

A pipeline problem: exploring policy disconnect in craft higher education



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Introduction

This paper explores disconnect between policy and creative higher education. It reflects on how current social and political discourse is shaping and defining the value of creative education, focusing on how this discourse has begun to impact undergraduate craft higher education in England. In this paper I aim to highlight contradictions between policies that advocate for the creative industries as an economic growth sector whilst simultaneously devaluing creative skills and disinvesting in arts education.

The paper begins with a discussion of current trends in arts education in the UK today followed by the literature on creative skills and the creative economy. It then highlights some key features of recent policy and government proposals that influence the creative industries and higher education, focusing on the Industrial Strategy and early proposals for the Post 18 Education Review. This is followed by findings from my own PhD research on craft higher education in England, highlighting the challenges faced by craft HE from the perspectives of craft educators. The paper reflects on how this creates a problem for the talent pipeline at both ends and a need for further evidence-based policy advocacy for the value of creative education and the impact of educational disinvestment. It ends with a call for a joined-up resistance between schools, higher education and the creative industries.

This paper presents findings from an ongoing PhD project on professional development in craft higher education in partnership with Crafts Council UK.

Literature and Context

Arts Education in the UK

In this section I provide background information on current trends in arts education in the UK at secondary and higher education level. Participation in arts subjects is on the decline at both levels. Data on national GCSE participation indicates a 25.6% decline in arts entries¹ over the last five years (Ofqual, 2018) with the greatest reduction in Design and Technology (42% decline over the same period) suggesting a move away from material and equipment intensive teaching, and thus a reduction in the focus on 3D learning. The decline in uptake of arts subjects in schools has been associated with the introduction of educational performance frameworks, perceptions of the value

¹ Art & design; Design & technology; Drama; Media/ film/ TV studies; Music; Performing/expressive arts

of arts education among pupils and parents, and a political emphasis on STEM over STEAM (Last, 2017; Cultural Learning Alliance, 2017).

Research by Norwich University of the Arts has also indicated negative attitudes towards art as ‘a subject worth doing’ as students enter secondary school, alongside a lack of basic drawing and painting skills and a decline in independent thinking (Last, 2017). More broadly, there has been an ontological separation of the head and the hand and hierarchical value systems have been applied (Guery and Deleule, 2014) resulting in the devaluing of manual activity in the rise of the knowledge economy (Gibson and Carr, 2018).

Marketisation of HE

In considering the position of craft education today it is important to acknowledge wider trends in the higher education system that affect craft degree participation and provision, particularly ongoing marketisation and debates around value for money. The marketisation of higher education through neoliberal policies and agendas (Olssen and Peters, 2005) has been heavily criticised, with tensions rising from the introduction of market ideology in a quasi-market structure and the rise of student consumers/customers (Brown, 2015; Molesworth et al., 2009). This system has generated ideological conflict between the foundational role of HE and the reality of students’ experiences (Molesworth et al., 2016).

An emphasis on the economic value and viability of higher education has given rise to a system subject to and dependent on performative measures of output, impact and achievement whereby education ‘can be reduced to an economic production function’ (Olssen and Peters, 2005, p.324). Here we have an instrumental approach that aligns higher education with getting a job (Houghton, 2016). The manifestation of this rhetoric can be seen in the establishment of The Office for Students² in 2018, which was designed to represent student interests, improve HE quality and choice and ensure ‘a good deal’ (DfE, 2018a) for students.

While policies to increase higher education participation and the establishment of new universities brought more art and design students into universities as independent Art Schools merged with university faculties (Banks and Oakley, 2016; Orr and Shreeve, 2017: 10), arts degree applications declined in 2012 following the introduction of higher rate fees (Banks and Oakley, 2016:50). 14,000 fewer students took creative subjects at university level in 2017 compared with 2016 (UCAS, 2017), although they remain a popular option. There has also been a decline in the number of key specialist courses at HE level following funding reduction, pressures to raise staff-to-student ratios and reduce hours of practice and study (Warwick Commission, 2015).

While the full impact of this disinvestment in arts education and wider social, economic and political perceptions of creative careers on the craft sector remains unclear, a 50% decline in all crafts higher education provision, (54% in core crafts courses) between 2007/08 and 2015/16 points towards a significant negative impact (Crafts Council, 2016). Although overall craft degree participation has declined more slowly (4%) over the same time period following a high intake in 2011/12, numbers are falling and are down 16% from 2012 (*ibid*).

² An independent regulator for higher education in England, replacing HEFCE
<https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/>

Skill and Value

‘there is a flaw in the logic that says to *count* is to be economically productive, but to *create* is not.’ (Last, 2017: 1)

The UK’s Creative Industries are a high growth sector, contributing £92bn GVA to the economy and supporting two million jobs (BEIS and DCMS, 2018). Creative occupations have been championed as being more future-proof and at a lower risk of automation (NESTA, 2014) and GuildHE (2016: 5) have estimated that ‘the economic impact of creative focused universities and colleges to the business community in the UK is £8.4 billion each year’. However, the talent pipeline at risk (Last, 2017; Bennett, 2018). While a skills shortage in the creative industries (Creative Industries Federation, 2017) is acknowledged, in supporting the development of the creative workforce government agendas emphasize improving digital and computing skills, while failing to address the critical risk of diminished arts education in schools (Hill, 2018).

While there is much cause for dismay and despair here, cases for support are being made for the value of arts education and creative skills from creative industries and education stakeholders (Cultural Learning Alliance, 2017; Nesta, 2015, Last, 2017; Warwick Commission, 2015). A growing evidence base for retaining and promoting is vital to garner political support for arts and cultural education. Advocacy grounded in evidence has been shown to be effective; in 2014 Crafts Council UK successfully prevented the removal of craft from the DCMS Creative industries definition³ by evidencing a £746m GVA contribution of crafts businesses, rising to £3.4bn GVA including occupations outside of craft industries (TBR, 2014). Subsequent research has also highlighted that craft skills and knowledge have a strong economic impact and significant potential to drive further growth and innovation in other sectors (KPMG, 2016).

The economic value of craft is accompanied by wide ranging social benefits (Schwarz and Yair, 2010), including health and wellbeing (Yair, 2011; Knit for Peace, 2018), although in garnering political support it would seem that such findings carry less weight in political decision making than evidence of economic growth. This is highlighted in the latest Industrial Strategy (BEIS, 2017) and the agenda for the Post 18 Education Review (DfE, 2018b), as outlined in the next sections.

Industrial Strategy and the Creative Industries

‘the UK’s world-class creative industries, which cover film, TV and video games, are growing at twice the rate of the economy as a whole and are heavily reliant on STEM skills.’ (BEIS, 2017: 104)

The Industrial Strategy had the potential to address the mismatch between educational policy and the needs of the creative industries. However, what was presented was an ongoing emphasis on STEM over STEAM, as highlighted in the quote above, and a concentration on digitally orientated sectors at the expense of others. The choice of a limited definition of the Creative Industries centring on film, TV and video games is also telling and highlights a broader issue of classifying diverse sectors as the creative industries and treating them as a homogenous group. The Creative Industries Sector Deal also focuses its attention on digital business and improving digital and computing skills. I argue that heterogeneity between sectors cannot be supported by policy that prioritises the few at the expense of the many.

³ proposed due to an inability to measure the sector’s economic contribution

This also highlights a wider challenge in accurately defining and measuring the creative industries, which are evolutionary rather than static (Roodhouse, 2011). The fixed nature of Creative Industries and Industrial policies (Hegarty, 2010), may make it fundamentally unsuited to the sectors it governs (Bassett, 2010) given the fluidity and diversity of CI organisations/businesses. While political understanding remains inordinately aligned with the economic interest in the knowledge economy (Leadbeater and Oakley, 1999; Howkins, 2001) the heterogeneous structures and needs of creative sectors cannot be sufficiently accounted for. The inadequacy of the definition and categorization of creative industries may partly explain why the Creative Industries Sector Deal (BEIS and DCMS, 2018) fails to address arts education and challenges facing employers and employees in the sectors not accounted for in the Industrial Strategy⁴(BEIS, 2017).

The commitments outlined in the Deal around skills and talent development present further challenges to the labour supply in that access initiatives are tied to the priorities of the Industrial Strategy. While the goal of overcoming barriers to entry is admirable, the emphasis on apprenticeships and a careers programme that aims to improve ‘understanding of the sector among students, parents and teachers’ (BEIS and DCMS, 2018: 11) are therefore likely to reinforce and expand the divide between the arts and STEM. I argue that the continual emphasis on the importance of STEM skills, and a failure to acknowledge or address the decline in arts education represents not only a fundamental flaw in political understanding of the creative industries (Creative Industries Federation, 2017), but an ideological denial of the value of creative skills and creative education.

The emphasis on apprenticeships and on the job training is also potentially problematic for higher education providers. This issue is heightened by the link between the priorities of the Industrial Strategy and the Post-18 Education Review which has an aim of assessing ‘How we can best support education outcomes that deliver our Industrial Strategy ambitions, by contributing to a strong economy and delivering the skills our country needs’ (DfE, 2018b: 2). In the next section I address the threat the Review poses to craft.

Craft and the Post-18 Education Review

The shift in attitude to higher education and entrenchment of market logic is prominently manifested in the discourse that has arisen around the Post 18 Education Review. While we await the conclusion of the consultation process and for the final regulations to be announced in 2019, the emphasis on “value for money” disadvantages arts and social science courses that, from a purely economic perspective driven by square-metre calculations and HMRC data, could be considered as low value.

The shift towards market logic is illustrated in the comparative positions of those reviewing higher education. Whilst in 1963 Lord Robins advocated that ‘it is just not true that the total return on investment in education is measured adequately by the same yardstick as investment in coal or electricity’ (Committee of Higher Education, 1963: 205), in 2018 the Secretary of State for Education, Damian Hinds, suggested the Review could result in a differential fee structure based on “the cost [to universities] to put it on, the benefit to the student and the benefit to our country and our

⁴ Industries omitted from the Industrial Strategy references to the Creative Industries: advertising and marketing, architecture, crafts, design, radio, photography, publishing, museums, galleries and libraries, and music, performing and visual arts

economy” (Shipman, 2018), and that arts degrees would therefore have lower fees. Again, this argument fails to take into account growth in the Creative Industries and its skills and labour pipeline.

On the face of it, charging less to study a craft degree might seem like a good idea, but it runs the risk of making it unviable for universities to deliver such courses given their high material, equipment and space costs. Craft education could be seen as uneconomic in this sense; 'something is uneconomic if it fails to earn an adequate profit in terms of money' (Schumacher, 1973/2011:28). As higher education providers succumb to increasing marketization, creative degree programmes deemed (by senior management and by government measures) to be failing to generate sufficient income or profit through student fees and research income in comparison with their expenditure on energy, facilities and materials may be first to go in 'efficiency savings'.

A key issue in the context of the Review is that craft courses tend to have both high material, equipment and space costs *and* lower than average graduate salaries. Graduate income, as reported in surveys such as DLHE and by HMRC tax data, should however be approached with caution and considered in relation to the prevalence of unpaid internships and low paid graduate jobs in the creative industries. Such measurements reflect negatively on HE providers when using the Destinations of Leavers of Higher Education (DLHE) survey or Longitudinal Employment Outcomes (LEO) data to evaluate graduate destinations and determine value for money in higher education. There is also a problem of a lack of accurate data on creative graduates, particularly those in early-career self-employment and portfolio careers (Ball et al., 2010; Hunt et al., 2010), although the introduction of the Graduate Outcomes survey in 2018 (aka NewDLHE) may go some way to addressing this. Further issues with using LEO data to determine the value of a degree to a graduate and society is that degrees are not the key indicator of earnings and there are significant regional differences (Hunt, 2018). For craft, the high proportion of micro-enterprises – 90% of the sector (BOP, 2012) – also makes accurate measurement difficult in national economic estimates.

The impact of encroaching market logic on higher education is manifested in course closures for some disciplines, as indicated in *Studying Craft 16* (Crafts Council, 2016) and by Partington (2010) regarding the decline of ceramics courses, while for others it may mean amalgamation with other core or borderline craft subjects, the loss of specialist equipment, workshop space or staff reduction. The branding of such courses and careers as uneconomical also has symbolic implications. According to economist E F Schumacher (1973/2011: 27);

'If an activity has been branded as uneconomic, it's right to existence is not merely questioned but energetically denied'

The decline of craft provision in higher education suggests that such economic criteria are already being applied by University management. In this sense economics has 'usurped' other evaluations of value (*ibid*) in a way that does not take into account the 'boundaries of the applicability of the economic calculus' (*ibid*: 31) and therefore discounts or devalues the contribution of higher education training to the craft sector (Yair, 2011) and wider creative economy (Comunian and Gilmore, 2016). Are we moving towards a system that questions the right of craft, despite all its social benefits (Schwarz and Yair, 2010), to exist, grow and prosper in a higher education environment?

The persistence of craft (Greenhalgh, 2003), a resurgence of craft and craft work at amateur and professional levels (Luckman, 2015), its celebration as an anti-consumerist activity (Crawford, 2009), and in the case of ceramics a revival in the contemporary art arena (Lilley, 2017) suggests that craft will be retained by society or individuals for 'non-economic reasons - social, aesthetic, moral, or political' (Schumacher, 1973/2011: 28). However, whether it will be preserved in the sphere of academia remains uncertain, and if so in what form?

While creatives may have a tendency to shy away from or even dismiss economic arguments or objectives in the pursuit of creative practice (Caves, 2000; Penaluna and Penaluna, 2011), it remains the case that economic justification is a key driver for policy (Jakob and Thomas, 2015; Pollard, 2007; Schumacher, 1973/2011) and may be a necessary evil if creative industries and creative workers want to exert influence over the development of policies that support, protect and promote their businesses and jobs. It is also important to note here that creative practice does not operate within a vacuum and we must therefore consider its position within both creative and wider economy structures if it is to be sustainable. However, even if we accept the economic argument current categorisations and measurements used in national economic estimates do not count the full value of craft (TBR, 2014). More nuanced metrics may therefore be required alongside continued advocacy for the breadth of craft's contribution.

Methods

In the previous section I have provided the context for my own investigation into what impact the current social and political discourse is having on craft higher education. This study was conducted as part of my PhD project on craft higher education and professional development. In this paper I draw from interviews with fifteen craft educators (lecturers, programme leaders and technicians) from craft undergraduate degree programmes at four higher education institutions in England. Using thematic analysis, I identified key impacts around the filtering of the broader socio-political debate around value for money and creative education into the higher education system, including challenges of student recruitment, perceptions of employability among prospective students and the overall impact of market logic of course structure and provision.

Findings

Recruitment and perceptions of employability

The primary concern for my craft educator interviewees was recruitment and declining student numbers associated with a lack of uptake of arts subjects in school, the costs of going to university, a lack of encouragement to pursue a creative pathway from teachers, careers advisors and parents, and heightened employability concerns among prospective students and their parents. It was also indicated that lower numbers of applicants meant that courses were also limited in their ability to be selective in their recruitment.

'we have to educate the parent just as much as the student about where the jobs are in the craft industry' – Educator, South West

They also reflected on changes to the perceived role of higher education, particularly for creative-practice based subjects from a means of enhancing knowledge of a particular practice or material

towards being a route to employment. This was seen as a somewhat contradictory approach to craft driven by wider employability agendas. Enhanced expectations of immediate graduate employment and career establishment were also highlighted, with increased pressure from parents and the government exerted through judgements of graduate success in the Destination of Leavers of Higher Education (DLHE) survey. It was highlighted that such expectations and measurements often failed to account for the time required to establish a professional creative practice.

Skillsets and approaches to learning

Staff often referenced the decline of arts education in schools and a lack of engagement with resistant materials such as wood, clay and metal pre-university. This was seen as impacting the higher education system in that students were arriving with lower base level skills and material knowledge and therefore required more foundational skills development in the first year of their degree. This effect was compounded by increased recruitment directly from college or school rather than through foundation programmes, where students would previously have built up a greater skills base.

In addition to technical skills, a requirement for remedial work was also perceived as necessary to rectify lower levels of communication skills (written and verbal), critical thinking, independence and resilience among new students. Craft educators also reported that students expressed a preference for tick-box learning and explicit instruction and were challenged by high levels of self-directed learning. It is important to note that this observation is not particularly new or limited to craft degrees; in 2010 Tim Oates' (2010:4) highlighted the negative effects of 'tick list' teaching and learning in the national curriculum. More recently, resilience has taken a prominent position in higher education debate and strategy, linked with growing concerns for students' mental health (McIntosh and Shaw, 2017), although Hayes (2017) argues that young people have wrongfully been constructed by the education system and media as 'Generation Snowflake'.

*'students who come straight out of school **we have to do quite a lot of remedial work to get them to think critically and independently** a lot more than perhaps we used to have to...**that's about pipeline**, that's about how you progress from one system to another'* – Educator, North East

*'a lot of our students **are not as resilient as they used to be**...they can't stand up in front of someone without falling apart'* – Educator, London

Denying the value of creative skills

There was a sentiment expressed by staff that the current attitude towards craft, making, and creative skills presented by the government through policy and the media represented an ideological denial of the value of creative skills, whereby making was positioned as an unnecessary luxury, in line with 'art for art's sake'. This political standpoint was also seen to be at odds with the resurgence of interest in craft and craft work at amateur and professional levels, and its manifestation in the education system as out of touch with contemporary social movements.

*'it's kind of strange that at a time when making is so prevalent, that so many courses are shutting down. And I also think that there can **be a limited view of what making is and it's kind of deemed to be sort of possibly unnecessary, a bit like the arts**. Whereas to me it's fundamental. It's absolutely essential to our kind of community, global or local'* – Educator, London

Staff also expressed how they felt the government were systematically devaluing creative education through its quashing in primary and secondary education, and in negative messaging regarding

employability in the creative industries. All of this was perceived as filtering down to prospective students, influencing their perception of studying craft and ultimately their choice to study or not study a creative subject at university. Negative messaging was also seen as creating a challenge for graduates to see the transferability of their skills beyond making, and for those seeking employment rather than self-employment, in having their skill set recognised by employers.

It's a myth to say you'll never get a job in the creative industries, that just isn't true, because I think there are many more people leaving engineering courses or other types of academic courses that are still struggling to get jobs. So, if the government would stop you know planting those negative seeds it would help our cause a little. – Educator, Midlands

Overall impact of market logic

More generalised effects of growing market logic in the higher education system identified by educators were a decline in lecturer's contact hours with students dedicated to skills-based teaching and tutorials. This was associated with the decline in student numbers, changes to staff work-loading, and an increase in classroom-based teaching. A perceived lack of face-to-face studio time with lecturers was also highlighted by final year students that I interviewed, suggesting that the shift in workload had not gone un-noticed by students. Consistent support was however given by students for technical staff at their institutions for their knowledge, material expertise, tuition and guidance in and out of scheduled workshops.

Staff also reflected on the amalgamation or closure of craft degree courses in their own institution and more widely across the sector. There was however a sense that those who had survived the cull were subsequently benefiting from being in a smaller pool of providers. The downsizing of facilities, or threats to workshop space as cost-saving strategies were rolled by senior management were also identified. A particular challenge was highlighted in demonstrating economic efficiency in a square-metre per student measurement as courses required large scale, expensive equipment and studio space to facilitate creative projects, but that due to the nature of the course they typically had small student cohorts. This is compounded by a decline in student numbers across craft (Crafts Council, 2016) and creative subjects overall in higher education (UCAS, 2017).

However, disinvestment in workshops and making facilities varied across my case studies; in one case there had been an £8m investment in equipment and facilities whilst in another a specialist site had been closed, moved to a significantly smaller location and amalgamated with another programme. In this we can observe the influence of wider institutional pressures (financial) and the leadership's position on craft and making on an institution's strategy and subsequent course growth or closure.

'lots of the courses to do glass and ceramics down South have closed, we're still as strong as ever. We've had a bit of a tricky patch with lower numbers but we're on the way back up. And I think we've now become the beneficiaries of a sad decline in how many people are doing glass and ceramics and craft' – Educator, North East

Another common theme was the strategic changing of a course title to increase search-engine optimisation in recruitment, attract a wider pool of students, and present a heightened sense of professionalism. This tended to involve a move away from 'craft', and in particular 'crafts', towards 'design' or 'designer maker'. This observation links with the findings of my earlier investigation of craft degree course descriptions (England, 2017) which highlighted a minimal promotion of their connection to craft, despite disciplinary links, again with preference given to 'design' and 'making'.

'I felt the title wasn't really selling the course more than anything. I feel the word contemporary, it's not the right academic word, but I think it's really 80's... I felt the word 3D Design Craft made it feel a bit more modern and feel a bit more approachable to do everything.' – Educator, South West

Conclusions

Bringing my own findings together with the evidence of an ongoing decline of arts education, particularly Design & Technology, in schools (Ofqual, 2018) I present that there is a talent pipeline problem at both ends. Overall, I support that craft as a field of academic study in higher education should have a wider remit than developing technical proficiency. However, a loss of material engagement in primary and secondary education, combined with decreasing opportunities for more advanced technical skills development in higher education, and a growing emphasis on transferable, soft skills for employability, I argue, is fundamentally detrimental to the skills and material knowledge needed for innovation, the creative application of craft knowledge within and outside the sector, and yes, economic growth. However, in order to fully understand the impact of educational disinvestment in art, craft and design at all levels further research is needed that can be used as an evidence base for policy advocacy by stakeholders in the creative industries and education sectors.

In 2015 Doreen Jakob and Nicola Thomas wrote of the political opportunity afforded to craft advocates by a change in UK government from Labour to a Conservative-Lib Dem coalition, and a period of economic uncertainty between 2010-12. They highlighted the importance personal investment, both among craft sector stakeholders and policy makers in advancing the craft agenda. Willing advocates were then found in John Hayes as UK Minister of State for Further Education, Skills and Lifelong Learning (2010–2012), and Ed Vaizey as Minister for Culture, Communications and Creative Industries (2010-2016), who provided an 'open ear' within the walls of Westminster (Jakob and Thomas, 2015). Subsequent changes in the cabinet, the resounding presence of economic growth rhetoric in the cultural and creative industries agenda (Flew and Cunningham, 2010), and the supremacy of STEM (Last, 2017) over STEAM perhaps could have predicted the waning of craft's political zeitgeist. Where are the ministers championing craft today?

There is an undeniable passion and will to support creative education in the UK, and growing evidence of resistance among the creative community demonstrated by research and advocacy by organisations and individuals (Last, 2017; Cultural Learning Alliance, 2017; Crafts Council, 2016). A few higher education providers are bucking the trend of downsizing by investing in their making facilities and supporting the talent pipeline through school partnerships, while after-school and Saturday clubs continue to provide access to Art & Design. However, localised or extracurricular activities cannot be sold as the answer to the systematic removal or downgrading of arts in schools and higher education, both of which threaten the prosperity of the creative economy. My research also suggests that siloed activity by providers and craft educators may be limited by institutional status (i.e. as an Arts College or University) linked to the prevailing institutional logic (Thornton and Ocasio, 2008) and how senior management subsequently respond to the market and the government in their strategic planning.

Given high levels of political uncertainty in the UK there may be another window of opportunity for art, design and craft to regain the political support they need to reverse the educational trends and preserve creative education for future generations. I argue such advocacy requires a joined-up resistance between schools, higher education and the creative industries, by individuals and organisations, and that crucially, the argument needs to be put in front of ministers, rather than makers.

Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are my own and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of King's College London or Crafts Council UK.

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