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## Art for art's sake? A critique of the instrumentalist turn in the teaching of media and communications in UK universities

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### Abstract

This paper charts the turn in the UK New Labour government's (1997-2010) creative industries policy from an early focus on encouraging wider access to the arts to an increasingly instrumentalist emphasis on self-funding and the generation of wealth from intellectual property. The paper demonstrates the effect of this policy primarily through the case of the teaching of media and communications in UK universities. Focusing on the Skillset Media Academy Network (SMAN), the authors ask whether this is both the best approach to teaching media and communications in UK universities and appropriate that many of these courses appear to be solely geared towards preparing graduates for jobs in the creative industries.

**Keywords:** creative industries; neo-liberalism; cultural policy; higher education; vocational education; arts and humanities.

## **Art for art's sake? A critique of the instrumentalist turn in the teaching of media and communications in UK universities**

### **Introduction**

A recent book by former New Labour minister Liam Byrne (2013) highlighted the challenge that the UK faces in competing with the world's rapidly developing economies (his focus was on the largest of those economies, China). This was preceded by other siren voices in the western world over the last few years, most notably from Thomas Friedman (2006) in the guise of his best-selling book, *The World is Flat*. Like the authors who preceded him, Byrne (2013) argues that his own country (in his case the UK) should meet this challenge by utilising its universities to create ideas for businesses. Specifically, Byrne identifies the creative industries as an important sector for the UK; he discusses this in relation to providing opportunities for the UK to utilise its expertise in this area in a Chinese context, but this argument could be applied to other markets too. This is not surprising, given New Labour's identification with this sector throughout its term of office from 1997 to 2010. This paper will focus on how both the New Labour government and the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition (2010–) that succeeded it have attempted to prepare students for the job market through direct intervention in the teaching in higher education of one subject, media and communications studies. This could be said to directly relate to eight statistical categories that the UK measures creative industries within: advertising; publishing; TV & radio; design; film, video and photography; music & visual and performing arts; software/electronic publishing; digital and entertainment media (DCMS 2011) (1). While this paper does not decry the growth of the UK's creative industries, it does question whether the preparation of students for specific industries through the development of their skills is a better way of encouraging creativity and innovation than the building of the type of theory-based enquiry that is central to a more general arts- and humanities-based pedagogy, as well as the most appropriate way of teaching arts and humanities in higher education in the UK. The paper will discuss the general role of education within the development of the creative industries from the late 1990s onwards, before focusing specifically on the creation and working of the Skillset Media Academy Network (SMAN) from 2007-2013, within the authors' own field of study, media and communication studies.

### **Post-1997 creative industries policy in the UK**

Early in its first term of office, the UK's New Labour government (1997-2010) introduced a policy concept that was quickly picked up by other governments around the world (Flew 2012, p.11). The creative industries was a collective term for economic activity that already existed and, in that sense, its approach was hardly novel. What was novel was the decision to place the concept of creativity at the heart of economic policy. But creativity is an elastic concept and, before proceeding with our analysis of the way in which it is understood in the context of the UK's education system, the paper will first trace the general genealogy of this idea and its relationship to policy in the early years of the New Labour government.

The publishing by the UK's Department of Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) of a document to map that nation's creative industries (DCMS 1998) was the first attempt worldwide at mapping this sector by any government department. A further mapping document by the DCMS in 2001 refined the measurement of these industries, but did not significantly alter the original typology of 13 (White 2009, p.338). What was the policy rationale for this type of

exercise? In his foreword to the 2001 mapping documents, the then Secretary-of-State for the Department of Culture, Media and Sport stated:

Just over two years ago, we published the first ever *Creative Industries Mapping Document*. The need then was to raise awareness of the industries, the contribution they made to the economy and the issues they faced.

Today, the term is more widely used and understood; in a knowledge economy the importance of these industries to national wealth is more commonly recognised; and the special needs of these industries are reflected more in policy development at national, regional and sub-regional levels. The creative industries have moved from the fringes to the mainstream (Smith, 2001, p.3).

Here we can discern both a retrospective glance, in an (institutional) acknowledgement of industries that had existed for a long time when Chris Smith wrote his foreword, and a tilt to late modernity, in his promotion of the knowledge economy and the moving of these industries into the policy mainstream. The desire to raise the awareness of these industries was largely political, in that it served to provide justification for the Labour Party's decision not to reverse the long-term decline in manufacturing industries to which, through its traditional supporters and links with the trades unions, it still had a nominal attachment (Flew 2012, p.14). Also, the replacing of the previous administration's Department of National Heritage with the Department for Culture, Media and Sport seemed to represent a generational shift from a Conservative government that was most interested in preserving the past to a New Labour government determined to embrace the cutting-edge industries of the future (Flew 2012, p.11; Hesmondhalgh 2005, p.104).

It is worth discussing Smith's foreword in some detail to ascertain what he and his department's vision was at that time. While there are the customary references to the importance of the creative industries to the economy and to developing young people's career opportunities in those industries, Smith viewed his department's remit in a much more ambitious way. His declaration that he wanted 'all businesses to think creatively' seemed to imply that the notion of creativity is central to all economic activity, not only that which occurs within the 13 designated industries (Smith 2001, p.3). Also, he wanted to give people better access to museums and galleries, partly through an online format that was developed at that time, *Culture Online* (Smith 2001, p.3). These two goals reflected a more comprehensive approach to the encouraging of creativity than the more instrumental route that was taken later in New Labour's term of office (an analysis of which will take up the second part of this paper). Apart from the *Culture Online* initiative, £40 million was to be allocated to the *Creative Partnerships* programme (an additional £70 million was announced in 2003 (Sharp *et al.* 2006, p.3)), which would facilitate engagement between teachers in schools and practitioners in the arts. While the more vocationally-focused development of a careers guidance booklet entitled *Your Creative Future* was the remaining proposed new programme, the emphasis was very much on creativity being developed in a holistic rather than instrumental way (Smith 2001, p.3) (2). Though *Creative Partnerships* was a schools' rather than HE programme, it would be useful at this point to discuss in some detail this early attempt at promoting the creative industries within the UK's education system.

### **Creative Partnerships**

As the name suggests, creativity was nominally central to the *Creative Partnerships* programme. Emanating from a 1999 National Advisory Committee on Creative and Cultural Education (NACCCE) report and launched in 2002, the programme endured beyond the New Labour's removal of office before finally being terminated in September 2011 (Creativity, Culture and

Education (CCE) 2012b). It is not entirely clear, though, what were the precise objectives of *Creative Partnerships*, with various government and other reports devoted to this scheme struggling both to define creativity and provide a convincing explanation for the implicit rebuke to teachers for their supposed inability to encourage creative thinking in their pupils. An example of this is the House of Commons Select Committee on Education and Skills report (2007, p.3) which answers its own question ('what is creativity?') with the following vague formulation: 'Policy-makers now appear agreed on a definition of creativity which goes beyond the expressive and aesthetic arts, and agree that in educational terms creativity should extend right across the curriculum'. While the DCMS 2001 green paper *Culture and Creativity, the Next Ten Years* highlighted the need for pupils to learn 'creative skills' its emphasis on culture and diversity suggests that this programme was more concerned with developing students' cultural awareness rather than their capacity for creativity; this might explain why the latter term is so nebulous in official documents (Sharp *et al.* 2006, p.2–3). The programme did, though, bring many workers from the cultural and creative sectors (6,483 organisations by 2009) into the classroom (CCE 2009, p.7). By the end of the programme, over 1 million students, 90,000 teachers and 8,000 projects had been involved (CCE 2012a). While references to preparing students for the workforce of the future suggest some instrumentality, most of the official reports on the *Creative Partnerships* focused on the positive impact on students' enthusiasm for schoolwork, the lowering of absenteeism, the slightly higher level of educational attainment (though not enough to suggest causality) and the development of team-working skills, initiative and self-confidence (Sharp *et al.* 2006; Ofsted 2006; House of Commons Select Committee on Education and Skills 2007; CCE 2009). Another, perhaps unintended, by-product of this programme was in its providing of stable work contracts for a large numbers of young creative industries professionals, a significant boost to a sector where labour is notoriously 'precarious' (CCE 2009, p.15; Neilson and Rossiter 2005).

Administered by the Arts Council England and largely funded by the DCMS, *Creative Partnerships* was perceived as being too biased towards the arts (House of Commons Select Committee on Education and Skills 2007). This would not have unduly concerned Chris Smith, the DCMS Secretary of State from 1997 to 2001, who in a speech in 2003 admitted that many of the arguments he made in office were intended solely to secure more money for the arts:

Spare a thought, however, for the poor old Minister, faced with the daunting task of getting the increased funding out of the Treasury to start with. The Treasury won't be interested in the intrinsic merits of nurturing beauty or fostering poetry or even "enhancing the quality of life". So I acknowledge unashamedly that when I was Secretary of State, going into what always seemed like a battle with the Treasury, I would try and touch the buttons that would work. I would talk about the educational value of what was being done. I would be passionate about artists working in schools. I would refer to the economic value that can be generated from creative and cultural activity. I would count the added numbers who would flock into a free museum. If it helped to get more funds flowing into the arts, the argument was worth deploying (Smith 2003).

Interestingly, the term creative industries is conspicuous by its absence in his speech. In a sense this was a clever strategy for a minister who wanted to secure more money for activities that sometimes do not appear to have a tangible economic output from an instrumentalist administration keen to promote the creative industries. It could be argued that the success of Smith's approach actually raised expectations about the creative industries that could not easily be met. Smith's own formulation that creativity was, or should be, evident in all economic activities made his department vulnerable to the charge that it was doing very little to ensure that

this was happening. Defining creativity in this way led to uncomfortable (for the DCMS at least) suggestions that the Design Council and the Royal Societies should become more involved in the *Creative Partnerships* so as to extend their remit decisively away from the arts (House of Commons Select Committee on Education and Skills 2007, p.25).

Academic critiques of the government's approach in the middle of the previous decade highlighted the dilemma for the arts and culture in this instrumentalist new world (Garnham 2005; Hesmondhalgh 2005; Hesmondhalgh & Pratt 2005; Pratt 2005). There is no doubt that in the short-term, the promotion of the creative industries enabled the DCMS to secure more funding for the arts, as suggested by Smith above. The projected increase in DCMS spending over the period 1999-2002 was £290 million (Humphreys 2000, p.234 cited Hesmondhalgh 2005, p.105), while spending on arts alone rose from £195 million in 1997 to £230 million in 2000-2001 (Toynbee & Walker 2001, p.66 cited Hesmondhalgh 2005, p.105). These increases were matched by progressive policies, like the free admission to national museums and art galleries. Paradoxically, though, these laudable social democratic policies took place within the wider context of an increasingly instrumentalist emphasis on promoting the (largely corporate) creative industries (Hesmondhalgh 2005, p. 105). Of course, Chris Smith and the subsequent DCMS Secretaries realised this, but exploited the opportunity it gave them in the short-term. Pratt (2005, p.33) argues that the DCMS's creative industries mapping documents of 1998 and 2001 were partly responsible for these rises as they gave the department economic credibility with the Treasury. This Faustian pact with the Treasury worked well for the DCMS for a while, but the logic of the creative industries approach was likely to be inimical to the arts over the long-term.

### ***The Cox Review (2005) and the Roberts report (2006)***

For most of Tessa Jowell's tenure as Secretary of State at the DCMS (2001-2007), her preoccupation with the Communications Act (2003) and the BBC Charter review (completed in 2006), left her little time to push the creative industries agenda (Schlesinger 2009, p.13). Into this vacuum stepped the Treasury, in the form of the *Cox Review* (Cox 2005) on creativity and business, which reported in December 2005. Led by chairman of the Design Council, Sir George Cox, the report went further than previous ones in giving more precise definitions of creativity, as well as innovation and design. It also tied the creative industries much more to the UK's global competitiveness and, in a radical departure from earlier formulations, recommended not only closer links between businesses and creative professionals, but also between universities and industry (Schlesinger 2007, p.380). Like Liam Byrne's later arguments cited at the beginning of this piece, especially where they relate to links between universities and industry, the rise of the BRICS nations, particularly India and China, were seen to pose a threat to Britain's global competitiveness (Schlesinger 2007: 379). (As reported at the beginning of this piece, Thomas Friedman's best-selling book *The World is Flat* made the same argument around this time in a US context). Also notable was the acknowledgement that the UK was not intrinsically more creative than other nations, a radical departure from existing policy with its implicit suggestion that other nations, notably the emerging economic powers, could concentrate on low-cost manufacturing while it did the creative and innovative stuff: 'it's dangerously complacent to think that the UK's creative capabilities are simply *an enduring national characteristic* [emphasis by Schlesinger]' (Cox 2005, p.13 cited Schlesinger 2007, p.281). The logic of acknowledging that the UK was not intrinsically more competitive than other nations led to questions about how greater competitiveness might be achieved. An answer can be found not

only in the measures outlined above, but additionally in the provision of, in the words of Schlesinger (2007 p.381), ‘university degree courses to produce new creative specialists.’

Around the same time that Cox was nearing the end of his report, Minister for Creative Industries and Tourism James Purnell argued that the UK should seek to become the ‘world’s creative hub’ and introduce initiatives in the education system to help the country reach this goal (Schlesinger 2007, p.383). This led to the government commissioning prominent education specialist Paul Roberts to write a report on creativity, which was published as *Nurturing Creativity in Young People* by the DCMS and (tellingly) The Department for Education and Skills (DES) in 2006 (Readman 2009, p.8). While the report references creative partnerships many times, its tenor is clearly more orientated to preparing students for the global marketplace. This included a call for apprenticeship programmes that could prepare young people for work in the creative industries, among which was proposed: ‘The development of a National Skills Academy co-financed by industry leaders and more closely aligned to business needs’ (Roberts 2006, p.59). As the report acknowledged this would build on existing programmes, like the then Minister for Culture David Lammy’s Creative Partnership Task Force and the Sector Skills Council’s apprenticeship pilot scheme (Roberts 2006, p.59). Schlesinger (2009, p.383) reports that this section was actually written by Tom Bewick, Chief Executive of Creative and Cultural Skills (one of the Sector Skills Councils mentioned in this piece). This signified a move towards an apprenticeship model, or what we might term a skills agenda that was embraced throughout government (see Margaret Hodge’s foreword to the DCMS’s 2008 report *Creative Britain* and the Arts Council’s endorsement of ‘Creative Apprenticeships’ and a ‘National Skills Academy’ (House of Commons Select Committee on Education and Skills 2007, Evidence 2). Garnham’s (2005, p.27) critique of the creative industries prefigured this in its argument that this demand for more publicly-funded training schemes came not only from government but from people in the cultural sector and ‘arts college lobby’ too. In the next section, the authors will look at the case of the teaching of media and communication studies (3) in universities as a means of analysing how this decisive move towards a more skills-based form of education has impacted on the teaching of the arts and the humanities in the tertiary sector. Although for years there have been long-running journalism training programmes in higher education accredited by the NCTJ, in this paper we are more concerned with the institutionalising of vocationalism in media and communication departments rather than the existence of discrete programmes (for example, animation). This institutionalisation has been manifest in departments’ joining Skillset Media Academies (as part of the SMAN run by Creative Skillset), which is what we will mainly focus on from hereon in. The broader implications of this vocational turn for the REF (Research Excellence Framework) specifically, and research and teaching of media and communications in universities generally, will also be considered by the authors. There we will consider the 2008 RAE results for the subject unit of assessment, and ask a set of questions pertaining to the institutional relationship between practice and research. For example, we will ask whether the three universities that had SMAN status at the time of the 2008 RAE were able to gain any advantage in the quality of their research by virtue of their association with Creative Skillset at the time, perhaps by way of greater access to industry.

### **Debating media and communication education**

At stake here is the very question of what media and communication studies education is for. Arguments that the teaching agendas of universities be subservient to the creative industries are made strongly by van Raalte *et al.* (2013). Focusing, albeit, on vocational education, their report

argues unambiguously that it is universities that must acquiesce to the demands of the market. From their review of the literature, they suggest that (van Raalte *et al.* 2013, p.5):

Higher Education has a key role to play in narrowing the skills gap, but to do so it needs to keep pace with industry. Universities and industry need to collaborate in order to ensure they effectively prepare graduates for careers in the digital creative industries.

Among the seven recommendations in their report (4), they suggest that there should be a ‘Change [in] the culture of the academy at all levels to support and foster creativity and entrepreneurialism’ and that the field must ‘Keep pace with industry practices, ideally moving into a position to lead change and development’ (van Raalte *et al.* 2013, p.48). While the latter recommendation suggests that universities might be able to gain the initiative, the burden of responsibility might be said to lie with universities to provide graduates with the ‘core attributes that underpin success’ (van Raalte *et al.* 2013, p.21), including, ‘An entrepreneurial attitude: characterised as passion, focus, guts, risk-taking, originality, a pioneering spirit’ (van Raalte *et al.* 2013, p.23). It is worth relaying an extended quotation that relates to how the group understands entrepreneurship, derived from their research among practitioners in the digital creative industries (van Raalte *et al.* 2013, pp.24–25):

On the topic of entrepreneurship, there was a general consensus that, while the passion and drive that characterizes most entrepreneurs may be innate, Universities could give digital creative students a stronger foundation in terms of business skills and commercial awareness. It was also felt that an entrepreneurial attitude could be fostered and developed within Higher Education, by rewarding innovative thinking and risk taking – which is not currently the case within many curricular and assessment regimes.

Note firstly the ambiguous concept that ‘passion and drive’ might be ‘innate’ (van Raalte *et al.* 2013, p.24), but that the teaching of business skills might help level the playing field. However, innateness is apparently not a problem when it comes to the fostering of an ‘entrepreneurial attitude’ (van Raalte *et al.* 2013, p.25) through changes to teaching and assessment. Here – as is often the case when the language of the market is evoked – what is lacking in current teaching regimes is that higher education has not been market sensitive enough, and that it needs to make changes to further develop business skills. Thus the role educators should play and the overall purpose of the discipline should both gear graduates towards becoming market ready – students one day and workers in the creative industries the next. In this conceptualisation, what role universities have beyond supplying the market the labour it needs is unclear.

While van Raalte and colleagues talk of vocational education, as we note above, the ramifications of this approach are clearly to be seen throughout the academy in media and communication departments. Indeed, many UK departments in the field appear mixed between having vocational and critical elements, with few departments aiming to focus solely on one or the other. As we outline below, three of the ten highest ranked submissions by research quality, based on the results of the 2008 RAE Unit of Assessment 66 (excluding Leicester B: Museum Studies) were mainly from departments that had Skillset Media Academy Network status at that point. Myriad proclamations from industry, think tanks and government organisations promote the skills agenda, where preparation for the market trumps conventional views of critical academic training. For example, Chris van der Kuyl, then Chief Executive of brightsolid (an Internet company based in Scotland) is quoted in a Universities UK – the largest umbrella group of universities in the UK – report as arguing: ‘It is my belief that by fostering relationships



between business and academic institutions we can ensure that graduates leave university with the necessary skills to make their mark on the business world' (van der Kuyl cited Universities UK 2010, p.v). Moreover, Stuart Cosgrove, Director of Creative Diversity, Channel 4, has argued, 'Higher education can play a crucial role in innovation in the creative industries by pioneering and delivering courses, opportunities and research that are truly connected to the changing nature of creativity' (Cosgrove cited Universities UK 2010, p.iii). For van der Kuyl and Cosgrove, higher education institutions (HEIs), such as media and communication studies departments, are ideal partners to produce the type of *industry ready graduates* that the market desires. Here the ability to design a mobile phone app or to direct a 30-minute documentary is on the surface a more attractive prospect to employers than to be able to engage in a sustained theory-based 5,000-word critique. This is, of course, an overtly narrow view. Is the 'changing nature of creativity' (Cosgrove cited Universities UK 2010, p.iii) adequately served by the teaching of skills that can quickly go out of date? We question whether it is and, yet, it is the employability agenda (which we might think of as education solely to ensure employment and further economic development) closely tied to the skills agenda that is consistently winning through. For Creative Skillset (2011, p.5), the 'Mismatch of applicants' skills to the needs of the job is a common issue raised by employers'. They note that their own media (and film) academy networks are helping to change this situation, and as a result the 'The "fit" between course and what might be expected in the workplace is tighter and employers are thus more confident about what they will get from these institutions and courses' (Creative Skillset 2011, p.5).

If the recent views of bodies like Creative Skillset and of academics like van Raalte and colleagues are becoming dominant in the discourse surrounding media and communication studies, it is worth noting that this has been a longstanding problem. As Berger and McDougall outline (2012, p.7):

despite the fact that media courses have been in existence in further and higher education since the 1970s, it has always been thought of as something to 'prepare' students to work in a particular field; discourses of utility and employability have always surrounded the subject area; the employability (or not) of media graduates is the stick used to beat us, time-and-time again.

There is a sense in which many both inside and outside the academy (often including those within media and communication departments themselves) do not support the field if it is alone a theory-based intellectual pursuit, where students and intellectuals ask important questions regarding the social, cultural, political and economic role of media in society, questions that draw on traditions from sociology, political theory, philosophy, history, economics and literary theory among others. Indeed, defending media and communication studies as an intellectual discipline is important, if the wider debate regarding the skills agenda is to be influenced. In his polemical (and wide-reaching) defence of the discipline, Curran (2013) surveys modules from degree courses at Cardiff and Sussex universities, and argues for the complex and intellectually rigorous nature of media studies degrees from these types of institutions:

Most of these courses ... examine the media as a way of illuminating particular aspects of society. This requires students to assimilate different areas of knowledge, and to make sense of different disciplines with distinctive technical terms and referents. Far from being a soft option, this is enormously demanding.

Curran's assessment is indeed perceptive, and his wider approach to the subject is a reminder that we ought to think broadly in our approach to both teaching and research. For

example, Curran (1991, p.27) argued in an earlier piece that ‘historical research – the neglected grandparent of media studies – can contribute to the debate about the role of the media in liberal democracies.’ When historical questions are asked, key political issues are raised in relation to wider society and the economy. These are issues that can come into direct conflict with the broader sense in which media and communication studies departments are being encouraged to pursue the skills agenda, and are being beaten by Berger and McDougall’s (2012) employability stick. When questioning why we should study the media, Fenton (2011a) discusses the role of media [and communication] studies in questioning the legitimacy and role of neo-liberalism in politics, and the failure of liberal democracy to limit its spread (cf. Fenton & Titley 2013). Fenton (2011a) suggests, ‘This new grand narrative—the way we think of our world—has sought to abandon the social for the economic ... One pressing point of media studies is to expose the fact that neo-liberal democracy has failed in critical ways’. Her contention is that media studies ought to have a political dimension, with the reinvigorated political-economy of media approach seemingly corroborating her position (cf. Fuchs 2011; Fuchs & Mosco 2012). The disjuncture between this and the prevailing Skillset agenda is large, but we contend that a discussion needs to ensue of how education for creativity and innovation need not narrowly pursue the skills agenda as encompassed by the SMAN. Indeed, from what theoretical and political standpoint can we begin if we want to be critical of the skills agenda? Should we not turn to established media and communication arguments that aim to critique social and economic structures when addressing our own discipline? Arguments for the theory-based media and communication studies approach – shown here in Fenton and Curran’s work, although numerous other examples could be cited – need to be reinstated and efforts redoubled in its defence, lest the tradition go into serious decline under the pressure to deliver degrees that are largely or solely skills based.

### **Actualising the skills agenda: the Skillset Media Academy Network**

Under the New Labour government, a clear strategy to tie higher education tightly to the creative industries was pursued, so as to steer university degree courses towards the teaching of particular skills suitable for the creative industries, and through the increasing involvement of industry in course development and validation. This might be termed the skills agenda, and while the concept has wider traction throughout the UK economy (Evans 2011; CBI/NUS 2011), we will continue to focus on how this relates to media and communication studies. As part of the UK government’s approach to digital media literacy, and within the remit of Creative Skillset (one of two ‘sector skills councils’ (DCMS 2009, p.21)), the New Labour government established the SMAN in 2007. The network had the express purpose of bringing ‘colleges and universities to work with industry in developing a new wave of talent to create the “Facebook”, “You Tube” and “Bebo” style concepts and media content of the future’ (Creative Skillset, 2007). The SMAN was formed with the express purpose of linking the creative potential of university media and communication departments and their graduates to economic development. This was set out in very clear terms by Creative Skillset, that argued that the network would “‘hardwire” collaborative partnerships between the media industries and academia’ (Creative Skillset 2007). Part of the wider Creative Skillset Academy Network (that includes film academies), the network was initially comprised of seventeen Skillset Media Academies. (In June 2013, as we were conducting our study, Creative Skillset ceased granting SMAN accreditation for institutions in favour of accrediting individual courses (Churcher 2013)) (5). At the end point of the SMAN, there were twenty-three Skillset Media Academies (five in London; two in the Midlands; four in the North of England; six in the South of England; six in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland,

as based on Creative Skillset's own geographical descriptors). These academies varied between being single institution academies, where only one HEI is involved (for example, Central Saint Martins Skillset Media Academy) and being comprised of multiple institutions (for example, Creative Loop Skillset Media Academy in Scotland, comprising six offering a mix of further and higher education) (6).

In a publication written four years after the launch, Creative Skillset (2011, p.66) noted that 'Engagement between HE and the Creative Media industries is crucial and there is scope for further development as 81% of universities in England identified the creative industries as a target sector for external engagement.' These academies were described as 'centres of excellence in television and interactive media' (Creative Skillset 2013a), and as providing 'an answer to industry need for fresh talent and innovation, and set new standards in higher education for the design and delivery of practice-based courses' (Creative Skillset 2013b). Universities UK (2010, p.39) noted that the 'model is based on accessibility, flexibility, adaptability, integration and responsiveness to address the needs of a fast-paced, digitally-enhanced industry.' While Creative Skillset was retained by the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government following its election in 2010, Flew (2012, p.31) argues that (in relation to the coalition's response to the Browne Report) that 'they are not convinced by creative industries arguments that claim to put the arts and the sciences on an equal footing in terms of their contributions to national well-being'. The decision to remove the block teaching grant from the arts, humanities and social sciences (Collini 2012) is evidence of this, and it has been noted by Fenton (2011b, p.103) that this change, along with others, 'will have a massive impact on universities in general and on teaching in particular as we see a decisive move away from the notion of the university as a public good of necessary general benefit to society'. While it is true to say that the New Labour government had announced planned savings and cuts to the higher education budget totaling around £1 billion only months before the Coalition government came to power, unlike the latter's approach, these would have affected the hard sciences as much as the arts, humanities and social sciences (7).

Along with setting standards, it might be said that the SMAN existed as much to market courses and recruit students, and through the marketing of individual courses continues to do so through the Pick the Tick accreditation system (which survived the June 2013 cutting of the academy network). This is described as a 'kitemark of quality' (Creative Skillset 2013c), and appears throughout Creative Skillset online publications. That Creative Skillset uses the concept and the language of the kitemark is interesting. In the UK, the British Standards Institution awards the iconic kitemark to compliant products as 'the symbol that gives consumers the assurance that the product they have bought really does conform to the appropriate British Standard and should therefore be safe and reliable' (BSI Education 2013). In a marketised HE environment, when students in media and communication studies degrees pick the tick, this gives consumers [students] the assurance that the product [degree] they have bought really does conform to the appropriate creative industries standards. To achieve this, the onus is placed solely on industry as the final arbiters of what the involved universities should be teaching: 'For a course or apprenticeship to be awarded the Creative Skillset Tick, you can be sure that it has undergone a rigorous assessment process conducted by experts working in the Creative Industries' (Creative Skillset 2013c). Here the implication is that media and communication studies degree courses only have validity if their content has been checked by industry, with the market carefully working to shape the types of graduates that it seeks; in other words, those courses that have the tick. Indeed, this is consistent with the *raison d'être* for the SMAN, which

in a structural sense placed the needs of industry at the heart of media education (Creative Skillset 2013d):

The focus can no longer be about 'Education', on the one hand, and 'Industry-led demand for Skills' on the other - the infrastructure for a more holistic approach is needed and the Skillset Academy Network model is delivering that vision.

In this model, media education that operates alone as an independent and theory-based subject is no longer legitimate, where it does not provide links for students with industry, develop skills that the creative industries supposedly require, and produce graduates who boast not only a degree, but a kite marked degree. Furthermore, while industry dictated the content of degrees through the gaining and maintenance of SMAN status (Creative Skillset 2013e), this model also placed the student-consumer at the centre of the approach, whereby the student is encouraged to pick the degree course that will best suit the particular (and often very narrow) sector they wish to enter. This is taken to the natural endpoint with the 'Build your own MA' initiative (another innovation that survived beyond June 2013), whereby students can construct a post-graduate degree by studying various modules across a range of institutions (Creative Skillset 2013f). In a sense, Build your own MA takes the SMAN model within a marketised HE environment to its natural endpoint. Here the student is at the centre of the concept of the student experience (8), constructing an MA out of modules offered by different providers, gaining the skills from the institutions they perceive to be most attractive. If the student-citizen is now the student-consumer, the Build your own MA is an innovative and brilliant concept. If in normative terms one holds to the idea that the student ought not solely to be at the centre of the education process, and that academics still have something to offer, then Creative Skillset's innovation marks a watershed moment for ill in media and communication studies education.

In terms of the wider implications of the SMAN on the teaching of media and communication across the UK, it is useful to compare the list of universities that had SMAN involvement with the results of the 2008 RAE Unit of Assessment 66 – Communication, Cultural and Media Studies (9). Allowing for the anomaly that the top ranked unit was 'Leicester B: Museum Studies' (Guardian 2008), of the ten highest ranked submissions from media departments, only Goldsmiths, University of London, the University of Westminster and the University of Ulster had SMAN status at that point. Also in the ten highest ranked institutions, Nottingham Trent University later gained SMAN status in 2009) (Nottingham Trent University, 2009), while Cardiff University was a member of the Media Academy Wales between 2009 and 2010. The remaining five departments that comprised the main part of RAE submissions from, University of East Anglia, LSE, University of East London, University of Sussex, Royal Holloway, University of London, were not linked to the SMAN (10). It is unclear what inferences, if any, can be drawn from this information: earlier in this article we noted that one question that could be asked was if the three universities that had SMAN status at the time of the 2008 RAE were able to gain any advantage in the quality of their research by virtue of their association with Creative Skillset at the time, perhaps by way of greater access to industry? Empirical research may be required to revisit those submissions by interviewing those involved with their composition. Were the seven universities in the top ten media submissions that lacked SMAN status at the 2008 RAE there in part by virtue of their non-SMAN status, giving academic staff in those departments more time to focus on their research? What can research-active staff gain from working in departments alongside practitioner colleagues, and what about those who fulfill both roles (for example, the strong critical tradition of those active in both the

theory and practice of documentary film)? Does SMAN status boost research output and quality over a six-year period (this time period chosen as the figures of the 2008 RAE could be compared with the 2014 REF upon completion)? Such questions could only be answered by additional empirical research, and while we do not answer them in this article, they are worthy of the attention of future research. Moreover, could it not be argued from a strategic point-of-view that a favourable REF result alone will bring significant additional funding into the department or school?

Despite this, discussing the SMAN in relation to research is important. Universities can ultimately be judged by the quality of their research, and it is the production of knowledge rather than its dissemination alone that sets universities apart from other sectors. Moreover, is it not the case that the SMAN status would have been further boosted by that department also rating highly in terms of research? It is important to note here that Creative Skillset does not try to justify its status regarding the quality of the degrees it kitemarks with reference to the quality of research at its partner universities. The overall approach is on industry accreditation and the acquiring of skills, while research is mentioned in passing. Thus, while Goldsmiths was ranked as the media department with the third best RAE submission in 2008, Creative Skillset's website for the Goldsmiths Skillset Media Academy only briefly mentioned that the postgraduate courses are 'embedded in a rich, high-rated University research environment' (Creative Skillset 2013g). Similarly, the Creative Skillset webpage for the University of Westminster – the highest ranked media department in the 2008 RAE – briefly mentioned that the department has 'a strong international reputation for research and scholarship in media' (Creative Skillset 2013h). This tenuous relationship with research goes to underline the lack of focus on research that Creative Skillset has. That the SMAN was solely about industry engagement, providing the market the skills it needs and advancing the skills agenda in education more broadly, was shown clearly in this regard. While this is not contrary to what is claimed by Creative Skillset, it does show the shifting of influence away from research.

### ***Managing expectations: what do our graduates expect?***

In this final section we contend that the wider environment of engagement with industry, the pursuit of employability and the teaching of skills needs to be addressed, both with reference to other subjects and also with reference to the job market for media and communication graduates itself. Returning to Berger and McDougall (2012, pp.8–9), they suggest that media and communication studies is in some senses treated in a way that differs from other similar subjects with regards to the employment opportunities that graduates gain:

While it is perhaps true that our subject area is more industry facing than many others taught in universities, the fact remains that English Literature programmes are not considered to be inadequate if their graduates do not become novelists, poets or dramatists. Similarly does a politics graduate who does not become a councillor, MP or lobbyist feel that they have been short-changed?

In this sense, there is a point here about *expectations*. Do we engender in our students the expectation that a degree in media and communication studies will necessarily lead on to a career in the creative industries? Berger and McDougall's point about English and Politics graduates is perceptive, and yet similar arguments within media and communication studies are in short supply. While the publishing of the career destinations of graduates can go some way towards establishing realistic expectations on the part of future graduates entering the labour market, it

should also be incumbent on university departments that are selling the prospect of a degree that will allow the student to work in the creative industries to be clear on what the graduate will find when they get there. Issues surrounding the precarity of labour in the creative industries, the number of hours that one is expected to work, and the paucity of pay for many workers at the entry-level must become part of the story that universities tell if they are to retain any adherence to the values of the public sector from whence they came. To be sure, there is adequate research that can be drawn on when establishing this point. Some of this, like the 2009 figures which showed that 62% of workers in the creative industries earn less than £20,000 per year, come from *Creative & Cultural Skills* itself (Oakley 2011, p.285). Two years later, the same organisation reported in *The Qualifications Blueprint* that ‘Only 28% of people working in the creative and cultural industries are qualified to the appropriate level for the requirements of their job, the majority being overqualified for the specification of their roles’ (Creative & Cultural Skills 2011, p.5). While this figure may reflect those who have also achieved masters or doctoral level qualifications, those 72 per cent of people working in the creative (and cultural) industries who are overqualified – presumably they are mainly graduates – must rightly wonder why they pursued a degree in the first place. Rather than being overqualified, one could have entered the sector (three years) earlier and have gained a start over many of their peers. Without placing undue reliance on this one statistic, it does pose a serious question to those agencies and individuals who suggest that students must pick the tick if they are to get an acceptable degree, validated by industry. Must the skills agenda and employability agenda govern media and communication studies education where it relates to innovation, when the research suggests that in the UK you might well end up doing a job that will leave you as one of the 72 per cent overqualified?

## **Conclusion**

Earlier in the article, we asked if the changing nature of creativity was adequately served by the teaching of skills that can quickly go out of date? As a concluding point, some further reflections are required on this. It is necessary to note that it would be possible for media and communication departments in the UK to be at the cutting-edge of media technology and the teaching of skills. Indeed, this is the case for many other vocational subject disciplines, such as medicine, where universities need to be at least at pace with developments outside of the academy. But media and communication studies is a vastly distinct area to those vocational degrees that we are mentioning here, and should be treated as such. This is necessary to deal with the counter argument that could be mounted to the effect of, *why* teach skills in any subject at university, if they will be quickly out of date and industry could themselves do the work? The point here is about vocation itself, career paths and the responsibility of employers to their graduates. Take nursing in the UK as an example, a subject which has recently become exclusively graduate-only, but which has for many years been dominated by those who trained at university rather than through the previous system of ward training. During their degree course, nursing students will be taught a range of essential skills necessary for the caring of patients and the administration of medicine etc. These skills are taught first in the university classroom, and augmented through extensive time spent on placements. However, when the graduate nurse enters the workforce, he or she will carry on a lifetime of training within their post, as they gain certificates linked to the learning of skills as they change and develop within the profession. These are essential to staying in a post, and retaining one’s professional registration. Here the

employer provides a regime of continual training, whether NHS or private, knowing that the regulator demands it, and ensures that the workforce is equipped to the demands of the profession. Degree courses are validated on the basis that the university is providing a particular skill set, to meet a narrowly defined profession. Within the creative industries, the picture is very different. The industry may train to the requirements of the project, where employees are permanent employees, or simply hire new contract workers to suit the job. The employer has no ultimate responsibility to train employees, except in the rudiments of health and safety etc. (Athique 2013, p.182). There are very few narrowly defined professions that necessitate a validated university training, requiring the graduate to come to the workplace with specific technical skills that can only be learned in the academy.

As Neilson and Rossiter (2005) have demonstrated, employment in the creative industries is characterized by its precarious nature, and the fact that only 1 in 10 people in these industries earn more than £41,000 per year (Creative & Cultural Skills, 2009 cited Oakley 2011, p.285) means that there are very few who can make enough money in the good times to tide them over in leaner periods, let alone pay for their own training. Therefore, any opportunity to secure more stable terms of employment is likely to be grabbed with both hands by creative professionals. In addition to this burden on creative professionals in their post-higher education life, the observation above that universities are increasingly taking the place of employers with regards to industry training is a trend which, as we have argued throughout, we also find deeply problematic. While all this reinforces our general criticisms of the skills agenda, paradoxically it also highlights a positive, albeit unintended, benefit of having more vocational programmes in universities. As stated earlier, one of the benefits of the Creative Partnerships programme in the UK's schools was that it provided employment and new experiences for creative workers (in all, 6,483 creative organisations were involved in this Creative Partnerships programme in the period 2002—2009 (CCE 2009, p.7)). As the reviews of this programme noted, this provided a substantial amount of stable employment for creative professionals. While the proliferation of the type of university courses that this paper has discussed is likely to run the risk of creating more creative professionals than a post-global crisis economy can absorb, those courses are creating employment themselves. While we do not have the relevant figures to hand, we note that even in a recession universities are continuing to employ a rising number of creative professionals (often at the expense of academics) to teach these courses. As well as providing a relatively secure and non-precarious working environment, these universities will also provide the kind of training that creative professionals so desperately need. Would it not be ironic, then, if the main benefit of the skills-based media courses in universities were to be to prepare students not for the brave new world of the creative industries but for employment on those self-same courses?

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## Notes

1. The authors are aware of the teaching of vocational skills in higher education in sub-sectors of the creative industries like animation and journalism, but are mainly concerned with the institutionalising of vocationalism within media and communication programmes rather than discrete courses. The categories that we refer to here are the sectors that the UK's Department of Culture, Media and Sport now measures creative industries within, which are slightly reformatted as compared to the thirteen sectors set out in 2001.
2. Judging by its website, *Your Creative Future* was hardly the most ambitious approach to inspiring young people to consider a career in the creative industries. (See: <http://www.yourcreativefuture.org.uk/>).
3. We use the collective term media and communication studies as a catchall for media studies, communication studies, film studies, cultural studies and Internet studies, along with the many competing and complementary disciplines that feed into contemporary teaching and research in the field.
4. '1. Change the culture of the academy at all levels to support and foster creativity and entrepreneurialism allowing students to see long-term success from short-term failure; 2. Adapt the culture of the academy to better engage with industry; 3. Keep pace with industry practices, ideally moving into a position to lead change and development; 4. Teach students a balance of conceptual thinking and practical skills aimed at both entry level jobs and long-term employability, including such skills as communication and teamwork; 5. Explore and learn from existing best practice models of collaboration; 6. Promote better mutual understanding between industry and higher education. 7. Initiate, invest in and develop stronger working relationships with industry' (van Raalte *et al.* 2013, p.48).
5. The Creative Skillset Film Academy Network remains in place, though it is not of concern to us in this article. A reorganisation of the Creative Skillset website took place in July 2013 (Churcher 2013), and thus the URLs we reference in this article predate this change.
6. Our focus in this article is on HE and hence, while acknowledging the importance of the FE sector in relation to Skillset, we will not be discussing its role here.
7. For an illustration of the difference between New Labour's planned funding cuts in higher education and the Coalition's, see the chief executive of the Royal Society of Chemistry Dr Richard Pike's criticism of the former's unwillingness to favour the hard sciences; no doubt Pike was delighted by the new approach of the incoming Coalition government (Shepherd 2010).
8. Lord Browne's (2010, p.10) report on the future of the funding of higher education notes that in a marketised environment, 'providing a high quality student experience is critical.' This is seen as preferable to a graduate tax model within which, for Browne, 'Student experience does not matter to HEI for raising funding' (Browne 2010, p.10).
9. The RAE was the now defunct Research Assessment Exercise that ranked all university departments based on research quality. It has subsequently been replaced by the Research Excellence Framework.
10. The University of East Anglia has one Skillset accredited course, MA Creative Writing: Scriptwriting, but it is offered by the School of Literature, Drama and Creative Writing which did not come under the 2008 RAE Unit of Assessment 66. This is an indication of the fact that there is not in every case a precise fit



between departments and RAE submissions. A broader discussion here could encompass discussing those institutions that fell outside the ten highest ranked submissions, and also focus on other issues such as student satisfaction as recorded in the National Student Survey. We would like to thank one of the anonymous reviewers for making this point.

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