressers and other roles unlikely to be on the curriculum of a media degree (or indeed, of interest to students electing to study for such a degree). Certainly, universities will graduate students in accountancy and law, some of whom may choose media-related specialisms, while further education colleges continue to train young people in a range of other useful skills who, with the right career advice, may be persuaded that the glamour of work in the screen industries outweighs its more precarious features. None of this, however, has much bearing on the education of those students who have elected to study on media degrees and who have ambitions to work in production, editorial or technical roles.

This is not to argue that the needs of employers should, therefore, be ignored. On the contrary, many HEIs go to considerable trouble to consult with employers on ongoing industry developments. However, in practice employers represent a highly diverse group of stakeholders with a wide range of needs. The assumption that there is an employer consensus remains 'part of the current mythmaking about employability' (Atkins 1999, 271). Attitudes to graduate attributes have long been highly variable and frequently self-contradictory (Tomlinson 2021). Differences in priority may reflect local versus national interests, short-term versus longer-term interests, market-specific versus pan-market considerations and so on. Such variation in attitude and opinion is common across the wider economy and as much a feature of the screen industries as any other. A review of reports from the sector's skills body (Skillset/Creative Skillset/ScreenSkills) over the years strongly suggests that individual media employers tend to focus on their own immediate and local recruitment needs, and there has been little collective strategic planning for industry-wide future skills requirements. Universities then, remain best advised to focus their efforts on the immediate and long-term interests of their graduates, while doing their best to ensure the industry can draw on a broad skills base for their graduate workforce.

Myth 2. 'The screen industries do not require a graduate workforce'

It is a curious feature of the HE-industry skills discourse that the assertion that degree courses need better to reflect 'industry relevant learning and skills' is frequently contradicted by the claim that, in fact, film and television does not need graduates at all. These incompatible positions – sometimes held simultaneously – have been the source of considerable confusion in previous attempts to build collaboration and partnership. It is, of course, true that some people enter the industry via work experience alone (usually predicated on personal connections).

Yet, despite there being no formal qualification requirement for many jobs in TV, it seems that, for most people, a degree matters a great deal. Moreover, the characteristics traditionally associated with 'graduateness' (a notion we return to) are nowhere more in demand than in this highly competitive sector. In the UK, 72% of screen industry workers have (at least) a first degree – a figure that rises to over 85% in the case of post-production.⁴ As this is significantly higher than in many other sectors, to suggest that a degree is not important is disingenuous and misleading. The *reasons* such an idea persists, however, and why the graduate nature of media work is so often downplayed, are important to understand.

The first reason for reticence about the importance of HE to media employment is that it has become a way to emphasise the non-*academic* nature of many of the generic skills that are considered essential to television work. For example, ScreenSkills describes the necessity for new entrants to be ‘hard-working, passionate, resilient; willing to commit to what they see as a vocation’ (ScreenSkills 2019a, 18–19); *essential skills* include being an ‘articulate, coherent communicator – verbal and written (able to use the phone!) ...’ and so on. Thus, by asserting that ‘attitude and employability skills often win out over qualification’ (ScreenSkills 2019a, 2) the salient point is made that *merely* having a degree is no guarantee of a job. In the words of a recent report commissioned by the All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) for Creative Diversity: ‘Put simply, a degree will not guarantee an individual a job in the creative industries; but an individual is unlikely to get a creative industries job without a degree.’ (Comunian et al. 2023, 7)

Second, and related to the first reason, is the persistence of a culture within the film and TV industries of ‘paying one’s dues’: a belief that, irrespective of qualification, new entrants should prove themselves in the menial aspects of a job before they can progress their career (Grugulis and Stoyanova 2009). Hence there is an expectation that the newly-appointed runner (perhaps the recipient of a first-class or even post-graduate university degree) will still be required to start at the bottom – fetch and carry and make coffee (Ashton 2015a, 2015b). This levelling approach to the start of a career – a long-standing characteristic of work in film and television – means that at entry-level, any qualification is deliberately treated *as if* it were unimportant.

The third reason for this down-playing of the graduate nature of media work relates to the industry’s long-time problem with equality, diversity and inclusion (Henry and Ryder 2021). In recent years, there has grown up an argument that one way to address systemic career barriers for certain disadvantaged groups is to encourage a fast-track approach to particular roles within the industry (Wallis and van Raalte 2022), thereby circumventing the need for university education. Indeed, a number of attempts have been made to develop alternative (which is to say non-graduate) direct-entry routes into the industry over the years. Such has been the persuasiveness of this logic as a less demanding way to address industry inequality, that little critical consideration has been given to its implications. What this perspective fails to recognise is that, beyond the attainment of an entry-level role (or ‘training opportunity’), barriers to *progression* remain every bit as great as barriers to entry (Nwonka 2015; Lee, Grigulis, and Kill 2024). By deterring engagement with HE, such schemes are in danger of actively contributing to longer-term career disadvantage. We return to the important issue of equality, diversity and inclusion in our consideration of Myth 6. Meanwhile, however, any discourse suggesting either that the industry does not require an educated workforce or that aspiring individuals can progress in the modern industry just as well without a university education should be viewed with caution.

Myth 3. ‘Media work requires media graduates’

The fact that media employers chiefly employ graduates does not mean that these graduates are drawn mainly from media courses – i.e. those programmes that fall within the broad category of ‘Media, Screen, Journalism and Communication Studies’

(The British Academy 2024). Although robust data is not available, we know that subject areas represented by graduates who work within the screen industries are drawn from the full gamut of science, social science and humanities degree programmes. It would be surprising if it were otherwise since the screen industries employ for a wide range of editorial, production and technical (or 'craft') jobs as well as a myriad of other supporting roles. During the period of exceptionally high demand for content that began with the expansion of Netflix in around 2015 and (other than for the hiatus of Covid) lasted through to the Spring of 2023, the lists of jobs in film and television reported to be 'hard to recruit for' included roles such as: assistant production accountant; construction manager; draughtsperson; electrician; and financial controller (ScreenSkills 2019b, 9). None of these are roles for which a media degree would have particularly advantaged an applicant.

If, as is sometimes claimed, 'oven-ready' or 'set-ready' graduates (Atkins 1999; Carey et al. 2017, 30) are indeed what employers say they principally want, it is not reflected in their collective hiring behaviour. There is little evidence that most media employers discriminate based on degree specificity, other than where a particular role necessitates some specialist knowledge (as in the above examples). Based on hiring practices, at least at entry-level, we may conclude that media employers view a degree, whatever the subject, as an assurance of some more generic set of abilities and accomplishments thought to be appropriate to meet the demands of the professional workplace. In this respect, film and television is much like many other industries and it is, perhaps, useful here to redeploy the notion of 'graduateness', the term originally favoured by the UK's Higher Education Quality Council (HEQC 1996). Although the term has been largely superseded by the more instrumental notion of 'graduate employability', 'graduateness' most accurately conveys the idea of generic qualities that employers look to universities to guarantee. These will typically include: self-management; team working; problem solving; and communication skills (Kornelakis and Petrakaki 2020). More specifically, in the case of skills associated with humanities, arts and social sciences degree subjects, 'graduateness' involves 'critical thinking; innovation; creativity; collaboration; deep research and analysis skills' (House of Lords Communications and Digital Committee 2022). Of course, universities are commonly berated for turning out students that are deficient in various of these qualities. However, such anxieties about slipping standards (and the reason that political capital can be made by those attempting to identify 'low quality courses' producing graduates thought to fall short of these standards) are rooted in the very acceptance of the premise that the university exists to develop these transferable skills and qualities in its graduates.

Degree specificity, then, is no more nor less significant than the interests and needs of an individual employer at a particular moment. For example: a chemistry degree might advantage a graduate applying for work as part of the editorial team on a television science show, while a degree in animal behaviour might similarly mark out a graduate applying for work at the BBC's Natural History Unit, and so on. By the same token, a media degree will be considered a desirable asset by certain employers and at certain times: having a basic familiarity with the process of filmmaking, or the ability to 'hit the ground running' in some aspect of production, might well prove to be advantageous for an entry-level media graduate in the context of a particular project. But all this is generally seen as 'added value', while the baseline is having a degree: employers' priorities

tend to be the generic qualities associated with graduateness. As an early Government report into media skills made clear, employers want entrants ‘with the ability to maintain their learning, rather than those ... who arrive with a set of non-transferable skills’ (DCMS/Skillset 2001, 74).

This being the case, the cruciality of a media-focused degree becomes a moot point. Certainly, the screen industries employ many media graduates who choose to go on to pursue a media career (Wallis, van Raalte, and Allegrini 2020, 78) and many do so with much success. The media employer who boasted of never having hired a media graduate (as in Thornham and O’Sullivan’s 2004 study) would today be considered an eccentric contrarian.⁵ That said, for as long as employers continue to enlist new entrants from the full range of undergraduate and graduate programmes, it is difficult to support any argument that presupposes a *media* degree is the pre-requisite for the majority of jobs in the screen sector.

Myth 4. ‘The value of a media degree is determined by how well it prepares students for entry-level media jobs’

As intimated above, to notice that media employers do not necessarily prioritise subject specificity when making entry-level appointments, is not to conclude that media degrees have no distinctive value for employers. As employer-led entry-level training provision has been slowly eroded (Kahn 2024), subject-specific knowledge, critical insight or practical media skills and experience (such as camera operating or editing) can provide a valuable grounding for many media roles. From the point of view of the graduate, therefore, there will be advantages arising from courses that have exposed them to industry projects or facilitated related work experience, or where access to social networks has helped to broaden their industry contacts.

Nevertheless, given that graduates working in the screen industries are not drawn in any systematic way from media courses, and given the ongoing emphasis on transferrable graduate skills in employer discourse, it must follow that media courses set up to be ‘practical’, ‘vocational’ or ‘industry-oriented’ in their focus, are not necessarily any better placed to provide successful new entrants than are others. Yet much of the discussion about the value (or otherwise) of a media degree is based on the extent to which media degrees are considered insufficiently skills-focused or ‘industry relevant’, and on concerns over an apparent ‘mismatch between the skills needed by employers and the skills provided by the education system’ (BFI 2022, 63; O’Brien, Arnold, and Kerrigan 2021).

In the UK, as elsewhere, there has been a long tradition of highly theoretical film and media studies courses that combine aspects of sociology, cultural studies and psychology, running alongside more practically focused programmes. Yet to assume that a media studies course that foregrounds theory must be insufficiently ‘industry relevant’ reflects an overly narrow understanding of the way in which theory may directly inform practice. It would be a mistake, moreover, to assume that a course that foregrounds theory necessarily precludes practice-focused elements, since almost all film and media courses engage with both. Similarly, a degree course described as ‘vocational’, ‘industry-oriented’, ‘practical’ or ‘practice-based’ (terms that are sometimes used interchangeably and sometimes to imply specific meanings) should not be assumed to preclude aspects of media theory (British Academy 2024). None of these courses may be said to be ‘vocational’ in the

sense of being tied to a qualification as a condition of employment (in the way that medicine is said to be 'vocational', for example). All of them aim to be relevant in helping students better to understand media. As Laughton observed back in 2001: 'there is a continuum from the mainly academic to the mainly practical, and there is no easy way of determining where on this continuum a particular course can be placed.' (DCMS/Skillset 2001, 73). As with any subject, course curricula vary widely from programme to programme and from institution to institution, driven by a range of constantly changing factors (including most notably, student demand). Individual educational experiences on one programme, moreover, may vary considerably from student to student, given the principles of student choice and student-centred learning that dictate approaches to education in modern universities. A continuum 'from the mainly academic to the mainly practical' (as Laughton has it) makes the impulse to draw clear lines between courses neither straightforward nor especially productive, as the Qualifications Mapping Project discovered to its cost in an early and unsuccessful taxonomic attempt of this kind (DCMS/Skillset 2001).

Most employers, in practice, are unphased by the variety and nuances of these courses, seeing value in the range of emphases and skillsets. Reporting on the findings of a three-year study to investigate the meanings and perceptions of 'employability', Thornham and O'Sullivan (2004) show that many media employers do have a broad appreciation of different attributes offered by the range and types of media courses.

There is a further important factor in contesting the myth that the value of a media degree is determined by how well it prepares students for entry-level media jobs. Media work is now integral to all economic and cultural development and extends far beyond the screen industries. To view the value of a course in terms of its supposed 'industry-relevance' begs the question: 'how relevant are the screen industries?' Occupations most commonly associated with film and TV, as these industries have been defined by policymakers, represent only some of the broad range of media occupations open to today's graduates.⁶ In providing a robust evidence-based account of creative labour, Stuart Cunningham's work (2011 and onwards) has made an important contribution to our developing understanding of occupations across the creative sector. Through his 'creative trident' methodology, Cunningham distinguishes between creative occupations within the core creative industries (what he calls 'specialists'), creative occupations employed in other industries ('embedded') and the business and support occupations within the creative industries responsible for managing, accounting for and technically supporting creative activity ('support'). To apply this insight to the UK's screen industries: there are indeed film and television 'specialist' occupations within these industries; but there are also multiple 'support' occupations (where skills shortages are most frequently identified); and there are still more 'embedded' media occupations across other sectors of industry and the public sector (Ashton 2015a). Graduates of both media and non-media courses are hired in each of these categories. Some employers may prefer to hire graduates of media programmes – it would be surprising if they did not – but this is for a relatively narrow range of occupations. Given the type of 'flexible' careers that graduates now must navigate, the question has to be asked: are courses that set out to be exclusively 'specialist' in terms of current occupations within the screen industries alone, really in the best interest of graduates? And, by extension, should their value be assessed in those terms?

Myth 5. 'Practice-based and 'practical' courses exist primarily to produce 'set-ready' graduates for specific industry roles'

As we have discussed in the previous section, one of the recurring points of contention about media courses over many decades has been in the characterisation of the 'right' kind of media course, usually one that teaches practical skills that is supposed to enable the graduate to arrive at the workplace 'oven-ready and self-basting' (Atkins 1999) or in more industry-relevant parlance, to arrive 'set-ready' (Carey et al. 2017, 30). This is broadly the pitch that many universities make to potential students to such courses. The offer of 'industry standard' skills and experience (Keith and Collins 2023) has proved to be an effective approach to recruitment and the reason that many students give when asked why they chose their degree programme. However, both the complexity of student motivations, in this respect, and the critical purpose that practice plays within pedagogy are frequently misunderstood.

Many students who choose courses that foreground their 'practical' components describe themselves as 'non-academic', identifying rather as *practical* people who learn in a *practical* way (Wallis, van Raalte, and Allegrini 2020). The reason for their choice of degree, it seems, has as much to do with the importance that they attach to a practical, hands-on (often project-based) approach to teaching and learning (sometimes referred to as 'learning-by-doing' or 'experiential learning') as it is about the extent to which they believe that their course will set them up for work.

Although often melded with the idea that 'practical' is synonymous with 'vocational', this second reason – a hands-on and practical approach to teaching and learning – is distinct and crucial to understand within any discussion pertaining to a media curriculum. For many students, these kind of degree courses provide a path through HE that other kinds of courses do not. Thus, in opening the door of the university to a wider constituency, courses that contain significant practical elements ensure a richer diversity of talent for employers to draw from an entry-level. It is here that the primary value of such courses may be found, rather than in the implausible idea (even when setting aside consideration of 'paying one's dues') that universities could or should prepare students to a level of skills proficiency to be 'set-ready' from the get-go. The primary significance of such courses is their pedagogy – their *method* of teaching students. Put simply, the value of university-based media practice is not that it is an end, but rather that it is a means.

The work of education is to school the student in the principles of acquiring knowledge and understanding and in the confidence to transfer that knowledge. The value of 'learning to learn' is self-evident within the context of an industry that is heavily technology-dependent, where that technology is constantly changing and in which specific skills (and even roles) are rapidly superseded. The point of practice in the HE environment is not to provide students with a 'crash course' in industry skills (even if such skills could be agreed upon). Rather it is primarily to teach them *how* to learn new skills (as expounded more than a century ago by John Dewey 1904). As a pedagogical tool, therefore, practice will necessarily be theorised (as well as highly selective). This is a rudimentary principle of teaching and learning that goes to the heart of what universities offer that industry generally does not.

There is a further important distinction that should be recognised, in the way in which industry practices are treated within the university, that is different from industry: the

insistence on an element of criticality and reflection (Hesmondhalgh 2014). Describing the media curriculum landscape of the end of the twentieth century, Ian Macdonald observed:

Academics ... may reject the hegemony of the dominant modes of film and television production in particular, and argue for a wider view. They may regard their work as 'research into creativity' or a time and place for students to experiment with form, theory, style and so on. They do not regard technical skill as the essential component, just one of several. (Macdonald 2000, 20)

One final point should be made pertaining to the notion of 'set-ready' graduates. Putting to one side the question of whether the screen industries have an appetite to end their long-established start-at-the-bottom culture, universities are not appropriately positioned to produce 'set-ready' graduates without a major gear change of approach on the part of industry. Fully vocational courses recognised as such by the sector (i.e. those found in disciplines such as medicine, teaching and law) integrate a considerable amount of industry-based training as part of the qualification. They also feed into established programmes of continuing professional development. While practical media courses can (and generally do) enable some form of work-integrated learning, this is highly variable, receives no formal support from industry and contributes to no nationally agreed framework.

Work experience facilitated within the framework of the media degree can range from mentoring schemes and workplace visits through to placements lasting months at a time (as in the 'sandwich' course). The enormous variation in quality and value of such experiences is, of course, entirely dependent upon the investment and collaboration of employers willing and able to offer students suitably relevant opportunities. Currently, student access to UK media workplaces for periods of more than a month are hard to come by. And since most professional media work is 'freelance' and highly contingent anyway, the number of full industry internships made available by employers is vanishingly small. Meanwhile, graduate apprenticeship schemes are also few and far between for similar reasons.⁷ Workplace visits, visiting speakers from industry, and (perhaps most valuable of all) work-simulated learning where work-like projects take place in a controlled university environment linked to assessment, are all highly beneficial. None, however, may claim to be resulting in 'set-ready' graduates in the way that this term is generally used to imply.

Myth 6. 'Universities are a barrier to industry diversity'

In the previous section we have suggested that one advantage of those media programmes where student engage in practice is that they provide a pedagogical approach that draws into HE (and through it into the industry) a more diverse range of students than would otherwise be the case. However, the prevailing political narrative over recent years has tended to position HE as a barrier to diversity in the industry – notwithstanding evidence that diversity is greater across media degree programmes than it is across the industry.⁸

The UK screen industries have historically been affected by a conspicuous lack of diversity of any kind, and this has remained a problematic feature of the sector into the current century. As long ago as 2007, the UKFC commissioned Reena Bhavnani to conduct a review of what was known about diversity in film, television and the audio-visual

sector. She reported that ‘women, black and minority ethnic groups and people with disabilities’ were under-represented when compared with their proportions in the UK workforce (Bhavnani 2007, 10) and that the sector’s senior positions were dominated by white, middle-aged, non-disabled men. These findings were publicly reinforced by Lenny Henry’s much-reported speech to the RTS in 2008, which set out to shame the UK media establishment, asking ‘Why is it that the U.S. has got cultural diversity right and we’ve got it so wrong?’ (RTS 2008)⁹

Many and various initiatives aimed at promoting ‘inclusivity’ followed over the next decade, ranging from diversity policies to the appointment of diversity leads, to assorted schemes and (more recently) employment quotas¹⁰ with mixed success. A great many of these have involved various forms of training and development, although primarily aimed at ‘fixing’ those discriminated against, rather than those perpetrating discriminatory practices (Newsinger and Eikhof 2020). The extent to which training has become the default ‘solution’ to all concerns about diversity, and the problematic emphasis on ‘fixing’ the individuals concerned rather than the system, is discussed by Henry and Ryder in their manifesto, *Access all areas* (2021): ‘separate diversity training schemes essentially devalue the entire process by creating a subset of candidates requiring “remedial” attention.’ (46). In a scathing condemnation, one disaffected graduate of a ‘fast track’ scheme aimed at ‘BAME potential management employees’ (all of whom were let go after more than a year on the scheme) is quoted as saying:

I think they do exactly what they’re intended to do, which is to create the appearance of doing something, while simultaneously doing nothing to improve diversity. It is a cruel and deeply unfunny joke. In retrospect, it dawned on me: if diversity schemes and initiatives posed so much of a hint of a threat to the status quo, there wouldn’t be any. Hence, there are, of course, loads. (2021, 48)

An emphasis on training, and entry-level education in particular, as a solution to TV’s diversity problem may be seen as an attempt by industry to ‘pass the buck’ of responsibility for its woeful diversity record, and the recent tendency to conflate the issues of training and diversity, as unhelpful to any attempt to analyse or address either. Given that new entrants are predominantly graduates, HE clearly has a crucial role to play in formulating a talent pipeline receptive to diverse talent, but the data suggests that the education sector is making more progress than the screen industries in this respect. The recent *Making the Creative Majority* report indicates that in creative, as in other degree programmes, there are still considerable challenges for HE in achieving fully equitable recruitment processes and in closing awarding gaps. However, the greatest challenges for ‘women, non-White, lower SES [Social Economic Status] and disabled graduates’ are their ‘lower employment prospects following graduation’ which, the authors conclude ‘indicate an issue with employers’ (Comunian et al. 2023, 79). A more diverse industry is clearly an important goal towards which greater HEI-industry partnership and collaboration could profitably be focused, but this is unlikely to happen if the idea prevails that universities are the principal barrier.

Beyond the myths

Whilst collectively incoherent, the myths that have dominated discourse about HE and the screen industries, have held together sufficiently well to effectively undermine progress

towards collaboration and partnership. Our argument here may be positively summarised in the following three statements:

First and foremost, a university's responsibility is to serve the needs of its students. Since relationships forged between universities and employers are crucial to develop the career readiness of students, most universities welcome and seek to understand, engage with and involve employers wherever possible. This is especially important where students aspire to media employment and therefore need to understand how to navigate and self-manage their careers in the context of an industry in which work is contingent and employers are unlikely to provide much support or investment in them after they have graduated.

Second, although it is possible to gain media work without a degree, the screen industries in the UK principally demand a graduate workforce, and in doing so, they draw widely from all kinds of undergraduate and post-graduate programmes. They do so both because all kinds of degree subjects have potential relevance to their requirements and because employers often prioritise the qualities of 'graduateness' over subject specificity. Media degrees form an important part of a broad menu of hiring options for media employers.

Third, media degrees do not produce 'set-ready' graduates if that term is assumed to imply that they should instantly be able to operate in a specialist production role (e.g. camera assistant, grip, researcher etc). Nor would there be much point in them doing so whilst the culture is dominated by an expectation that everyone 'starts at the bottom'. Nevertheless, as many students who study media hope to find media employment either within or beyond the 'screen industries', their courses are likely to provide them with some subject-related advantages (through specialist knowledge, skills, contacts or experience). Furthermore, since the media industries have historically failed in diversifying their workforce, universities may be well-placed to help in this respect (albeit that if there is to be significant change in this direction, the industry will need simultaneously to address its broader progression and retention problems). For an employer, therefore, the value of a media graduate may be simply in their graduateness; it may be in their specialist media knowledge; or it may be in the more diverse demographic that they often represent. And of course, it may be in all of the above.

Looking forward, then, and in the light of these arguments, where ought priorities lie when it comes to collaboration between HE and the screen industries in developing and maintaining a talent pipeline? And what might effective partnership in this space look like?

Setting out its vision for the first decade of a new century, the *Skills for tomorrow's media* report highlighted: industry 'input into curriculum development'; and 'access to work, placements and support with resources' (DCMS/Skillset 2001, 73–74). As has been clearly recognised in the recent BFI report, these remain at the crux of where collaboration is most likely to count, as relevant today as in 2001, providing a starting point for future work in this area. And good practice exists¹¹ – it is simply patchy and often short-lived. What is needed is a greater level of honesty about what is possible and desirable, and a recognition of the respective needs of both sectors.

Conclusion

This article has argued for a new realism and seriousness of purpose in response to the welcome publication of *A Sustainable Future for Skills* (BFI 2023). The report calls for a

renewed partnership and collaboration between the screen industries and the education sector. We have noted that previous attempts to build such collaboration have not fared well, but do not suggest that this is a reason not to redouble efforts in this direction. We attribute previous failure in no small measure to the persistence of a mythos that has existed about the nature of HE and the industry, and we have attempted to systematically dismantle six such myths. We have noted that universities and industry have different priorities and obligations, and that neither speak with one voice. Yet each has a vested interest in a healthy and relevant talent pipeline into the screen industries, and each could significantly contribute to this through informed cooperation.

To achieve sustained success, collaborative ventures between education and industry must be based on *authentic* reciprocal relationships and a recognition that while employers bring industry insight and expertise, universities are leaders in education – a field in which industry is both a contributor and a beneficiary. National leadership, in this context must be focused on recognising and potentially amplifying small or incremental changes where they occur. It is only such an approach that is likely to result in the trust and mutual respect necessary for the kinds of partnership required.

From these observations, we conclude this article by posing four questions: First, how do we create a balance between a national ‘vision’ for collaboration and partnership, and a form of leadership that recognises (and nurtures) an essentially organic and inevitably shifting collection of different initiatives that will be taking place mainly at a local/regional level? Second, which organisation would be best placed to drive such a vision, given the importance of winning the trust of both industry and the HE sectors, recognising the strengths of each and being prepared to meet them on equal terms? Third, what work is there to be done to ensure policy makers, industry leaders concerned with the education and training agenda, and media educators disavow the myths we have outlined, and move the conversation in a more positive and visionary direction? Fourth, and most challenging of all, how do we address the systemic issues that lie at the heart of the sector’s current employment model (with its over-dependence on a contingent workforce) that, until they are properly addressed, will continue to make problematic even the most cohesive working relationship between HE and industry?

Notes

1. A small step in this direction is represented by recent AHRC funding of CoSTAR, a £75.6 million national research and development network developing new technology for gaming, TV, film, performance, and digital entertainment.
2. The term ‘screen sectors’ (or ‘industries’) – often used interchangeably with the singular form ‘screen sector’ (or ‘industry’) – has been adopted here by the authors to reflect its usage in current skills discourse. However, the elasticity of this terminology arbitrarily to include or preclude different subsectors (eg. to include ‘high-end’ television but preclude ‘unscripted’) is highly problematic and leads to significant categorisation errors as we have described in some detail elsewhere (Wallis and van Raalte 2022). Since our concern here is primarily with media courses, we use the terms ‘screen industries’ or ‘screen sector’, mainly to refer to the film and television industries, rather than industries more likely to draw from technology courses (such as games and VFX).
3. These have included successive changes to the oversight of skills bodies. At the time of writing, a newly elected Labour government has announced its *Invest 2035* Industrial Strategy and the intention to establish another new skills oversight body. Under the previous

government, the UK Commission for Employment and Skills (UKCES), the Sector Skills Councils (a licencing body for sector-specific Skills Councils) was axed in consequence of the Public Spending Reviews of 2015, closing in March 2017.

4. These statistics are based upon the Labour Force Survey (LFS) and the Annual Population Survey (APS) in 2020 and gathered by SIC code.
5. Media employers have not been immune from a populist habit to denigrate media degrees as insufficiently serious or rigorous. To borrow the parlance of a sometime UK Higher Education minister, Margaret Hodge (BBC News 2003) media-related undergraduate courses have been the archetypal ‘Mickey Mouse degree’ – a dysphemism seemingly employed without irony.
6. The complexities and inconsistencies of attempts to map job titles in the creative industries to national data sets like those of the Office for National Statistics Standard Industrial Classification (SIC) and Standard Occupational Classification (SOC) codes have been set out by GuildHE’s recent report (Wicklow and Gamble 2024).
7. Recent experimentation with Flexi-Job Apprenticeships has been pitched at pre-university level, mainly delivered by private training providers and coming under the regulatory jurisdiction of Ofsted.
8. For example, according to data cited in ScreenSkills’ 2017 ‘Skills Audit of the UK Film and Screen Industries’ the proportion of BAME students enrolled on programmes directly related to film and television far exceeded the proportion on degree programmes in general, and for the most part met or exceeded the proportion of individuals identified as BAME across the UK population at the time. (Carey et al. 2017)
9. Although it is important not to exaggerate the lived realities of equality and diversity in Hollywood, as argued, for example by Kristen Warner (2016).
10. Under the terms of *Ofcom’s Diversity and Inclusion Programme 2018-2022*.
11. Indeed guidance to HEIs and their industry partners on how such collaborations might best be developed is offered by the ScreenSkills-supported WRYSE project (McCaffrey and Weiss 2023).

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