The value and purpose of a Media Production degree from the perspective of mid-career graduates

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Keywords: media degrees; employability; industry-oriented education; graduates; Higher Education; media work.

Abstract

Debate about the value and purpose of studying media at Higher Education has been dominated in the UK by the notion of 'employability', often defined in narrow terms. In this article we examine the perspectives of a sample of a single cohort of media graduates more than two decades after they left university. We explore how these graduates understand the purpose and value of their undergraduate education, with the benefit of hindsight. The themes that emerge coalesce around five broad areas: the integrated nature of the university experience; the value of 'practical' approaches to teaching and learning; the importance attributed to relationships with others; the place of autonomy and initiative-taking; and the role of work experience. We conclude by discussing the implication of our findings both for policy and for programme design and delivery.

Introduction

The value and purpose of studying media at Higher Education in the UK, historically, has been as much contested as the place of Media Studies within the school curriculum (Barker, 2001; Buckingham, 2003; Buckingham, 2009). Over the years, media degrees have been popularly denigrated as both 'lightweight' and 'poison in the jobs market' (Curran, 2012); the latter claim playing into wider public uncertainty about the purpose of Higher Education *per se*. In a period in which successive governments have prioritised market principles in the sector, what has come to dominate is the notion of 'employability', and the extent to which Higher Education may be justified in terms of a calculation made by the individual consumer/student, based on the anticipated ratio of fee to future earnings. Graduate earnings within five years has now become *the* primary quality indicator of a degree (DfE, 2019a), and since 2008/09, the UK's Department for Education has attempted to track graduates through *Longitudinal Education Outcomes* (LEO) data, reporting annually on the employment and earnings outcomes of

graduates by subject and institution (Universities UK, 2019).

The notion of 'employability' has not always been understood solely in terms of future earnings (McQuaid and Lindsay, 2005), any more than it has always been assumed to represent the only value or purpose of a university education (Collini, 2012). In a recent attempt to broaden this discussion, a wide-ranging review of post-18 education provision in the UK (the 'Augar Review') identifies six purposes of Further and Higher Education: to promote citizens' ability to realise their full potential, economically and more broadly; to provide a suitably skilled workforce; to support innovation through research and development (R&D), commercial ideas and global talent; to contribute scholarship and debate that sustain and enrich society through knowledge, ideas, culture and creativity; to contribute to growth by virtue of post-18 institutions' direct contributions to the economy; and to play a core civic role in the regeneration, culture, sustainability, and heritage of the communities in which they are based (DfE, 2019b). This broader understanding of purpose, however, is not widely reflected in political or public discourse, and it is the measures and the auditing instruments of the market that continue to dominate.

In this article we examine the value and purpose of a media degree by purposefully shifting the focus from the discourse of policy, to the discourse of graduates. Our intention is to investigate the (largely unexamined) voices of media graduates that speak from the vantage point of post-university employment and the world of work: specifically, those who are now in mid-career. *How do these graduates understand the purpose - and to what do they attribute the value - of their undergraduate education, with the benefit of hindsight more than two decades into their working lives? And what, if any, are the implications of this perspective for those of us who design and deliver these programmes?*

Studies of media students and the work they go on to do, have generally focused on specific aspects of the undergraduate experience itself (Ashton, 2011; Ashton, 2013; Ashton and Noonan, 2013); the transition of graduates into the workplace (Ashton, 2014); and various aspects of the experience of working in the media industries (from which we can extrapolate for media graduates who go on to undertake media work) (Blair, 2001; Lee, 2011; Nixon and Crewe, 2004; Banks, 2007; Deuze, 2007; Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2011; Eikhof and York, 2016; Hennekam and Bennett, 2017; and others). Although working in media industries is popularly portrayed as creative, empowering, personally fulfilling and so on, this body of research has tended to highlight how media work is also characterized by individualised and unstructured careers, long and anti-social hours, and often inadequate remuneration. Project-based work means not only that contracts can be short, but that the acquisition of work is heavily dependent on the individual's cultural capital and personal networks. This exacerbates systemic class barriers, and inequalities determined by gender, ethnicity, disability, and their

intersection (O'Brien et al., 2016).

Whilst research of this kind has provided important insights for industry-oriented undergraduate media education (particularly in how we teach the way in which the media industries now operate as a labour market), the unique perspective of media graduates now established in the world of work, has hardly been heard. Here, then, we set out to describe the extent to which the discourse of mid-career media graduates reflecting back on their university experience in the light of their subsequent careers, validates (or otherwise) current assumptions about the value and purpose of their degree. In so doing, we also aim to further improve the education of our students.

Context

Industry-oriented undergraduate media education has existed in one form or another in the UK since the early 1960s, developing first in the tertiary technical colleges and the art colleges of this period. Various kinds of broadcast and communication engineering programmes provided the basis for more technical roles, whilst Film Studies began to emerge within the Diploma in Art and Design (Dip.AD) programmes, introduced in 1963, with a National Film School (later renamed the National Film and Television School) opening in 1971. Over the following two decades, a growing number of industry-oriented degree programmes emerged, particularly in institutions outside of the traditional universities: Scottish central institutions, colleges of art, and the polytechnics. Since 1992, and the removal of the distinction between different degree-awarding bodies, many of the older universities have begun to offer similar types of programmes.

The institutional challenges of universities maintaining meaningful contact with alumni over time, make retrospective and longitudinal studies particularly challenging. Larger scale longitudinal studies, such as the Creative Graduates Creative Futures project (Ball et al, 2010) - a survey of more than 3,500 creative graduates across the UK – have seldom been maintained beyond, at most, seven years after graduation. As such, these studies tend to provide more insight into the (sometimes lengthy) transition into work phase, and early career experiences, than they do into longer-term career trajectories. What they highlight is the fluidity of early work patterns, characterised by temporary jobs, post-graduate study, and time out for overseas travel. The Creative Graduates study, for example, found that the majority (77%) of their respondents had gone on to undertake 'further study or informal learning of some kind' (Ball, et al, 2010: 6), and 42 per cent had undertaken unpaid or voluntary work, with nearly a quarter still in these types of roles at the time of the survey. We know relatively little about the realities of working life as it unfolds over a longer period of time, or the longer-term retrospective views and attitudes of these graduates to their education and subsequent careers. Thus, while

the struggles of new entrants to these industries, the trade-offs they are obliged to make, and in particular the balance between personal rewards and self-exploitation involved are widely recognised, the particular challenges – and indeed rewards - experienced by established practitioners is less well understood. It can be argued therefore that our understanding of the value of a creative degree, at least for the graduates in question, is based largely on short term outcomes, and on the perceptions of relatively inexperienced practitioners. This study will take a small step toward correcting that limitation, giving us a better understanding of the value of a media production degree over the course of a career, and from the perspective of experience.

We chose to focus our study on the BA Media Production (BAMP) programme at Bournemouth University in the south of England. The Dorset Institute of Higher Education, as it was known during the late 1970s and 1980s, had pioneered one of the earliest industry-oriented Media Production programmes. Throughout the 1980s, the programme had established a strong industry reputation for its particular attention to professional practice (as distinct from some of the more theoretical Communication Studies, Film Studies and Cultural Studies programmes that were appearing elsewhere at the time). At the point at which the institution became a university (after a brief spell as a polytechnic) the programme had become well-known for its three practice-based strands: television production; radio production; and computer animation. This small-scale exploratory study takes as its focus the cohort who began their studies at the point of this transition to university status in 1992, and who therefore graduated from the institution in 1995.

Data collection and methodology

An analysis of graduates' retrospective narratives was made possible by our uncovering from the university's archives, a cohort list of the Media Production graduands of 1995: a total of 79 names with their corresponding degree classifications[1]. Armed with this list, and the appropriate ethical approval, we first set out to discover how many of them it would be possible to trace. Due to the distance of time, the university's alumni records proved to be of limited help, although an alumna of this period working at the university, provided some helpful contacts during the intial phase of this work[2]. Once a number of confirmed contacts had been acquired, social media networks proved to be useful in helping us to connect with others, facilitating a snowball sampling approach in which many of those we successfully contacted were then able to provide information about other people. The majority of the research that ensued was undertaken between 2017 and 2018. Within the timeframe available, we were able to find up-to-date contact details for approximately half of the 79 names on the graduand list. Of these, some proved unresponsive, or declined our request for an interview, some agreed but never settled on a date for a variety of reasons, and one had died. We were eventually able to

interview 28 former students: over one third of the cohort. Twelve of this sample were female, and 16 male, making it slightly under-representative of women, as the original cohort had been equally split by gender.[3]

Informal semi-structured interviews were undertaken (generally by telephone or Skype), recorded and transcribed. Although we used a schedule, our interviews were deliberately informal, designed to encourage reflection and to allow for wide-ranging conversations, enabling the interviewer to pursue unexpected avenues that might emerge spontaneously. The particular themes that emerged, therefore, were sometimes prompted by our schedule, and sometimes unprompted. We specifically asked participants to talk about the extent to which they thought the programme had prepared them for work in industry, and how they recalled their thoughts about their future careers at the point at which they graduated. We asked them to describe how formative they thought their time at university had been, and the extent to which they attributed this formation to the media programme they had chosen.

This is not a longitudinal study, but a study of retrospective accounts: an investigation of the narratives of these graduates reflecting back on their undergraduate experience from the vantage point of the world of work. We have paid attention to both what was said, and what was unsaid, and the way these stories were told to us. In coding and analysing the transcripts of our interviews, we have adopted the three-stage pattern of critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 1989): *description*, noting precisely what was said, and how; *interpretation*, identifying significant themes, and recognising attitudinal statements, values and assumptions; and *explanation*, relating these observations to the broader context, and to what we know from other sources. From this process, we have identified five prevalent themes set out in the following section. Our analysis and consideration of their broader implications is presented as a discussion in the latter part of this article.

Our findings

We began by establishing how our interviewees were currently employed. They offered a very wide range of occupations, from the more-or-less expected (an independent radio managing editor; a television studio director for BBC News; a freelance production manager; a television drama line producer) to the more-or-less surprising (the headteacher of a comprehensive school; a senior civil servant; a classic vehicle restorer; a homeopathic healer). Precisely half of our sample told us that they currently earned their living from media work. Of these, four had staff jobs, and the remainder were self-employed. The majority of media workers had roles in aspects of television production, although radio and journalism also featured.

Of the half of our sample who told us they did not currently work in media, only five said that they had never done so, and several of these described roles that were broadly media-

related (such as a Director of Marketing and Communication, or a media teacher). All but two of our sample indicated that they had set out to work in media at the time of their graduation, and irrespective of their current occupation, the vast majority purported to have some ongoing interest or involvement in media production, even if it was simply in a voluntary capacity or hobby (such as running a film festival, or helping with the local Muslim community television station). Media production seemed to be deeply ingrained for many, as a source of pleasure and as 'labour of love' (Ursell, 2000: 821).

The significant themes identified in this study, and described below, may be categorised as follows: the integrated nature of the university experience; the value attributed to practice and being 'practical'; common identity, teamwork, and learning to manage relationships; their understanding of autonomy and initiative-taking; and the value of opportunities for encountering the workplace.

'The whole shebang!': the integrated nature of the university experience

We asked each of our interviewees how formative they thought their time at university had been, and how much of this had been to do with their undergraduate programme in Media Production. Most told us that they thought it had been extremely formative, and in all but five cases (where some specific reservations were voiced), this was positively expressed, and included such sentiments as 'the happiest memories I have' (Co95-60); and 'the best thing I've ever done in my life, and the best time of my life' (Co95-03). We note that such responses often conflated references to the programme with those of the wider university experience: 'I loved the university experience, and I think my course was very much part of that' (Co95-36) was typical of such responses, even among several of those who had chosen not to pursue work in media:

> …the actual [Media Production programme] was the bit that banged it together, if you know what I mean. So for me, when I look back at the benefit of the course, I'm looking at the whole thing – looking at the people, and the skills I picked-up along the way. (Co95-25)

Thus the programme is remembered as integral to a broad and multifarious educational and growing-up experience that, for many, amounted to a rite-of-passage. As another interviewee put it: 'it was the whole shebang!' (Co95-63).

Of those who had not gone on to pursue a media career, reasons given included not having been sufficiently interested, wanting to earn more money, and the feeling of not having had 'the right personality type' (Co95-35). Nevertheless, most spoke of the experience in positive terms:

> I don't look back now to think 'oh I wish I'd done a course in catering'. I don't regret it at all. I really, really don't. It's nice – it's interesting when people ask you what you did at uni, and for me to say, you know, 'I did media', and they say 'oh yes' and they sort of ask about it. (Co95-36)

The primary value seemed to be simply in gaining a degree:

> …I think with having a degree, it doesn't mean a great deal unless you *don't* have a degree, if that makes sense. It sort of gives you a grounding, and it gives you the ability to move onto the next step in life. (Co95-03)

Although a few of our interviewees told us that they had concluded (at the time, or with the benefit of hindsight) that they had probably been on the *wrong* programme, these were not among those who had decided against a media career. Rather they were people who believed that they would have benefitted from following a different specialism (such as journalism). Graduates who had once worked in media but do so no longer, cited a range of reasons for leaving the industry, and the notably high level of attrition from media work by mid-career is a subject that we have explored elsewhere (Wallis et al, 2019).

In summary, the vast majority of respondents considered their undergraduate experience to have been highly formative in their lives, both personally and professionally, and this was thought to have been positive by most of them. However, they found it impossible to disassociate their experience of the programme from their broader experience of university life and the only way in which the programme could be meaningfully discussed required the acknowledgment of this reality. Critically, the programme's specificity and industry orientation was not considered problematic by any of those who had chosen alternative career paths.

'A very practical course': the importance of practice, being practical, and perceived relevance to industry

We asked our interviewees why they had chosen this particular programme, and to identify features that they thought had been most valuable and important, both at the time, and with the benefit of hindsight. The most common reason given for choosing the programme was that it was 'regarded as a very prestigious course' (Co95-70) and this seemed to be because of its perceived closeness to industry.

Talk of the programme's relationship to industry was interwoven with frequent references to its 'practical' focus, and the majority of those we spoke to indicated that they believed that this was where the value of the programme lay. Having 'a rudimentary understanding of what

an edit suite was' (Co95-22), or being able 'to pick up a camera' in one's first job (Co95-03) were typically offered as examples of how practical skills had given them an advantage early in their media careers: '…it was really valuable to have a course that actually used that equipment in a professional environment' (Co95-18).

Many were keen to draw a distinction between 'the practical aspect' (Co95-22) of the programme, and 'the analysis side of things' (Co95-55). This was expressed in various ways, but the point is clear enough, as the following illustrates:

> The training which I felt has been most beneficial to what I do is the actual hands-on experience with the equipment, rather than possibly learning a lot of theory stuff, which maybe… hasn't really been that useful to me. (Co95-48)

The pejorative sense in which the words 'theory' and 'theoretical' were often used, seemed to imply a broader meaning than would normally be understood by the concept of 'media theory' within academia. It was used to refer to any programme content not perceived to be 'practical' or 'hands on' (including, for example, such an industry-relevant subject as media law). There was little, if any, reference to the notion of theory to imply the exercise of *criticality* in relation to media industries, or media practice.

Whilst this practical and hands-on emphasis was commonly described as being one of the programme's most valuable attributes, it was possible to discern two distinct (albeit often confused) reasons for believing this to be the case. The first related to the programme's industry orientation: as suggested by those quoted above, they were learning practical skills that they believed had direct application in the workplace. The second (less explicit) reason seemed to be pedagogical: it was the way they learned, often describing themselves as practical rather than 'academic' people. The thinking seemed to be that a *practical* programme was more appropriate for *practical* people who learn in a *practical* way:

> It was all about making television, film, radio programmes, and not so much about the study of media. So those things attracted me to the course in the first place, because it was a very practical course, and I feel I'm a very practical person. (Co95-36)

Although there was almost universal agreement on the value of its practical-ness, there were a number of seeming contradictions, such as when it came to talk about the status of the University's production facilities, with some extolling the virtues of their being of a high specification and of industry standard, and others remembering them as hopelessly out of date. These contrasting recollections raise the more fundamental question about whether the

much applauded practical value of the programme really lay in student acquisition of particular specialized skills dependent upon high-specification industry-standard kit (as suggested by many of our interviewees), or whether its value lay more in the *process* of broad and basic skill-learning across technologies, and in developing the ability and confidence to transfer (essentially kit-agnostic) knowledge from one context to another. It is the latter position, for example, that resonates in the experience of an interviewee describing her feelings after getting her first job:

> What I realized at that point was that it was the course that had given me the confidence and the ability to say 'I'm an editor' because I had learned the rudimentary basics. I didn't really know what I was doing – I mean it was tape-to-tape for God's sake, and it was like, you know, if I didn't know how to use something, I'd find someone to ask. […] I was like 'well you know I know how to multi-camera direct, because I did it on my course', and 'you know I know how to use a camera, because I did it on my course'. And so suddenly I did have this sort of bank of practical knowledge that was incredibly beneficial, and I just kept thinking I just had to be confident enough to say that I could do stuff. And that's what I did. (Co95-22)

This sense of having learned a range of 'rudimentary basics', rather than necessarily having had a high level of training in a particular skill specialization, seems to be what this graduate felt had given her the confidence to learn quickly in her first job, and propelled her subsequent success. Or as another interviewee succinctly put it: 'I expected practical skills to take me into a role. Actually, what it taught me is how to be professional…' (Co95-76)

'Finding your tribe': Common identity, teamwork, and managing relationships

Another significant set of themes to emerge from these interviews was the enormous value attributed to teamworking, the consequent relationships forged, and the networks and friendships made whilst at University: '[that's where] I made most of my really close friends that I hold dear today' (Co95-51); and 'a massive part of it for me was the people that I met, the other students' (Co95-60). There were many comments in a similar vein:

> …the most important thing for me was the relationships with other students on my course [...]. Obviously, media production is a team sport so I'm almost building my team for the future in terms of people I want to work with and people I get along with not just ethically and morally, but creatively. […] what I learned from the course was that it was more about the people rather than the course itself. (Co95-70)

It was not always easy to discern when comments like this were primarily referencing friendships, or professional working relationships – in some cases it was clearly both: 'I still work with some of those people today, to this very day - so my main [Director of Photography] is from my course; my main editor is from my course; my main composer is from my course' (Co95-70). The depth and longevity of such relationships were attributed to the experience of intensive teamworking, a feature that was clearly integral to the structure of the programme that they had undertaken:

> I think because the course was so practical, so hands-on, so immersive, that meant that actually I formed much closer bonds […] I don't know many people who, at this point in their life, are still in touch with as many of their university friends as I am. (Co95-01)

This was linked to a sense of common identity, and for many, university was recalled as the first time that they found themselves surrounded by, and expected to work with, other people who were 'focused on the same kind of goals' (Co95-51). This requirement to operate as part of a team was generally considered to be one of the programme's most valuable enduring legacies: '…it's not necessarily a work network, but it's a network of other like-minded people. So what it gives you is your tribe. You find your tribe, which I hadn't found before' (Co95-26).

This experience of forging relationships was also about learning 'to adapt' and 'to get along' (Co95-25), and discovering 'how I could work with people - how I couldn't work with people…' (Co95-51). Learning how to work with others and to develop skills as part of a team was recalled as a painful, as well as pleasurable, experience. Several interviewees talked about the value of being 'with people who are not so easy to work with' (Co95-26). In one case, the interviewee told us that being 'thrown into a production group' with difficult people, had given him the 'kind of skillset which has put me here [professionally]' (Co95-25). Learning to work with others, however difficult, and forging new, often life-long, relationships were the features of their university experience on which many of our interviewees seemed to place the highest value.

'Being a self-starter': Autonomy and taking initiative

Another set of recurring themes related to the extent to which the university expected students to be proactive, to take initiative, and to gain experiences above and beyond the essential requirements of the programme. This was sometimes in reference to the need for learner autonomy in order to fully benefit from the curriculum, and sometimes in reference to the added value gained by initiating extra-curricular activities. Some of those we spoke to had clearly benefited from having understood this expectation for learner autonomy. One

explained: 'a lot of it was about getting out and about, and being a self-starter, and taking the initiative on a lot of projects' (Co95-29). Another recalled being part of a group that would regularly borrow filming kit over weekends to work on their own film projects, while acknowledging that, had he fully appreciated the value of the opportunities available, 'I might've actually tried to push myself even harder' (Co95-51). Integral to these university-facilitated opportunities, was the potential for experimentation and testing out alternative paths for self-development - something thought to be uniquely available to the student in the University environment: 'because [university] gives you all of those opportunities to try different things, you can focus on where you actually want to go, and that's something that you can't really do in the industry…' (Co95-51). Another said:

> It gives you the opportunity to test yourself, your abilities to improve - hopefully - and to keep in a supported environment. The industry doesn't give you that - if you're not good enough in the industry, you won't get hired again. (Co95-26)

Whilst this feature of their university experience was widely acknowledged, it was by no means always construed positively. One interviewee complained: '…we had so much downtime… in the end I started doing my own separate projects…' (Co95-78). In this case, projects were recalled as having been *despite*, rather than because of, the programme: 'I truly felt that everything I learnt at the university, I could've learned it in six months. The only person that really pushed on my development was me because I continually pushed myself, pushed boundaries' (Co95-78).

The sense of having been 'left to your own devices to work on things' (Co95-55), was linked by a number of those we spoke to, with the sense that the University had not provided them with sufficient structure and/or levels of expectation. As one interviewee remarked: 'I don't think that really helped people like me who actually needed that little bit of structure that you would have got from school' (Co95-02). Another said: 'I don't think I made the best of the opportunities that I had, and I wish I'd been pushed a bit more […] I think I needed to be kicked more' (Co95-76). Some suggested that they had simply not been mature enough to rise to this level of challenge:

> I'm not sure many 18 year-olds grasp the concept that you're supposed to 'read' a subject. […] I think in lectures I thought I was gonna be told everything I'd needed to know. You know, I'd write it down and that would be the course. […] I think I kind of got that concept by the end, but I'm not sure I knew that going into it. (Co95-18)

Indeed, reflecting upon the challenges of learning autonomy prompted some of our interviewees to express wider concerns about the appropriateness of the age at which their undergraduate education had been undertaken, with comments like: 'university should wait until you're in your mid to late twenties' (Co95-35); and 'I could have done with taking a year or two out, travelling the world, growing-up a bit' (Co95-18).

The importance of taking initiative and responsibility for one's own learning, then, was generally better understood retrospectively than it had been at the time, and a number felt that the large amount of unstructured time involved in their degree programme assumed a level of maturity that had been beyond their years. Some, however, did feel that they had significantly benefitted, particularly those who had undertaken projects above and beyond the demands of the programme.

'How it's done, for real': encounters with the workplace within HE

A significant highlight of their undergraduate programme, for many, had been the opportunity to undertake a work placement. Again, this was related to the value they saw in the industry orientation of the programme. Although a work placement was not a compulsory element at that time, it had been encouraged, and those who had undertaken one generally attributed to it their personal and professional development, with comments such as it having had 'a huge effect on my future, like, 20 years on' (Co95-44). It was an opportunity to see 'how it's done, for real' (Co95-27), which had been 'priceless' (Co95-48), and an eye-opener in a wide variety of ways: 'In that work placement, I learned so much about everything - about casting, about costume, about schedules, actors, things I hadn't really thought about…' (Co95-31). These were opportunities to learn beyond the scope of what would be feasible within a university context:

> …it prepares you for the hours, the stamina of working 12 hours, plus two hours driving each side (or something crazy like that) because you're working in London. It prepared me for the hierarchy of a larger crew, which you don't get at uni. (Co95-26)

The majority of those who had undertaken a placement, recalled them as formative, positive, horizon-broadening experiences, providing valuable insights into professional practice, and the workaday world of media. For some, returning to university after their workplace experience had felt like a backward step, while others told us how they had been able to apply newly acquired skills. At the very least, placements were attributed with having provided networking opportunities, 'really useful for getting your first step on the ladder' (Co95-27). Some had received job offers arising directly from their placements, in one case, to begin even before the final term had ended: 'I handed in my dissertation, I went straight up to

London and I walked into a job immediately, from that placement' (Co95-31).

Although placements were generally discussed in highly positive terms by those who had undertaken them, it was clear that in some cases, there had been (sometimes insurmountable) barriers to obtaining a placement. One major barrier had been in covering living costs and finding accommodation near to the place of work – particularly where this was London. Although many could not recall their circumstances in much detail, it was clear that those without family or contacts in the vicinity of a suitable workplace, had been disadvantaged. Those who felt they had flourished during their placement, had done so as much due to good fortune as to their own initiative. Many had got by thanks entirely to the kindness of strangers, reflected in comments like: 'I managed to stay with a friend's neighbour for free' (Co95-31); 'I managed to find an ex-boyfriend's auntie to stay at' (Co95-08); and 'I was fortunate in the fact a friend of mine's granny lived there, so I went and stayed with her for nothing' (Co95-02). (The same problem recurred even more starkly a year later, at the point at which, as graduates, they entered the job market.)

Not all of our interviewees remembered their placement happily. Negative experiences were attributed to having been expected to undertake inappropriate or unsuitable work, having felt themselves to have been insufficiently prepared, or having found the work environment intimidating: 'I lacked confidence I think, probably, and it was an environment that I wasn't prepared for, and I didn't enjoy that at all' (Co95-03). Such reports, however, were less common than those that told us that their placement had been a positive and significant learning experience.

Discussion

Thus far we have described the findings of an analysis of a small and self-selecting sample of graduates from a single industry-oriented undergraduate media programme in the UK. Our purpose has been to identify where these graduates attribute the value and purpose of their undergraduate experience from the vantage point of post-university employment and the world of work. Whilst not wishing to over-claim for our findings, in the discussion that follows, we examine some of the implications. Six observations are offered:

1: Recognising the primacy of transferrable knowledge and skills

Our findings suggest that the long-term value of their Higher Education for these graduates lay primarily in their learning of transferrable knowledge and skills, and in the developed sense of confidence that accompanies the process of learning them. This was not necessarily recognised by our interviewees, and may seem surprising given the programme's industry-oriented *raison d'être*; the fact that its 'industry reputation' had clearly been its main attraction

at application stage; and the importance attributed by our interviewees to the 'practical' bent of the programme. However, the conclusion we draw from our analysis is that the acquisition of specialist technical skills was not where their education's main value lay for these graduates over the longer term. In saying this, we do not wish to imply that specific technical skills were not useful; on the contrary, in the short-term, they proved extremely useful to particular individuals at the point of their transition from university into a first job. However, the main value of learning specific specialist technical skills for these graduates was realised when such skills also became transferrable (i.e. applicable within another context, and with another set of technologies). This, we would argue, is demonstrably important within media industries, where technologies are coming and going at a rapid pace. Moreover, the fact that half of our sample told us that they no longer work in media, suggests that the more transferrable the knowledge and skills acquired, the more valuable in the context of a wider work environment defined increasingly by the need for flexibility and adaptability.

2: The value of a 'practical' programme informed by theory

Our findings suggest that for many students there was value in 'practical', problem-based, and project-led approaches to learning. Although this was identified by our interviewees in relation to their Media Production programme's industry orientation, and in the production of media artefacts that they were expected to make, we think its essential value is more likely to have lain in its effectiveness as a pedagogical tool. This is not to imply that the programme's particular orientation is somehow irrelevant; on the contrary industry-relevant projects clearly help student engagement. However as a pedagogical tool, the principle is far more broadly applicable. Many of our interviewees suggested that they learn most effectively through practical, project-based, and work-related learning activities – which may have been particularly effective given the close alignment between media projects and their personal passions. The challenge, however, seems to be in also ensuring that theoretical knowledge and criticality is explicitly related to these learning experiences. Much of the pedagogical value of practical activity (and the knowledge and skills acquired in such work), is at the moment at which the theoretical understanding is made practically relevant. Our second observation therefore, is that the value of an industry orientated university experience depends for many on: a) recognition of the importance of practical approaches to learning; and b) programme design that ensures critical theory and practice do not run as parallel tracks that never meet.

3: The holistic nature of the student experience

Despite policy rhetoric, and the resources increasingly attached to monitoring and accommodating the student experience within Higher Education, such activity is generally

concentrated on market signals of 'student satisfaction', rather than any deeper engagement with the pedagogical challenge implicit in the fact that, for much of the time, learning experiences take place outside the classroom. Although this observation is hardly a novel one, our findings underline the importance of this being more unambiguously recognised. Current political and public debate often assumes that a university programme is a discrete entity, exclusively concerned with a defined body of knowledge that can be 'delivered' as a product irrespective of the broader context. Yet the reality for the majority of the graduates we spoke to suggests that this is simply not the case. Our third observation, therefore, is that the broader institutional context and the rite-of-passage aspect of the undergraduate experience is as integral as programme-specific content and delivery.

4: Promoting teamwork and people management

Learning how to relate to and manage other people, teamworking, and building new purposeful networks are, of course, transferrable skills, and often closely aligned to project-based and practical approaches to learning. Nevertheless, we have chosen to highlight this separately as an important and distinct aspect of our findings, for two reasons: unlike certain other areas, its transferability was already widely acknowledged by those we spoke to; and whilst project and practical work is often team-based, this is not necessarily so. Our fourth observation, therefore, is that working with others, the experience of teamwork, and the management of other people, is considered to be such a valuable part of their university experience, that it could be more explicitly recognized as an end in itself, and not simply as a means to an end: incorporated within the essential learning objectives of undergraduate programmes, rather than treated as a kind of welcome by-product.

5: Teaching for initiative, learning autonomy, and self-regulation

Our findings suggest that a level of learning autonomy and self-regulation had been assumed within the programme that our interviewees had undertaken (as would normally be expected within any programme of Higher Education), and its consequence acknowledged. This had been both in relation to the programme's curriculum, as well as in the opportunities that the university afforded to students initiating their own extra-curricular projects. Yet there was a marked negativity associated with this freedom among a significant minority, even with the benefit of hindsight. This suggests to us three possible explanations: first, that there could have been a problem in students understanding the importance of, and expectations associated with, the requirement for autonomy within Higher Education – essentially a problem of communication; second, that there could have been a problem in students' ability/preparedness to cope with this level of freedom, irrespective of whether or not they had understood it –

essentially a problem of competence; and thirdly, that there could have been a problem in the level of expectation on the part of the University, suggesting that the programme was not sufficiently rigorous in its assessment, to consistently demand this level of independent engagement (the likely implication of the suggestion by one interviewee that the programme could have been completed in six months) – essentially a problem of standards. These three possible explanations are not, of course, mutually exclusive, and each of them has implications for the design, delivery, and assessment of programmes. Our fifth observation therefore, is that universities need to actively promote and support the learning of skills of autonomy and self-regulation, through both the design and the delivery of undergraduate programmes.

6: Providing work placement opportunities

The importance of the opportunity to experience a work environment was clearly thought to have been of enormous value by those who had undertaken a placement both at the time, and with the benefit of hindsight. Gaining insights into professional practice, work culture, types of work opportunity, and work behaviours, were all thought to have been beneficial. This raises two issues that, for us, highlight the importance of effective university-employer partnerships: first, in the fact that work placements are in the gift of industry, and not universities; and second, in the fact that this evidence suggests that placements are inequitably distributed, too often dependent on the economic, social and cultural capital of the individual student. The responsibility of universities is to prepare students for placements, and to ensure afterwards that learning from them is properly consolidated. The role of industry is to provide them. Our sixth observation, therefore, is that the more coordinated the industry-employer partnership is to ensure that quality placements are made widely available, and that these are equitably distributed, the better.

Conclusion

We conclude with a final comment with reference to the original purpose of this study. A narrowed understanding of the notion of employability will, no doubt, continue to dominate political and public conversation about the value and purpose of a media degree. However, in taking the long view, our study suggests that much of the value attributed by our cohort of graduates to their university education, is not restricted to 'employability' in media (or any other) industries (even where this has been the educational route of choice); rather, it emerges as important in much the same way as it might have done had they pursued a programme that did not claim a specific industry orientation. Indeed, our findings would seem to align our graduates' perspectives on the value of their education less with recent directions in policy, and more closely with John Henry Newman's famous reflection on *The Idea of the University* (1852)

succinctly summarised by Sonia Deboick in terms of 'the mark left on the alumnus's mind, which stays with them all their lives' (Deboick, 2010). As Collini has argued:

> [University] educates [students] in order that they should extend and deepen their understanding of themselves and the world, acquiring, in the course of this form of growing up, kinds of knowledge and skill which will be useful in their eventual employment, but which will no more be the sum of their education than that employment will be the sum of their lives. (Collini, 2012: 91)

For our sample of graduates, the particular value of the industry orientation of their programme in Media Production seems to have been in the focus, clarity, and love-of-subject that was intrinsic to the overall pedagogical project, and in the shorter-term vocational opportunities that proved helpful (at least to some) at the point of their first step into the world of work. What emerges is a far more nuanced picture of the formative (and transformative) impact of Higher Education than is evident from the direction of current policy.

Footnotes

1. We are indebted to our colleague, Iv Marks, for her work in establishing precise details of the cohort list and programe structure of the time.
2. We are indebted to our colleague, Annie East, for her help in tracing these graduates.
3. When citing our interviewees below, we refer to each according to their position on the original cohort list for Class of '95 (eg. Co95-44).

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