

PROVOCATION PAPER **Are we taking the broken pipeline seriously?** *Dr Karen Patel, Research Fellow, Birmingham City University*

There are thousands of students studying creative subjects at University in the region, yet many of them aren't going on to work in the creative sector. Where are they going? Why isn't the sector utilising the pool of creative talent in our universities?

The majority of students studying creative subjects are at my university, Birmingham City University (BCU) in the Faculty of Arts, Design and Media. A large proportion of these students are from ethnically diverse backgrounds, reflecting the diversity of the region. However, the data shows that the diversity of the students who are studying and graduating from creative courses is not reflected in the creative workforce, which remains dominated by people who are white and from relatively privileged backgrounds.

There appears to be a disconnect between those who are graduating with degrees from creative courses, and those going on to work in the cultural sector in the region. The pipeline from creative education to creative employment in this region is broken for people from marginalised groups. Why is this? Potential reasons could be:

- As indicated in the data, wider perceptions of the region are outdated, with the Midlands not seen to be a desirable cultural destination of choice. Some students who study and graduate in Birmingham may move away in search of creative

employment in seemingly more desirable locations such as London and Manchester. The talent drain to other areas of the UK should be a concern for the region.

- There are not enough clear pathways from university into creative employment, and this can be because of the way in which the creative industries operate. Creative and cultural work is often precarious and relies on informal networksⁱ. These networks and relationships are sometimes forged in informal social settings such as pubs, which can exclude people who do not, or cannot frequent these spaces. Thus, the creative industries can seem like a closed shop.
- Academic research on the creative industries suggests that there is a tendency for organisations to 'hire in their own image'ⁱⁱ so that anyone who does not conform to the culture of an organisation can be excluded or not considered for a potential job. The lack of transparency in certain hiring processes, coupled with the dominant idea of what a cultural worker is (i.e. white and male) can reproduce inequalities in the sectorⁱⁱⁱ.
- It is very difficult to get a full picture of the creative sector because of the lack of data on creative sole traders, freelancers and SMEs^{iv}. Thus it is possible that many graduates go into creative self-employment or freelance work and it is not reflected in the data. It is crucial we know more about these workers and how they can be supported, especially given the additional financial uncertainty brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic.

There are bound to be many other reasons why the diversity of creative graduates is not reflected in the sector, such as financial reasons, caring responsibilities, or the perception of creative work as not a viable career choice, thus

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some students could be discouraged to pursue such careers by their parents. Many of these issues are related to finance and will have been exacerbated by the pandemic, so there is a risk that inequalities in the sector will be entrenched further as only those from privileged and wealthy backgrounds will be able to pursue a career in creative work.

Cultural organisations need to take this broken pipeline seriously, because if the sector is not diverse it will never represent the region it is supposed to serve. There is a talent drain which other regions are benefitting from and it has been going on for years – I graduated from my MA in the School of Media at BCU in 2010, and after that many of my friends on the course moved away in search of creative jobs, most of them to London. Eleven years later and the same thing is happening. The region has such a rich and thriving cultural sector, so what is going on? What can be done to make it more inclusive and more attractive to our graduates?

There are some practical steps which can be taken. For example, organisations should review their hiring processes so they are more transparent, reviewing the language of job adverts, as many of these can discourage people from applying. They should explore ways in which they can support students and graduates through paid internships, so that students from low income families are not excluded from getting valuable experience in the sector. There are also surely some opportunities for engagement through the Commonwealth Games, and some lessons could be learned from Coventry City of Culture.

Despite the current challenges brought about by the pandemic, it is so important that the sector works to create clear pathways from creative education to creative employment, to try and repair that broken pipeline and keep our talented and diverse creative graduates here.

References

- ⁱ McRobbie, A. (2016) *Be creative: Making a living in the new culture industries*. John Wiley & Sons.
- ⁱⁱ Banks, M. (2017) *Creative justice: Cultural industries, work and inequality*. Rowman & Littlefield.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Brook, O. O'Brien, D. and Taylor, M. (2020) *Culture is bad for you: inequality in the cultural and creative industries*. Manchester University Press.
- ^{iv} Patel and Naudin, (2018) *Diversity and Cultural Leadership in the West Midlands: A report for the West Midlands Leadership Commission* <https://www.wmca.org.uk/media/2690/report-diversity-and-cultural-leadership-in-the-west-midlands.pdf>