

Preparing for Work in the Film, Media and Cultural Industries Discussions and Tasks for Tutors and Students

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Introduction

The past few years have seen increasing attention drawn to the issue of ‘employability’ within higher education. The overriding idea that seems to have emanated from this issue is that HEIs need to work more with professional industries to ensure that their graduating students possess the skills and knowledge that industries require. What has been less discussed within this area is what ‘employability’ means and what should the role be of higher education institutions (HEIs) within this employability agenda. What has also been missing from this discussion are the ideas and thoughts of students themselves. As the people who are supposedly entering into the workforce, what do they themselves think they require so that they feel that they are fully prepared to transition from study to work? It is within this debate that the project, *Nice Work if You Can Get It! Preparing for Work in the Film, Media and Cultural Industries* was devised.

Focusing on work within the arts and media industries, this project sought to examine what employability meant within the industry where much of the work available in these sectors is short-term, precarious and contract-based. How do ‘traditional’ expectations of work based on a stable, long-term

career progression function within these industries and if they don’t, then how to better prepare students for work in these sectors? If much of the work offered in the industry is through informal networks, what roles do resumes and cover letters play? The thorny issue of often unpaid work experience and internships as a necessary entry route into the industry also requires unpacking in terms of inequality of access and the expectations from HEIs, the sector and students.

This booklet is the culmination of a project that brought together tutors from arts and media programmes within Birkbeck’s Department of Film, Media and Cultural Studies, students from the various programmes offered within this department as well as professionals working within the arts and media sectors. Sharing their thoughts on the fore-mentioned issues over a roundtable discussion, all three groups worked together to share their ideas on how to develop a curriculum that would take into account the changing nature of work in this sector. This was followed up with a workshop where students and tutors worked out what the aims and outcomes of this curriculum should contain, devising exercises and topics that the students felt were missing

from the current experience on the discussion on 'employability'. This booklet thus presents the curriculum that was created along with the activities that students undertook to prepare themselves for work in the film, media and cultural industries.

What needs to be made clear is that this booklet is not meant to guarantee that students will find a job the moment they have completed the exercises that follow. It quickly became clear during discussions that many industry professionals felt that HEIs had an important role in providing a space for students to critically examine and reflect on why they wanted to pursue a career in the arts and media. In short, a valuable aspect of this curriculum was offering a space to question what a critical arts and media education should entail. For many, if not all of the students, this curriculum created opportunities for them to evaluate, understand and hopefully be able to start navigating a path within a sector that seemed opaque and confusing in terms of entry points. This booklet is also not meant to provide a substitution to broad-based careers advice that many HEIs now offer but instead seeks to provide an addition to careers advice by providing exercises that would enable students to make informed decisions about their chosen career so as to be better able to leverage upon the help that is provided by careers advice.

These exercises are designed so that they can be led by a tutor for a group of students which is how the first iteration of this curriculum took place. However,

students who are interested can also choose to complete these suggested tasks on their own or with a group of their fellow students if they wish too. I hope that you will find the suggested tasks helpful in preparing your students (or yourself!) for work in the film, media and cultural industries. I would also like to take the opportunity to thank all the participants in this project as well as the Higher Education Academy in making this project a reality.

Theme 1:

WHAT'S MY IDENTITY?

Work in the arts and media sectors is closely linked to one's personal interest and largely dependent on self-branding and self-promotion. There is a need therefore for students to think about the similarities and differences between their personal and professional lives. This is particularly important where professional rejection and failure can feel personal. There is also a need for them to gain an understanding of how work in the sectors can complement or contradict the way one presents and organises oneself. The exercises in this section are meant to encourage self-reflection on one's current personal and professional identity. The key outcomes of this session are firstly for students to be able to identify, adapt and change their communication styles and skills and secondly, for them to evaluate how to manage rejection, personal expectations and professional development.



SUGGESTED DISCUSSION STARTING POINTS

- What aspects of my personality make me particularly suited for work in my chosen sector?
- How would I describe my communication style? How can I bring my ideas across clearly and professionally?
- What does 'success' mean to me?
- How can I handle rejection and failure?
- What are my personal expectations and do they differ from my professional expectations?



SUGGESTED KEY TASKS

- Develop a 50 word pitch and evaluate the pitch. Identify the areas that I need to work on to further develop my pitch so that it accurately reflects both my professional goals and provides an idea of what type of person I am.
- If working with a group of students, get students to evaluate and highlight good and bad examples of practice with each other's pitch.
- Make a list of your skills and competencies from your home, work and social life. Examine if these skills and competencies overlap between your personal and professional life.

Theme 2:

WHAT DOES 'WORK' MEAN?

One of the key issues that arose from the development of this curriculum was the need to develop tools that would allow students to orientate and navigate themselves in their chosen sector. As a large industry with jobs ranging from start-ups to major multinational companies, the variety on offer was often bewildering. These exercises are meant to provide students with a way to orientate themselves within their sector so as to be able to develop a personal strategy to enable them to begin to think about how to develop a career in the arts and media sector. The key outcomes of this session are that students are able to evaluate what they need to consider when wanting to develop a career in their chosen sector as well as creating a realistic and feasible short-term and long-term career plan.



SUGGESTED DISCUSSION STARTING POINTS

- What are the types of jobs available in my sector?
- What kind of skills, knowledge and experience are needed in the role that I want?
- What are the challenges that I need to consider or overcome to obtain this role?
- Why do I want to work in this particular role and what are the other routes (in other sectors) that would enable me to obtain this role?
- How does my chosen sector inter-relate with other industries outside of the arts and media sector?



SUGGESTED KEY TASKS

- Produce a written report on a specific industry examining the various roles in the industry and the types of employment available within this industry
- Create a personal career development strategy by putting together a list of check-points so as to produce both a short-term and long-term plan of their career development.
- Identify the 'gaps' in their personal career development strategy and potential ways in which to address these gaps.

Theme 3:

AM I THE ONLY PERSON EXPERIENCING THIS?

Due to the structure of work in the sector there is a prevalence of project work that is often short-term and contract-based. This means that work in the sector tends to be ‘individualised’ which can lead to many people working in the industry to simultaneously feel both ‘networked’ and yet ‘alone’ in their day-to-day work. The exercises in this section aim to provide a space to critically examine the forms of employment available in the sector and the key issues that need to be considered when undertaking a particular form of employment. Exercises in this section also seek to allow for reflection on the need for creating or tapping into different networks for support and collaborative action and employment. The key outcomes for this session are for students to be able to articulate the differences between forms of employment as well demonstrate a knowledge of the different professional and support networks that are available within their chosen sector.



SUGGESTED DISCUSSION STARTING POINTS

- What does self-employment mean?
- Do I understand the similarities and differences between contract work and commissioned work?
- What are the established networks that I can tap into such as professional unions or peer networks?
- How do these networks operate in relation to jobs and forms of employment?
- What are various (individual, collective and collaborative) ways in which I can share my experiences of work with other people in the sector?



SUGGESTED KEY TASKS

- Make a list of established networks that are relevant to the work that you wish to do or the sector that you wish to work in; identify what kind of support these networks provide.
- Examine how jobs are advertised across various online and off-line platforms; identify what are the professional networks that advertise the roles that you’re looking for

Theme 4:

HOW DO I GET TO WHERE I WANT TO BE?

In a sector where ‘overnight success’ stories are often presented, there is a need to prepare students to take a long-term view of career development and manage their expectations of the length of time and the work needed to achieve their goals in their career. The exercises in this section are thus meant to allow students to map the various routes and opportunities available for career development. The key outcomes of this session are for students to be aware of the different entry routes into their chosen career and also allow for them to manage their expectations on career progression in their chosen sector based on their current and future skills, knowledge and experience.



SUGGESTED DISCUSSION STARTING POINTS

- Consider the different routes, opportunities and possibilities to achieve your dream job. Can your route start in a different industry?
- What are the different levels of skills, experiences, knowledge needed in different positions within an industry?
- What would your ideal career progression time-line be?



SUGGESTED KEY TASKS

- Interview a chosen professional who is currently working in a role that you would like to be in within your chosen sector; the interview should focus on how your interview subject started out in their career and their progression
- Examine 2-3 job advertisements ranging from junior to senior positions to identify the different levels of skills, experience and knowledge needed at each level
- Make a time-line of your career development and compare that with the personal career development strategy developed in Theme 2.

Theme 5:

WHAT KIND OF PREPARATION DO I NEED?

While students are able to clearly articulate their passions and their desire for work in these sectors, it can be difficult for them sometimes to identify potential scenarios where informal recruitment can take place and how to present themselves in a positive light in these scenarios. In a sector where work is seen as ‘informal’ and ‘creative’ and where the work culture can seem very much of a lifestyle, the line between a formal job interview and an informal one is constantly shifting. The exercises in this session are thus meant to allow students to think about the different ways formal and informal recruitment can take place as well as the potential questions and tasks that can arise from these scenarios. The key outcome of these sessions are for students to be able to identify scenarios and tasks that are prevalent in the recruitment processes in the sector as well as being able to evaluate and determine appropriate responses, behaviours and preparation need to navigate the recruitment process.



SUGGESTED DISCUSSION STARTING POINTS

- Is it possible to work out when informal recruitment is taking place?
- What are the key ideas or impression about yourself or your project that you would like to get across in a potential recruitment scenario?
- What kind of preparation is needed to allow you to prepare for a formal recruitment situation?
- Are there appropriate ways to respond and behave at a formal and informal recruitment situation? What are the similarities and differences?

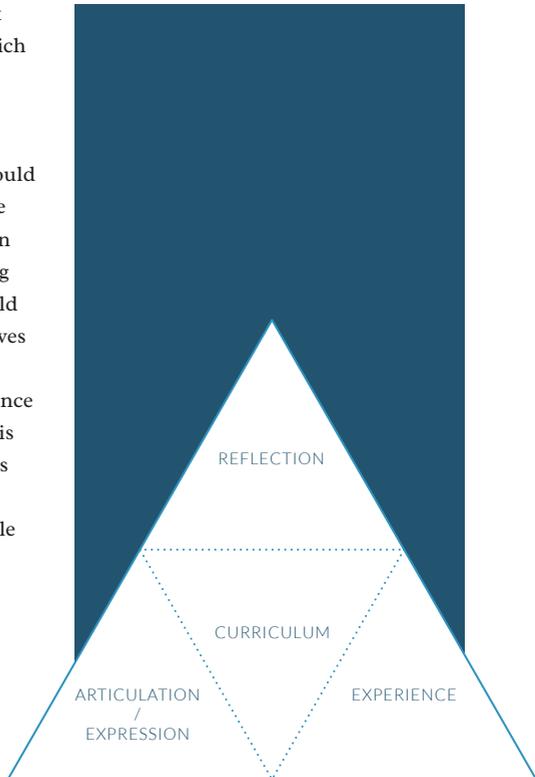


SUGGESTED KEY TASKS

- Make a list of potential situations and questions that can arise where recruitment, both formal and informal, can take place.
- Take turns questioning and providing answers to some of the suggested recruitment questions. Evaluate your answers and practise various questions.

Summary of Curriculum and Future Development and Collaborations

The above exercises are certainly not exhaustive of the various ways in which tutors and students can prepare for work in the film, media and cultural industries. Work in these sectors is changing fast and these exercises should continue to develop as well. What the students found particularly helpful in developing this curriculum was being able to create a space where they could reflect, articulate or express themselves and find ways to gain experience in specific areas to bolster their confidence as they move from study to work. This was visually presented by a student as a way to think about how tasks and discussions could be devised to enable them to meet these three aims.



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I would be happy to hear about any new suggestions for discussions on tasks. This booklet contains a feedback form with details on how to you can contribute to improving these activities.

The Elephant in the Room: Internships and Work Experience

It is not possible to talk about preparing students for work in the arts and media sector without addressing the issue of internships and work experiences. There is a plethora of literature available on the current situation and ethics of organisations offering (often unpaid) internships and work experiences to young graduates. Research has shown that these current practices create a sector where only young people who can afford to work for free are able to access these opportunities which further leads to the lack of diversity within the sectors. The Department of Film, Media and Cultural Studies at Birkbeck has adopted a policy where it does not circulate adverts for unpaid internships or voluntary work to students or graduates. We expect employers offering UK based job vacancies, work experience or internships are expected to comply with UK equal opportunities, employment and health and safety legislation. In addition, we believe that students or graduates undertaking any work experience where responsibilities and tasks are given as part of the role should be paid the National Minimum Wage. However, we recognise the value of providing opportunities for students to gain experience through work and are willing to work with organisations who want to discuss working with the

department to facilitated credited work placements that take place as part of a student's studies.

Finally, as part of a research project funded by the British Academy, my colleague Dr Sophie Hope and I have developed a series of resources for HEIs, students and organisations who wish to offer credited work placements. These resources including an ethical contract and guidance on how to develop a credited work placement that benefits all parties involved can be found here: criticalworkplacements.sophiehope.org.uk

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Feedback

If you have tried any of these tasks and discussions, I would be interested in hearing more about your thoughts and comments on the various activities suggested in this booklet. It would be great to be able to continually develop these tasks and discussions to take into account the fast-changing nature of the sector as well as the experiences of students from different backgrounds.

You are welcome to share your feedback on these tasks and activities using the following questions as a starting point:

- How helpful were the suggested task and activities in preparing your students for work in the film, media and cultural industries?
- What other types of activities would you suggest?
- What other aspects or issues concerning career development in the film, media and cultural industries could be included in these activities?
- What were the student's experience of undertaking these tasks and discussions?
- What was your experience as a tutor in using these tasks and discussions?
- How else can these suggested activities be improved?



Comments and suggestions can be left on www.workmatterscci.org a website that was set up to document the process of this project as well as the reflections of students who took part in creating this curriculum.



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