

NAHEMI Talking Shop: Higher Education and the Screen Industries in the UK. A provocation.

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Version 2.0

1.	<p>RICHARD:</p> <p>Thank you very much for inviting us.</p> <p>When Lucy contacted us about contributing to Talking Shop this year, it was on the heels of having just published an article on the theme of Higher Education and the screen industries. I want to stress that this is intended to be a provocation, and as we're here for a 'talking shop' what we propose to do is to use only half of our time to summarize the argument, so that we can then have time for some genuine exchange of ideas.</p>
2.	<p>With that in mind, if you'd like to refer to a brief summary of our article as a prompt whilst we're talking, you can access our recent blog post here on the Wonkhe site. We'll give you the QR code for the full version of our article at the <i>Journal of Media Practice and Education</i> a little later.</p>
3.	<p>CHRISTA:</p> <p>First, a bit of context.... In April of this year, the CMS Committee – that is the select committee that scrutinises the work of the Department for Culture, Media and Sport – published its report on British films and high-end television. This report calls for 'closer alignment between what is offered in formal education settings and the production sector's needs' (para 123). It cites evidence that degree programmes are not training students for the jobs that need doing, and that this leaves talented young people unprepared for careers in these industries. The deficit is attributed to a lack of coordination across the HE sector and a lack of connection between education and industry.</p>

	<p>Now these are not new charges. Neither are they beyond dispute. But they do raise the question of how universities should respond, because we've been here before. Many times.</p>
4.	<p>So what we're doing in this article is to argue for a better quality of conversation about what collaboration between HE and industry ought to look like. And in order for that to happen, we argue, we need to 'break the spell' of <i>six</i> persistent myths that always come to dominate this conversation. We've used the term 'myths', not because they're necessarily entirely false but because they oversimplify and distort how we talk about and envisage the possibility of fruitful collaboration between HE and the screen industries.</p> <p>So here they are. Six myths...</p>
5.	<p>RICHARD:</p> <p>Myth 1: 'Universities exist primarily to serve the needs of employers'</p> <p>Whatever politicians like to tell us, this is not the case! Universities serve a <i>range</i> of stakeholders and beneficiaries. Employers are certainly among them. But rightly or wrongly, the model of Higher Education that the UK's adopted is one that prioritises the fee-paying student as a kind of 'customer'. This means that our first responsibility is to <i>them</i>. What is in their best interests? And if they're intending to forge a career in the screen industries, where work is based on contingent and individualised arrangements, where employers will not be investing in their careers, and where no mutual loyalty is expected (in other words, they are not heading for a stable, consistent, or long-term occupation as might have been expected in a previous era) then the question we have to ask as educators is 'how do we best prepare them for managing this kind of self-directed, independent career'? Of course, there is an overlap of interests here. It's in the interests of our students that the media industries draw on a broad skills-base for its graduate workforce. But we prioritise the immediate and long-term interests of our students, not <i>simply</i> the short-term 'needs of the employer'.</p>

6.	<p>CHRISTA:</p> <p>Myth 2: ‘The screen industries do not require a graduate workforce’</p> <p>Again, this is not born out by the evidence. It is true that very few jobs in production demand a formal qualification. It is true that most of us know someone who’s ‘made it’ in the industry, without a degree. However! The fact remains that 72% of screen industry workers are graduates – this is a very high proportion, and a proportion that rises among the younger cohorts.¹ So whatever people say about not needing a degree, the reality is that – in the main – employers hire graduates. This is an industry where the characteristics of what we used to call ‘graduateness’ are still very much in demand. ‘Graduateness’ is the term that the Higher Education Quality Council used to use to refer to those generic skills that define the graduate beyond simply subject knowledge. In recent years graduateness has been largely displaced by the more instrumental notion of ‘employability’. But based on employer behaviour, ‘graduateness’ may well be a more accurate descriptor of what employers actually want. So why do people continue to insist that you don’t need a degree to work in the screen industries?</p> <p>I think there are three reasons: First, it’s become a way to emphasise the non-<i>academic</i> nature of many of the generic skills that are considered essential. Secondly, it supports (and is supported by) the deeply imbedded culture of ‘paying one’s dues’ - the idea that new entrants, irrespective of their qualifications, must prove themselves in the menial roles before they can progress. And thirdly, an argument has developed that the industry can tackle the longstanding lack of diversity in its workforce by a fast-track approach to particular roles – in other words, by circumventing the need for university education. This is a rather dubious strategy, given the contingent nature of this work, and the fact that the challenge for our graduates is no longer primarily about getting <i>in</i>, it’s about getting <i>on</i>.</p>
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7.	<p>RICHARD:</p> <p>Myth 3: ‘Media work requires media graduates’</p> <p>As we’ve already said, it’s true that media employers chiefly employ graduates. It is not the case that these graduates are necessarily drawn mainly from media courses. Graduates who work within the screen industries are drawn from the full gamut of science, social science and humanities degree programmes. We know that ‘hard to fill’ vacancies across the industry typically include roles like accountants and lawyers as well as non-graduate roles such as carpenters and electricians.² This is not to argue that specialist or ‘vocational’ degrees have no value: on the contrary they provide a route into industry for many graduates and bring their own distinctive value to employers. But given actual hiring practices, it’s difficult to support any argument based on the idea that a <i>media</i> degree is a necessary (or even expected) pre-requisite for work in the screen sector.</p>
8.	<p>CHRISTA:</p> <p>Myth 4: ‘The value of a media degree is determined by how well it prepares students for entry-level media jobs’</p> <p>This is the assumption that underpins a succession of accreditation schemes. But again, it’s difficult to support, given that graduates working in the screen industries are not drawn in any systematic way from media courses. Now, we’re not suggesting that ‘practical’, ‘vocational’ or ‘industry-oriented’ courses don’t have a distinctive value for employers. On the contrary, with the erosion of employer-led entry-level training provision, subject-specific knowledge and practical media skills provide a valuable grounding for many industry roles. Also, given the extent to which media work is now integral to a whole range of sectors, media graduates <i>can</i> – and most likely will - leverage their skillsets to access a much wider range of types of work. So... it’s by no means clear that students are best served by courses that set out to be exclusively ‘specialist’ in terms of current occupations within the screen industries alone, particularly given that these are under the constant threat of obsolescence.</p>

9.	<p>RICHARD:</p> <p>Myth 5: ‘Practice-based and “practical” courses exist primarily to produce “set-ready” graduates for specific industry roles’</p> <p>This is the pitch that many universities make to potential students - often the reason students will give when asked why they chose a particular course. But again, this is a myth. It’s an idea that fails to recognise both the complexity of student motivations, and the critical purpose that practice plays within pedagogy. In one of our earliest graduate studies, one of the things we noticed was that many of those who choose these kind of ‘practical’ courses identify themselves as <i>practical</i> people who learn in a <i>practical</i> way.³ For students like this, these kind of courses provide a pathway through HE that would otherwise be unavailable to them. The real value of courses that foreground ‘practice’ is that they open the doors of higher education to a far wider constituency of students than might otherwise benefit – and they offer employers a richer diversity of talent on which to draw. University-based media practice is a means to <i>education</i>, not a means to a job based on the the implausible idea that graduates should, or could, be presented to industry “set-ready”.</p>
10.	<p>CHRISTA:</p> <p>Myth 6: ‘Universities are a barrier to industry diversity’</p> <p>Again, this is disingenuous. Universities certainly face challenges around recruiting and retaining a diverse student body. However, the greatest challenges for aspiring graduates from minoritized groups are their lower employment prospects on leaving university. The conspicuous lack of diversity within the UK screen industries has been well documented, and under current economic pressures, is currently deteriorating further (despite numerous initiatives and interventions). A more diverse industry is clearly an important goal towards which greater HEI-industry partnership and collaboration should be focused, but this is unlikely to happen if the idea prevails that universities are the principal barrier.</p>

11.	<p>RICHARD:</p> <p>Six myths then! Collectively incoherent, but nevertheless – in one form or another – have distracted us from making progress towards meaningful collaboration. What we need instead is a more nuanced and respectful conversation about how we might develop authentic HEI-industry relationships that are in the interests of both the sector and our students.</p>
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¹ These statistics are based upon the Labour Force Survey (LFS) and the Annual Population Survey (APS) in 2020 and gathered by SIC code.

² AS listed in successive Screenskills reports, for example.

³ For graduate reflections to this effect, see Wallis, van Raalte and Allegrini, 2020