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Introduction

This article seeks to examine if it is possible for contemporary higher education institutions (HEIs) to try and challenge current working practices in the creative economy. The article will first examine the current state and perception of work within the creative economy in the UK before examining the role HEIs play as a 'producer' of talent for this sector, which is relevant globally. By drawing upon two

projects that examine *work placements* and *curriculum development* for young graduates, the article will then show how there are possibilities in which to provide some form of power and agency for young graduates as they seek to develop their career in the creative economy. While the context and examples in this article are drawn from a UK context, this article will conclude by not only highlighting how the issues addressed in this article are prevalent in the creative economies in different parts of the world, but it will highlight future directions that need to be examined so as to be able to continue to address and hopefully engender social justice in the current working conditions within the creative economy.

Work in the Creative Economy within the UK
In recent years, culture has been understood and used by governments around the world as a tool to bolster economic growth and advance social development. The potential for culture via the creative economy was recognised back in 2008 by the United Nations where it stated in its *Creative Economy Report 2008* that "the creative economy has the potential to generate income, jobs…while… promoting social inclusion, cultural diversity and human development" (p. iii). This belief has been reiterated in 2013 with a special edition of its *Creative Economy Report* (now jointly published by the UNDP and UNESCO), and which highlights how the creative economy is not only "highly transformative…in terms of income-generation, job creation and export earnings", but investment in this sector can also contribute to the "overall wellbeing of communities, individual self-esteem and quality of life, dialogue and cohesion" (p.10). The financial support of large-scale cultural projects around the world -- from cities such as Abu Dhabi and Singapore, to policy developments to allow for the creation of creative clusters in Shanghai and London -- is testament that it now stands as a political principle, that creative economy is an engine of growth and must be adopted as a form of strategic development to reverse the decline of economies built on agriculture and manufacturing.

The rise of the creative economy has occurred alongside a positive notion of the type of work that is available and the way work is organised in this new creative sector (or series of sectors – there is little consensus on how the creative 'economy' is structured. *Work* in the creative economy is routinely understood to be 'creative' (and undefined term) and by this virtue being particularly rewarding. Creative labour are

where workers are to some degree autonomous and independent; they are more able to set their own working hours or indeed work in a variety of locations. Most importantly, the forms of work that are being generated and produced within this new economy are routinely portrayed as fun as much as personally fulfilling.

The positive image of what work is in the creative economy has not gone unnoticed by young people, and what has ensued in recent years (particularly within higher education in the UK) is the growing number of young people who are inspired and motivated to develop a career in the creative economy. In the UK, recent figures from the Higher Education Statistics Agency demonstrate that there has been a 5% increase in the number of undergraduate students who have applied for courses in the subject area of 'creative arts and design' (HESA: 2015). For graduates, it seems, being able to determine the very nature of work seems to outweigh more traditional concerns over security, pay and working conditions. However, the initial interest in developing a career in the creative economy might also demonstrate a lack of awareness of the actual, material working conditions that exist, where, for example, there is a shortage of stable employment opportunities, or where certain areas within the new economy, in particular the publicly-funded arts and cultural sectors, are facing severe budgetary cuts in their publicly sources revenues or the rise of private sponsorship that perhaps bring to bear new limits on the opportunities for career development and progression. This paper will consider this current ensuing scenario – the seeming attractiveness and popularity of the new creative economy, and the actual conditions of labour, which are always partially (if not wholly) concealed from newcomers, and particularly young job seekers.

Higher Education and the Creative Economy
The often precarious and insecure working conditions within the creative economy has not gone unnoticed by scholars. One of the key areas of interdisciplinary research that has developed since the late 1990s in Western Europe has been the working conditions, expected behaviours, values, contractual terms as well as environmental conditions of workers within the new creative economy (see Ball: 2003, Gill and Pratt, 2008, Gill 2010, Bridgstock, 2011). The struggles of the new creative workers are being documented and recorded and a number of publications addressing such issues as inequality of access, lack of diversity, exploitation and

working hours, has steadily risen in the last 5 years -- and can be seen as a manifestation of a growing "social conscience" in the new economy as a whole (see Allen et al 2010, McGuigan, 2010, Social Market Foundation 2010). What, however, has been less discussed across the emerging schoolarly currents is the role that higher education and HEIs play within the creative economy scenarios outlined above. The HEIs, we may safely say, are part of the production process through which the creative economy develops. The creative economy largely functions through a supply of suitable labour (labourers who are suitably already inculcated with the behaviours and values required for such labour – flexibility, adaptability, non-monetary rewards, and 'creativity', and so on). These young creative workers are almost always educated at college of HE level. The HEIs provide the training and qualifications of such graduates, but perhaps more importantly, it is within the education system that the notion of 'creative economy' as a desirable career destination is inculcated – even to the extent that other, potentially, rewarding careers (in Law, Medecine, and so on) are turned down. To the extent that the HEIs, therefore, support the creative economy, what are their roles and responsibilities as they produce the next batch of eager graduates keen to develop a career in this sector?

A critical reflection of the responsibilities of HEIs within this creative economy is a crucial step for scholars to undertake, for two reasons. Firstly, it is clear that young creative workers are reliant on a formal qualification to set themselves apart within a highly competitive sector, where employment opportunities are scarce. In statistics released by the UK Government Department of Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) in 2014, states that "more than half (57.7%) of jobs in the creative economy were filled by people who have a degree or higher qualification in 2013 compared to 31.1 per cent of all jobs in the UK" (2014: 13). This figure, it seems, has only risen within a year where the Creative Industries Federation (CIF) writes that "60.5% of creative industry workers are graduates compared to a UK average of 31.8%" (2015: 25). It is obvious that HEIs play a key role in providing what seems to be an endless resource for the creative economy in the form of a large number of young graduates "whose skills are generic and in constant oversupply" and who are therefore "forced to accept low pay" or no pay when they seek to develop a career in the creative economy (Arvidsson et al: 2010: 296). How then should HEIs think about their

complicity in perpetuating to some extent the precarious working conditions in the creative economy itself?

Secondly, with the number of graduates greatly outnumbering available paid employment within the creative economy, what has also occurred is the increasing number of unpaid *internships* or 'work placements' being offered by various companies, organisations and universities themselves, as a potential *entry route* into paid work. Within the UK, there is tacit acknowledgment among young graduates that unpaid work via these internships or work placements is one of the main ways, if not the only way to securing future paid employment. Official guidance on how arts organisations should offer and offer internships from Arts Council England and Creative and Cultural Skills is a sign of the widespread nature of this practice (see Arts Council England and Creative and Cultural Skills 2011). Being able to work for free thus privileges particular students and graduates, which has resulted in inequality of access and a lack of diversity in the workforce in the creative economy. CIF highlights that while

> Public investment supports the identification, diversification and training of creative talent…92.1% of workers (in the creative economy) were from advantaged social and economic backgrounds compared to a UK average of 66.0%. In the creative media sector alone 14% of workers were educated in independent schools which represent only 7% of the population (2015: 25).

This lack of diversity is furthermore not limited to economic background but also to the *social* background of a person. In their research on work placements in the arts and cultural sector, Allen et al (2010) would highlight how gender, ethnicity and disability play a role too in how students are able to access, obtain and conduct their work placements. The difficulties they face are reflected in the percentage of women and black and minority ethnic workers within the creative economy. Here women hold "36.7% of jobs compared with 47.2% in the whole UK economy" and the percentage of black and minority ethnic workers only represent only "11.0% of the creative industries workforce, compared to 14.1% of the overall population of England and Wales and 40% in London where there is a high concentration of

creative industries" (CIF: 2015: 25). What is clear is that there are structural inequalities with regards to work in the creative economy. There is a need to combat the effects of the 'neo-liberalisation of work' where young workers now believe that success is predicated on what they do and that they are therefore "personally culpable for their own failures" (McGuigan: 2010: 328). Is there scope within the curricula of HEI courses that address these issues -- or should students be left to think that success in the creative economy is predicated simply on their own personal self-sacrifice, on hard work and passion, which (they are told) will overcome any barrier?

These questions are not easy ones to consider especially when viewed within the current state of higher education in the UK today. HEIs are under increasing pressure, via government reports (such as the *Review of Business-University Collaboration* published in 2012, henceforth referred to as the Wilson Review) to produce 'employable' graduates through working with businesses to provide appropriate work experience for their students. This 'skills' agenda has now become a global trend among HEI providers. The introduction of tuition fees by UK universities, of up to £9000 a year (and double or triple for international students), has also entailed a political mandate for institutions to demonstrate that the courses they offer not only justify the cost of this tuition but that the course itself is an *investment* that can and will lead to future employment. The introduction of Key Information Sets (KIS), where universities routinely tabulate the number of students in employment six months after completing their studies, including data on how much their graduates are earning, are directed at potential applicants and envisage opportunities in the labour market. Investment-style information for potential students is becoming a routine way in which HEIs are engaging with the wider employability agenda.

It is thus important here to think about how HEIs can challenge both the current narrative of work in the creative economy, as well as the wider employability agenda. Is it possible for HEIs to nurture their students' interests of work in the creative economy while also preparing them for the realities of this work? Is it also possible for HEIs to challenge and problematise the 'employability agenda' where students are expected to be able to find work as quickly as possible after graduation? Is there

space within HEIs to think about what other skills and knowledge are needed by young graduates that will allow them to develop a long-term sustainable career? Our study below seeks to examine if HEIs could firstly, potentially disrupt or change their role within the creative economy by challenging what skills and knowledge its graduates should possess and secondly, by problematizing the employability agenda. In what follows, I will draw upon reflections of two projects in which I was involved as a tutor. They sought to determine what the gaps were within the both the ways in which work placements were being offered and organised, and in the syllabus that was currently being provided within the courses of HEI departments. I was able to develop a curriculum framework that would address the issues articulated above. These two projects involved working with students, industry professionals and arts organisations, and my account below will aspire to reveal how it is possible to open up avenues for challenging the current narrative of work in the creative economy as well as the employability agenda, and do so through the creation and provision of a space that allows for reflection and discussion so as to enable all participants to think about the state of the creative economy today and their role within it.

Challenging the Narrative of Work Placements

In an attempt to understand how 'work' is perceived and understood from various perspectives within the creative economy, I presided over the organisation of a roundtable and a workshop session, where students and industry professionals were invited to discuss and share their thoughts concerning work in the creative economy. This was structured with a focus on three themes: *recruitment*, *skills and knowledge* and *expectations*. It was clear from both discussions that the reason why work within the creative economy is precarious, low paid and exploitative, can be identified in the way the creative economy is structured in terms of how people access work in its sectors, and how successful people working in these sectors perpetuate structural inequalities.

One of the many of structural inequalities identified is the plethora of recruitment processes accross the creative economy's various sectors. While it is acknowledged that work placements and internships form a part of an identifiable problem, other issues point to less visible phenomenon, like the lack of 'standard' recruitment

processes and the tendency for networks to act as intermediaries of recruitment forming a kind of 'hidden jobs market'. Advice was provided by industry professionals on how students could attempt to access such networks, ranging from the setting up of their own networks, or volunteering and undertaking various kinds of work placements. A deeply uncomfortable dimension of these suggestions was the range of established assumptions on students and graduates, that they would possess not only the financial means but also the time to seek out these opportunities. Evident also in the ensuing discussions was a critical lack of reflection from industry professionals of the interconnection between the current lack of diversity in the workforce and potentially exclusionary practices. What was even more troubling was the evident lack of understanding between the participants -- a young graduate working for free in order to develop their career, and a well-established company board member who was able to volunteer their time. As one participant, a former industry professional, stated "Unpaid work will happen throughout your career…there are people at the top of their profession who are doing things for free" (Industry Professional: 2014). (1) What this participant failed to take into account was how they belonged to a "small elite that can command high levels of market power" and thus enjoys a position where he or she is already well-remunerated for other work that they do" (Arvidsson et al: 2010: 296). This points to another structural inequality,where the working patterns of a small group (of mature and well-established professionals) set up and establish as norm an horizon of expectations, in turn imposed on large numbers of young workers, most who do not enjoy the financial security or privileges that enable them to participate. At the crux of these two issues is the lack of power, and the form of agency, young graduates possess when it comes to forging a career in the creative economy.

One small way in which my colleagues and I have sought to address the question of power, agency and the structural inequalities that are so embedded in the discurses and professional thought-processes across creative economy sectors is the offering of work placements within our own programmes. By bringing together organisations and universities that offer work placements, along with students who had undertaken them, a series of 'ethical' work placement contracts were drawn up (see Hope and Lim 2014), and they were drawn up in a way that attempted to address exclusionary and exploitative dynamics that so often emerge when unpaid labour is involved.

In this new improvised framework, students were encouraged to think about what they hope to achieve while undertaking their work placement, and how the work placement would help develop or address a gap in their current skills and knowledge. In addition, students are asked to think on what they can reasonably expect in a work placement with regards to supervision, training and learning. It became apparent how, for many organisations, an immediate question arises concerning if what is being offered is a genuine work placement, where there are specific learning outcomes and proper training and supervision provided, or not. Most importantly with regards to how HEIs, how can they challenge the way recruitment into the creative sectors currently takes place? HEIs are asked,in our framework, to ensure that students are aware that the aim of work placements is to extend their overall academic development and not a way to future paid work in the creative economy. As the very concept of a work placement is inherently exclusionary, we have sought to mitigate against this to some degree through the mechanism of the contract by addressing a source of exploitation: the lack of genuine learning outcomes (often as the work placement role itself is motivated by the avoidance of hiring a paid member of staff to fill a gap within the organisation's operations). By making 'learning' the contractual aim of offering or undertaking a work placement, we seek to locate the conditions of agency. We ensure that the student is able to locate themselves in a situation of relative power, by ensuring that they are aware of the reasons why they are providing their labour for free, and they assess their own expectations of what the work placement will provide by way of adding to what they have gained in their studies. The contracts sought to challenge the current narrative of work placements as a form of free labour for organisations and recast the work placement as a process of critical reflection on the intellectual conditions of labour in the creative economy. Gaining work experience beneficial to their own personal circumstances, and enabling the student to develop their career, is freed from the instrumental conditions that require the student to undertake work of no benefit to themselves and at their own expenses.

Challenging the Employability Agenda

Another outcome from the roundtable and workshop discussions were our identifying the forms of skills and knowledge students should possess when they graduate. The

outcomes of this discussion is critically engaged with the highly politicised 'employability' agenda, typified in the Wilson Review. The Review states that one of the ways in which universities can 'contribute' to society is not only through their research, but ensuring that "the enterprise and entrepreneurial culture…is developed amongst its students.[…]. and the applicability of the knowledge and skills of all its graduates" (Wilson: 2012: 13). The Review is a conduit for a predictable political rhetoric, where the central task of public universities is the production of graduates able to secure jobs upon graduation as they have the appropriate skills that businesses or organisations at that particular time require. Or, if they are unable to find such jobs or roles in industry, that will are able to be 'enterprising' and create their own jobs or role in the marketplace.

While this neoliberal logic seems fair and reasonable, among the many things it fails to acknowledge is the basic working conditions within industry (particularly in the creative economy), which not only differ widely (and sector by sector), but are changing rapidly, and that often lack recognised and stable lines of progression into work. Many sectors even lack fair regulation of access and equality through an application process and an interview assessment. The Review also fails to acknowledge that given the lack of regulation, most workers in the creative economy already are or have to be entrepreneurial by default. I would suggest that the very concept of 'employability' needs to be reconsidered, and a properly critical consideration could begin with the joint report *Working Towards your Future: Making the Most of your Time in Higher Education* produced by the National Union of Students (NUS) and Confederation of Business Industry (CBI). In this report, employability is defined as "a set of attributes, skills and knowledge that all labour market participants should possess to ensure that they have the capability of being effective in the workplace" (NUS and CBI: 2011: 12). The inclusion of the word "attributes" not only, sensibly, highlights that different types of work would require different qualities in a person, but that it points a critical failing in the politically motivated rhetoric around he discourse on employability in education. It widens the understanding of what 'employability' could entail – and this is centrally concerned with the agency of the student. What 'attributes' are needed to successfully negotiate and develop a career (in the creative economy or elsewhere) must concern the specific requirements a student must possess in facing an industry or marketplace of

complexity, structural inequality, closed or concealed networks, lack of legal scrutiny and regulation, and where the line of progression is not clear. The first stage in developing attributes suitable to a neoliberal economy is – as noted in our project exercise above -- a critical self-understanding of one's motives, position, resources and abilities in relation to the uncompromising systemic frameworks of work and the work place. It proceeds to developing an understanding of the processes of work and what they demand in terms of individual commitment or expenditure of personal welfare. They then, and only then, progress to developing an explicit understanding of the modes of intelligence, thought and practical application suited to a specific industrial field, or sector.   .

Such industry specific attributes required for young graduates (specifically to develop a career in the creative economy) were identified in the above discussion with industry professionals. While the participants acknowledged that cognitive skills (reading and writing well, analytical skills, and so on) were taken for granted, young graduates needed particularly to learn how to deal with professional rejection and failure. This, it was noted, is an important facility to develop in an industry where the potential of failure is much higher, and where rejection can often feel personal due to the forms of subjective investment that creative labour involved. Here industry professionals wanted universities to be places where students could experiment and fail outside of the pressures of the industry -- where failure could obviously mean a huge loss of income or the breakdown of professional networks and relationships. Universities should be a place where failures could become learning opportunities in an industry where second chances are few and far between.

Interestingly, that despite the specific demands of the various creative sectors for specific skills, the student participants too were not centrally concerned with the 'tool-kit' approach to learning and being equippped for industry. There was scepticism all round at the assumption that being in possession of the supposed necessary skills on an arbitrary list meant success in obtaining a job in the creative economy. Rather interest was stimulated foremost in information (where they can find information on the workings of a particular industry or field) and secondly, the need for a space to develop the facility in self-reflexivity and self-evaluation so as to become more aware of their communication styles or body language, of example. Students articulated a

need for opportunities in role-play, (presenting a pitch to a potential producer, or how to network, or how to engage in conversation socially) and other issues to do with the internal dynamics of the job process. Students were interested in being provided opportunities where they could think through potential responses from a variety of situations, and their suggestions articulated what in effect needs to be challenged within the politicised employability agenda and its focus on skills and knowledge. The issue of attributes, central to a persons sense and activation of their own agency, is something that requires further investigation and integration into our conception of skills and knowledge. We require a broader notion of what kind of experiences, qualities and individual characteristics that young graduates could cultivate that would allow them to confidently face the uneven landscape of the creative economy.

To achieve this, my students and I developed a curriculum that would provide them with opportunities for 'Reflection', 'Expression' and 'Experience'. Here students devised topics and tasks that they felt would feed into these three themes. Some of these involved reflecting on the way their personal and professional identities were interconnected, and also questioning the notion of 'work' and what 'success' means within the creative economy. Tasks included developing a personal pitch and practising this pitch with their fellow students, and conducting interviews with industry professionals to find out more about their career trajectories. This again is a small step in challenging the current rhetoric dominating how students need to be in employment within six months of graduation -- in a sector where the notion of 'employment' is fraught with complexities, What this curriculum frames is skills development process in which knowledge as self-knowledge is embedded and empowering. A sense of agency is afforded the students through helping them develop specific tasks and activities that allow them to address particularities and dilemmas embedded in the creative economy. It is clear from how this curriculum developed, that students wanted an opportunity to examine issues of employability within the wider framework of what it means to make a living within the creative economy. Being able to 'make a living' would thus encompass more than just being employable, but also include other aspects of 'work', which in turn would require a critical engagement with issues on cultural labour, managing the different aspects of one's professional and personal life when they became increasingly merged, and of learning different coping mechanisms when things go wrong or remain precarious.

Being able to provide a space for students to engage with these issues challenged the rhetoric and assumptions of the employability agenda, but more than that, it allowed the process of constructing employability a creative process of critical thinking and inquiry, building a range of attributes in a student's sense of agency.

Further Challenges and Future Directions

Access to work in the creative economy is exclusionary and to a large extent tends to benefit the socially and economically advantaged. The current composition of workers across the creative sectors is testament to how opportunities for career development are so skewed towards the economically and socially privileged. However, this is not specfiic to the creative economy in the UK. Research conducted on creative labour in America, Italy and China, among other countries in the world highlights how these conditions are prevalent globally (see Frenette 2013, Arvidsson et al 2010 and Kanngieser 2012). Such working conditions are consistent with our understanding of the neo-liberal direction of the global economy, which brings into question how these two UK specific projects would be able to challenge current working practices in these sectors in other countries. One must not underestimate the influence and impact of the UK with regards the various policies and strategies undertaken by different countries around the world as they seek to develop their creative economies. The widespread adoption of the UK Government's 1998 *Creative Industries Mapping Document* (DCMS, 1998) in various countries in Europe and Asia is one such example of the global knowledge flows of policy, strategy ideas, along with their enbedded values. In addition, the large number of students from Asia (and other parts of the world) coming to the UK to obtain their higher degrees in areas associated with the creative economy also point at how their understanding of the creative economy has the potential to influence the way they work when they return to their home countries. The increasing mobility of young workers and the ways in which technology allows for international collaboration on multiple levels also continually blurs the lines between creative economies in various countries. There are commonalities within the creative economies in various parts of the world that make it possible to see how the projects I have discussed could give young graduates the ability to challenge or disrupt the way these sectors function and are structured, wherever they choose to work in the future.

There are, of course, inherent limitations to these projects and their practical investigations. Firstly, any such project schemes work within current prevailing conditions and practices – cognitive as well as professional -- with the creative economy as it is currently constituted; and secondly, they only address one part of the creative economy, with regards to the 'production' of talent -- not the creation and production of cultural goods. Overriding both these issues is the idea that the creative economy is a positive force for good due to the way it is currently measured and quantified by governments: it is 'good' because it is an engine of economic growth, thus all aspects of the economy from production to consumption should be nurtured and supported, be they HEIs producing the students, to the creation of creative clusters to generate cultural products and the liberalisation of trade laws to promote consumption of such.

There is an opportunity here for HEIs to question and open up the notion of what constitutes a 'good' creative economy. Is there another way in which a creative economy could be measure and quantified, which moves beyond the economic as currently defined? What other kind of contributions could a creative economy make if it offered access of opportunity so as to ensure diversity within its workforce? This is important to consider given how the types of products produced by the creative economy provide people with "recurring representations of the world...constitute our inner private lives and our public selves' and 'contribute strongly to our sense of who we are" (Hesmondhalgh: 2007: 3). It is thus vital to ask not only what economic impact this sector has but also what kind of social impact it could have and in what shape and form. Attempting to deal with these issues would mean offering alternative narratives that are currently being presented by governments and institutions. Perhaps the biggest challenge for HEIs would be how to investigate and effect any findings or suggestions within the present pressure of meeting the aims of the employability agenda. Yet, to continue on the existing path runs a risk of forgoing an opportunity where HEIs could do more than just be a 'producer' of talent for the creative economy (and in so doing exacerbate some of the worst aspects of the global neoliberal economy). Instead, we could locate ways of effecting real change, so as to be able to address the structural inequalities of the sector and develop an economy that is genuinely creative.

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Endotes

1: Participants in the project chose to remain anonymous. The industry professionals that took part included a HR and Recruitment Consultant in the film and media Industries, a former Arts Council Employee and Freelance Arts Consultant, a TV and Film Journalist, an employee within an arts organisation and a founder and owner of a non-profit arts venue.

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