
Employability Issues in H.E. Performing Arts

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Introduction

PALATINE has been closely involved in promoting debate and sharing good practice in the associated areas of employability and skills development in the performing arts sector. Following recent workshops that explored the issues surrounding graduate employability and the relationship between performing arts higher education and the creative industries, PALATINE has now produced this review of recent literature relating to enhancing graduate employability in the performing arts.



Defining Employability

The national debate on graduate employment has moved on from the narrow focus on a set of essential 'core skills' within the undergraduate curriculum, as defined by the Dearing Report (1997). Current initiatives are placing the emphasis more on preparing students for 'graduate jobs', rather than for 'any job'. This involves developing critical, reflective abilities, skills for self-career management and the maintenance of employability and career progression.

The Department for Education and Skills defines employability as *"the capability to move self-sufficiently within the labour market to realise potential through sustainable employment. For the individual, employability depends on the knowledge, skills and attitudes they possess, the way they use those assets and present them to employers and the context (e.g. personal circumstances and labour market environment) within which they work"*.¹



Developing Employability

The consensus of most current research in this field is that embedding employability provision across the curriculum, giving students opportunities to proceed to develop personal qualities and skills to higher levels as they progress on their courses, is best practice. Exeter University, for example, aims to bring about learning outcomes for 'personal and key skills' - academic schools are encouraged to incorporate team development, work experience modules and materials, work-based projects and reflective learning into programmes of study.² The intention is not just to help students find their first job after leaving university, but to improve their higher level competencies and skills in order to enhance their long-term employability over their entire career span.

This approach is seen as central to the twenty-first century educational agenda. The creative industries, in particular, will need flexible, multi-skilled workers, possessing excellent people management and communication skills. There will also be a strong demand for technical, business and marketing skills. In addition, changing patterns of employment mean that new performing arts graduates also require adequate professional and personal resources to equip them for self-employment and freelance working.³

This interpretation of employability in the sense of what has often been called 'graduateness', a set of graduate competencies - skills, attitudes and abilities that make graduates capable as creative and flexible professionals, also needs to be closely linked to the management of students own personal expectations. Students need to be made more aware of how their personal skills development, over the course of their studies, is related to employability outcomes. This is where the planned introduction of student progress portfolios or 'profiles' by all universities ties in to the employability agenda. The monitoring of personal progress enables individual students to be able to identify, articulate and demonstrate the knowledge, skills and experience that they have gained from their time at university.

This process of Personal Development Planning is an important element of the employability initiatives currently being promoted by ESECT and the LTSN Generic Centre, who regard it as being *“at the heart of employability”*. It has the overall goal of allowing students to be able to evaluate their own learning experience in relation to their planned career and to be able to recognize and apply the skills they have developed. It can also form the basis for planning effective progression through subsequent learning, work and career development.⁴ The Drama department at Edgehill University College have developed an integrated Personal Development Plan (PDP) that is used in combination with feedback sheets completed by tutors that accompany each piece of assessment. The PDP itself is electronic and the marking of student work is also undertaken electronically.⁵

Other forms of reflective learning that can enhance students’ awareness of employability issues may be facilitated in performance arts subjects through student projects, workshops and student productions. The Performance Reflective Practice Project, supported by the Fund for the Development of Teaching and Learning and based in the Department of Performing Arts at De Montfort University, has drawn together a team of individuals from across the Higher Education sector to investigate, customise and support the development of reflective practice for performance and studio based work.⁶

Gaining experience of how such activities are taught and assessed in the performing arts may also help to enhance the skills of students from other academic disciplines.



Working in the Creative Industries

The creative industry sector is expanding rapidly with analysts predicting that it will play a major role in the ‘post-industrial’ regional and national economies. Since 1991 the sector has expanded by 17.5 per cent and now contributes more than £60 billion to the UK’s GDP.⁷

The workforce in the arts and entertainment sector has a very high standard of educational attainment. It is a highly competitive field to try to enter. There are many more students currently studying for entry into the creative industries than will ever be able to be directly employed in it.⁸

The nature of the job market itself is also changing, with less secure long-term career prospects. There are, for example, fewer permanent companies in dance, so dancers have less time to work consistently with a company, less security, and need to be more proactive to succeed and build a career. They also need to be prepared for periods of self-employment.

The creative industries as a whole are increasingly dominated by part-time, self-employed, and ‘multi-activity’ working. Many dance graduates, for example, play multiple roles in the dance profession, often combining dancing with teaching.⁹ Similarly, in the music industry, approximately ninety percent of people work part-time, or on a self-employed basis. The *“majority of musicians have to be as creative in terms of earning a living (let alone building a career) as in their playing, singing or composing”*.¹⁰



Employability and Performing Arts Courses

Recent research into employers’ expectations and graduate experiences has indicated that higher education institutions need to do more to explore ways to focus their curricula towards the needs of creative industry sector.

The majority of recent graduates expressed concerns that they were insufficiently prepared for employment or self-employment by their university studies. Seventy-one percent of respondents felt that their educational experience had failed to develop essential skills and had not provided satisfactory career guidance. A similar majority believed that these skills should be taught explicitly as an integral part of the curriculum.¹¹ Particular areas felt to be lacking were:

- ◆ IT;
- ◆ career management skills;
- ◆ work experience;
- ◆ industry links;
- ◆ running a small business;
- ◆ networking skills.

Employers also consistently reported that when recruiting graduates they looked for a combination of specific job related skills and other transferable skills such as team working, communication and IT skills. The skills and attributes in graduates that they considered to be the most important were communication, working with others, IT, research, self-development and problem solving. Business awareness / job-specific skills, personal skills and motivation were also regarded as important.¹²

Given the varied nature of higher education provision in this sector, however, different institutions may need to adopt a number of possible strategies to develop employability.

Specialist forms of vocational training are currently offered in conservatoires of dance, drama, theatre, performance and production arts – here the focus is on the development of professional practitioners. A

particular problem for these institutions is that national funding criteria tends to give far more weight to performance objectives than to other significant skills required for employment in the creative industries.¹³

Nonetheless, such institutions may still be able to offer a number of short 'elective' modules on topics like 'business skills' or 'career management'. The Professional Integration Project has recently sought to address the issues relating to professional skills in music education, the changing nature of the music industry and employment projects. Eight Course Units are available online, developed by members of the project consortium, each outlining possible ways of including professional development within course requirements, in conjunction with subject specific knowledge.¹⁴

There are other institutions where practice and theory are taught in different proportions and with a variety of purposes and where the pursuit of scholarship and research, including practice as research, has a greater emphasis.¹⁵ These institutions could perhaps seek to establish closer links with employers in the sector, with employers possibly being invited to contribute to the design and assessment of courses. LIPA's sound technology programme, for instance, is accredited by the industry.

Consideration could also be given to mentoring, talks and workshops featuring professionals currently working in the field. Links could be developed with external organizations, such as MusicSpace, professional actors, actors' agencies and performing arts companies.

Employers are particularly seeking people who have gained previous practical experience in the relevant field. Contacts and track record are important.¹⁶ In music and dance especially, the teaching is conducted by current practitioners who will have useful contacts and can provide practical help and information. Tutors could seek to increase the range of contacts directly available to their students, as well as encouraging work experience projects and placements.

A project funded by PALATINE at Bolton Institute will develop a Work-Based-Learning module aiming to enhance students' awareness of the culture of creative industries, business skills and entrepreneurship through work placements. Employers are also to be involved in the design and assessment of the module.¹⁷

Foundation degrees have been established that can help to support students in actually starting their careers during their academic courses. Bath Spa University College's foundation degree in Commercial Music, for instance, is an example of a vocationally based course focused on music performance/song-writing, music production and the music industry.

Similarly, The new Graduate Apprenticeship in Community and Participatory Arts, offered by King

Alfred's College, Winchester, aims to provide learning opportunities for arts graduates who want to make the transition into leading workshops, developing community and participating arts work. A range of regional partners are involved in the scheme, who offer placement experiences and also act as mentors to support the learning of the apprentice.



Skills Trends in the Performing Arts

Metier's *Arts Skills 2000* report, forecasting the skills that will be needed for the arts and entertainment industries, identified some sector-specific skill shortages. In theatre, technical skills were particularly mentioned, including technical troubleshooting and problem-solving. Other shortages included:

- ◆ Set construction, set-craft, prop-makers;
- ◆ Stage and theatre management, freelance stage managers;
- ◆ Costume-cutters, qualified costume supervisors;
- ◆ Production management;
- ◆ Directors;
- ◆ Video editing.¹⁸

A specific issue in the theatre is continued training for actors, whose skills may become out of practice, and the drop-out rate of actors over the age of 35. Provision of continued lifelong learning could help to address this issue.¹⁹

An increasing need for technical skills has also been seen as of "vital importance to all sectors of the music industry", because technological changes are now creating new ways of making, recording and distributing music. The Internet is also becoming central to music sales and marketing.²⁰

Technical skills was also an area where recent music graduates felt that they needed more training, particularly in the use of digital technology in music making and theatre and in music recording technology.²¹

More generally, employers believe that higher education should place a greater emphasis on the development of business and entrepreneurial skills, presentation, networking and fund-raising skills.²² Similarly, a survey of members of the Musicians' Union found that while most respondents thought their musical training had been good to excellent, more than ninety percent of all respondents stated that they had received little or no preparation for aspects of managing their own careers such as tax and other business or financial skills.²³

Higher Education institutions should be aiming to support their students not just in fulfilling their creative potential but also helping them to achieve the confidence and skills required to contribute effectively in the rapidly changing graduate employment market.²⁴ In addition to professional competency and 'work readiness', employers are also seeking multi skilled graduates with management and business aptitudes.²⁵

Graduates will also need adaptability in an increasingly diverse environment. The changing nature of music industry, for instance, requires an understanding of

new technologies, a greater demand for self-promotion, production and management skills. For those graduates seeking employment outside the creative industries, skills that employers regard as particularly important such as team-working, relationship building, project work and networking skills may be being developed through studying performing arts courses, others like business start-up and career skills generally may not be at present. These skills can be developed in a performing arts context through the provision of work experience and opportunities to bridge the gap between theory and practice within the curriculum.

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- ³ *The Music Industry: Skills and Training Needs in the Twenty-First Century*, DCMS 2000, p. 84.
- ⁴ The Learning and Teaching Support Network defines Personal development planning (PDP) as 'a structured and supported process undertaken by an individual to reflect upon their own learning, performance and/or achievement and to plan for their personal, educational and career development' (Jackson, 2001a, p.1 Jackson, N. (2001a) Personal Development Planning: What Does it Mean?, *PDP Working Paper 1*, Learning and Teaching Support Network Generic Centre.) ESECT are the Enhancing Student Employability Co-ordination Team, a group of nationally recognised researchers and representatives of key organisations who are working with the LTSN, over the next two years, to promote the capacity of higher education to enhance student employability.
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