EDGE FOUNDATION

SKILLS SHORTAGES IN THE CREATIVE INDUSTRIES

– An Edge Skills Shortages Bulletin special supplement



Introduction

Our Skills Shortages Bulletins have long tracked the creative industries as an increasingly important part of the UK economy. The sector is now one of the Government's eight priority growth sectors, with 2.5 million jobs and more than 269,000 businesses across a remarkably diverse range of activities: from architecture, advertising and publishing to screen, music, performing arts, craft and video games.

But as our earlier Bulletins showed, it is also a sector where many of the problems facing the skills system in the UK are felt especially acutely. Alongside concerns about the pipeline of talent including falling participation in some creative subjects and access to industry experience, they have highlighted the precarious and project-based nature of much creative work, and the difficulty of building clear, continuous career pathways.

These challenges are compounded by the structure of the sector itself. Creative businesses are, for the most part, small, and much creative work is freelance, project-based or fixed-term. This makes it harder for employers to release people for training, for training providers to engage employers, and for individuals to build secure, continuous career pathways.

Click on the covers to read previous Skills Shortages Bulletins



2.5 million filled jobs were supported by the creative industries in 2025

The creative industries supported around **2.5 million** filled jobs in 2025, **up 17.3%** on 2019, and considerably faster growth than the UK workforce overall *(Gov.uk)*.



£146 billion to UK GVA in 2024

The creative industries contributed more than **£146 billion** to UK GVA in 2024, around **5.5% of the UK economy** (Gov.uk)



Experienced staff

42% of employers with skills shortages said their difficulties concerned experienced staff **five to ten years** into their careers *(Creative Industries Skills Audits, 2026).*

81% expected to require Level 4+ Qualifications

81% of projected additional employment in the priority creative occupations is **expected to require qualifications at Level 4 or above** *(Gov.uk)*.



Word of mouth



The pipeline is not equally open to everyone: **46%** of recruiting creative employers still hire by **word of mouth** *(Creative Industries Skills Audits, 2026).*

30 priority creative occupations could grow by 416,000



Skills England projects that employment in 30 priority creative occupations could grow by 416,000 between 2025 and 2035.

43% skills shortages or skills gaps in 2025

In 2025, **43% of creative employers reported either skills shortages** when recruiting or **skills gaps** among existing staff *(Creative Industries Skills Audits, 2026).*

The Government's 2025 Creative Industries Sector Plan



The Government's 2025 **Creative Industries Sector Plan targeted £31bn of annual creative-industry investment by 2035**, alongside action on skills, finance, R&D, exports and regional growth. ***Creative UK*** found significant progress on investment, but several skills commitments in the Plan were still outstanding: including a Skills Forum to work with industry on training pathways, and a Freelance Champion to represent freelancers in government.

77% of creative employers provide some training



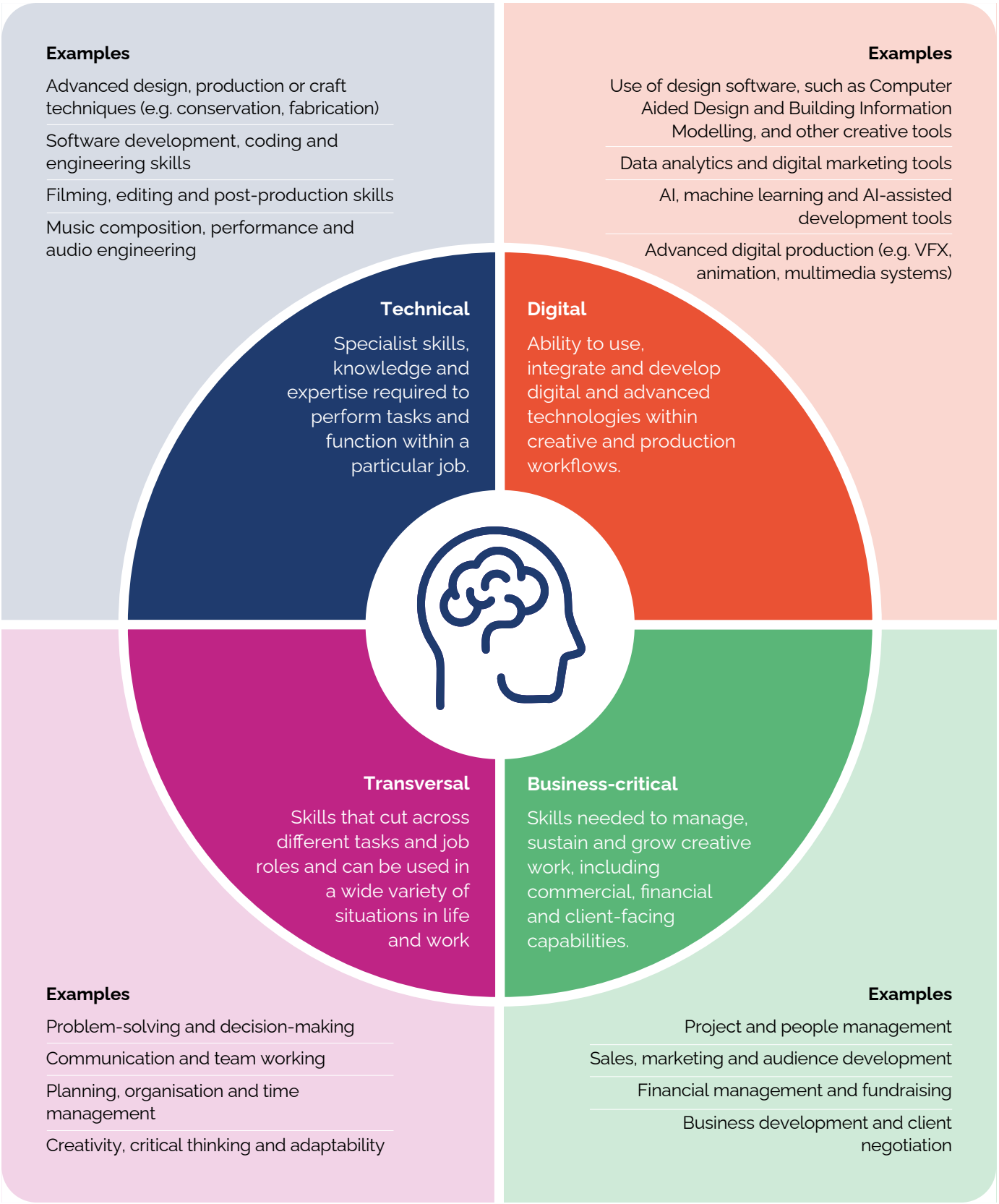
77% of creative employers provide some training, yet **36% say lack of funds prevents them doing more.** Nearly half say more flexible forms of training would help *(Creative Industries Skills Audits, 2026).*

93.4% of creative-industry businesses are micro-businesses

93.4% of creative-industry businesses are micro-businesses **employing fewer than 10 people** *(Gov.uk)*



The ‘alchemy’ of skills needed in the creative industries



Source: Creative industries skills audits: creative industries summary report (2026), p. 28.

The elusive alchemy of skills: what the first Creative Industries Skills Audits reveal

Heather Carey, Work Advance

The creative industries are one of the eight growth-driving sectors (the 'IS-8') at the heart of the government's Industrial Strategy. Nearly half (47%) of creative employers expect to grow their workforce and projections published earlier this year by Skills England suggest employment in 30 priority creative occupations alone will grow by 416,000 between 2025 and 2035. Yet until now there has been no consistent, comparable picture of the jobs and skills its eleven sub-sectors most need, from architecture and publishing to craft, music and video games.

The Creative Industries Skills Audits were designed to fill that gap. A commitment in the Creative Industries Sector Plan, they were funded jointly by the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport and the Creative Industries Council, and delivered by the Creative Industries Policy and Evidence Centre (Creative PEC) and Work Advance. Their aim was to give the sector the evidence it needs to speak with a united voice on its most pressing skills challenges. Over eighteen months we reviewed hundreds of studies, surveyed more than 1,300 employers through a new Creative Employer Skills Survey and engaged over 200 employers, freelancers and policymakers across the UK. The result is eleven sub-sector audits and a summary report, published in May 2026.

A shortage of skills more than qualifications

The Audits found that in 2025, 43% of creative employers reported either skills shortages when recruiting or skills gaps amongst their workforce. A third (32%) of those that had recruited in the past two years found vacancies hard to fill. Here the detail of the Audits matters. IT, software and computer services accounts for over 40% of employment in the creative industries and hence its needs can easily overshadow those of smaller sub-sectors. While software developers top the list of hard-to-fill roles across the creative industries as a whole, for employers in architecture it is architects, in publishing editors, and in the performing and visual arts theatre technicians.

In exploring the causes of recruitment difficulties, skills matter most:

72% of employers with hard-to-fill vacancies cited applicants lacking the required skills as a main cause.

Only 19% pointed to a lack of qualifications.

Some skills shortages are highly specialised: millinery in fashion, BIM software in architecture, collections management systems in museums, for example. But other skills shortages cut right across the sector. Employers in every sub-sector struggle to find critical business skills such as sales, fundraising, marketing and finance, and more than half (56%) of those with skills shortages said applicants lacked transversal skills like planning and organising. Creative employers need an alchemy of technical, digital, transversal and business skills, and it is finding that combination in one candidate that proves so difficult.

The mid-career talent problem

Policy attention has understandably focused on entry routes into creative work, yet 42% of employers with skills shortages and 37% of those with skills gaps said their difficulties concerned experienced staff, five to ten years into their careers. Around one in five pointed to entry-level roles. The problem is most pronounced in advertising and marketing, screen, video games, design and tech, where roundtable participants described people stepping up without skilling up: promoted quickly, often without the training needed for more senior roles.

Technology adds to the pressure, because the skills half-life in the creative industries is short. In games, screen and tech, upskilling in response to software and hardware updates is near constant, and 81% of employers expecting to grow their workforce anticipate upskilling needs driven by new technology, with AI front of mind. At the same time, employers across several creative sub-sectors warned that AI could reduce demand for junior talent, and junior roles are largely absent from the list of occupations employers expect to expand. If fewer people get a foothold in the industry today, the mid-career gap will widen in years to come.

These challenges are already holding back growth. Seven in ten employers with skills challenges say they are affecting their business, and around one in five report delays to new products and services (21%) or scaled-back long-term growth or investment plans (19%). Most employers (77%) do provide some training, but 36% cite a lack of funds as a barrier to offering more, and the dominance of micro-firms and project-based freelance work makes time for development scarce.

What needs to change

The Audits make 17 recommendations under five priorities. For policymakers, the most pressing is to give workforce upskilling equal weight with the pipeline of new talent. That means precision upskilling: clearer kitemarking of industry-recognised training (which 30% of employers say would help them train more), a subsidised management development programme focused on talent management and skills activation, and skills passports to record learning. Nearly half (47%) of employers say more flexible forms of training would help them offer more. Apprenticeship units, fundable through the Growth and Skills Levy since April, and the Lifelong Learning Entitlement, which from January 2027 will fund modules of Higher Technical Qualifications and of degrees aligned to the Industrial Strategy, offer real opportunity, provided creative courses are in scope.

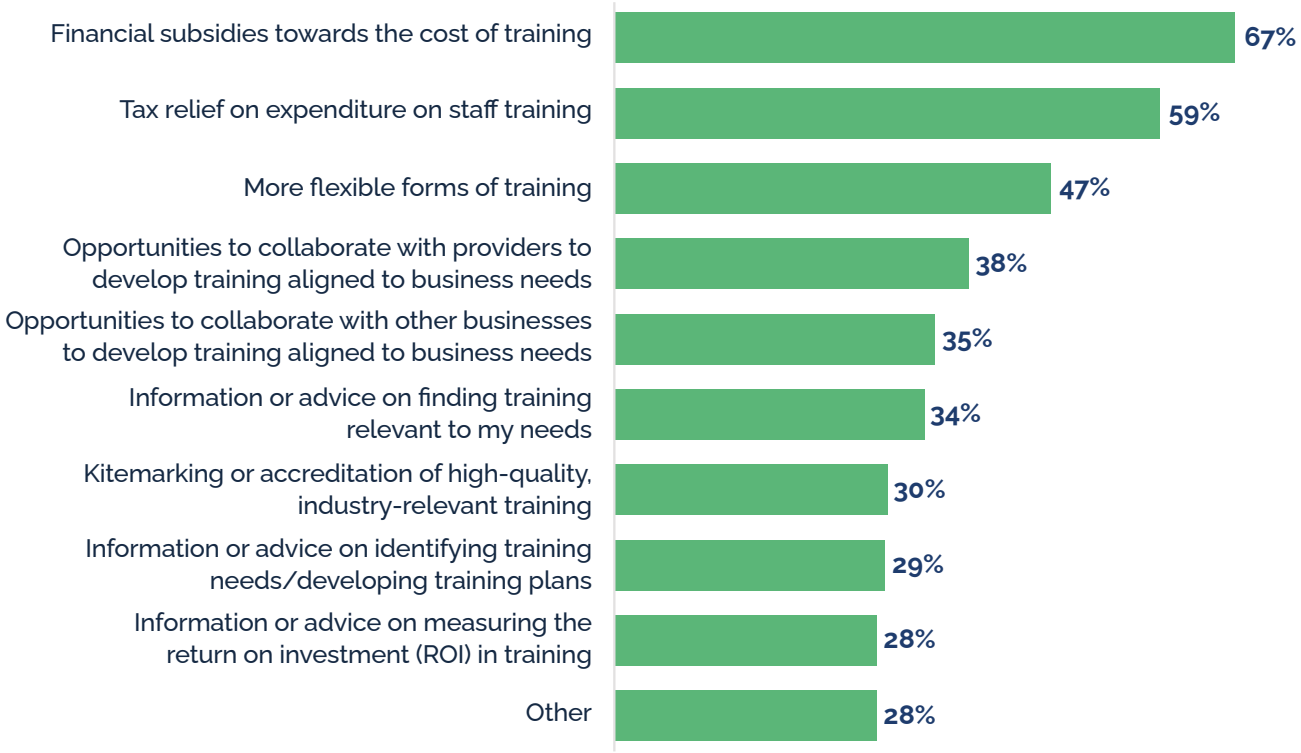
Entry routes still need protecting. Three quarters of the creative workforce hold a degree or other higher education qualification, yet from 2026-27 creative and performing arts courses in England will receive no Strategic Priorities Grant high-cost subject funding. The withdrawal of levy funding for Level 7 apprenticeships for those aged 22 and over is already impacting the creative industries and there is a need to carefully manage Level 3 reforms, to avoid switching off valued Applied General Qualifications before alternative routes, such as creative T-Levels and V-levels are well-established. Widening access matters too, when 46% of recruiting creative employers still hire by word of mouth and there is an underrepresentation of women, people of colour, disabled people and those from working class backgrounds across many creative sub-sectors.

Finally, there is a need to drive-up employer engagement. Nearly four in ten (38%) creative employers say opportunities to collaborate with providers to shape relevant provision would help them offer more training, yet earlier Creative PEC research suggests only one in ten do so in practice. We propose stronger skills governance for the sector, a clear skills mandate for the two Freelance Champions appointed in September, a Creative Industries Pact for Skills to galvanise employer investment, and a suite of place-based Technical Excellence Networks connecting employers, the new Technical Excellence Colleges and universities.

Taken together, the recommendations amount to a reorientation of the skills system around the needs of the creative industries, and a new chapter of partnership in developing the talent the sector needs to drive productivity, innovation and growth.

Enablers of skills investment 2025

% of employers suggesting these measures would enable them to offer more training



Source: Creative industries skills audits: creative industries summary report (2026), p. 75.



The Creative Industries Skills Audits mark a step-change in the evidence base on skills across the creative industries. Drawing on robust data and deep industry engagement, they show clearly that skills challenges sit at the heart of the sector's prospects for growth. From fast-changing technologies to gaps at mid-career level, the evidence is unequivocal: we need a more responsive, joined-up skills system, matched by greater investment from employers and workers to keep skills relevant now and in the future.

Heather Carey
Director, Work Advance, and co-author of the Creative Industries Skills Audits



When are Skills Shortages... good?

Andy Hall, Head of Policy & Public Affairs, ScreenSkills

In the screen industry thanks to the efforts of training providers, employers and others we have a skilled workforce which has strong capacity. This has been hard earned and is a real asset to the sector and the country but presents a challenge for individuals and businesses when production declines, leaving the workforce utilised below its capacity.

In this scenario skills shortages can be an important fuel to the skills machine. They can spur employer investment and prompt them to overcome barriers to training. They can encourage individuals' ambitions to train and retrain with trust and certainty that their qualifications and skills will have currency in a crowded labour market.

Cleary, long-term untreated skills shortages leave talent and growth on the table which no-one wants, but a system without them risks inertia. The act of training to fill skills shortages reaps benefits beyond the specific roles themselves too, boosting the diversity, essential skills and confidence of applicants.

These elements all boost productivity, innovation and global competitiveness, which in turn helps business sustain or expand roles.

However, for skills shortages to be catalytic rather than inhibiting, this requires three conditions:

- Being able to identify them,
- Having an industry bought in to tackling them,
- A skills system which enables employers and learners to access the training they need to correct these shortages.

For the UK Screen industry, we have the first two conditions but despite some positive developments the third is more elusive.

Strong foundations

Thanks to the investment and support from across the sector we know more than ever before about the size and shape of the screen workforce, where the skills shortages are and how we should respond.

ScreenSkills research, funded and supported by industry, shows the majority of employers in the screen industry report that at least 80% of the workforce is proficient, but some skills shortages still persist: for example, Production Coordinators, VFX Supervisors and Animators.

To their credit, employers from across the screen industry are tackling skills shortages and investing in talent. Next year, through ScreenSkills, industry will invest more than £21 million in training and workforce development. There is brilliant work happening. Framestore's Work Experience is opening up the industry to people of all backgrounds. Productions like Warp Films' Adolescence are providing placements to support the workforce to build their skills at every stage of their careers. People like Jon Beer are taking the next step and progressing through the make a move programme's on-the-job learning opportunities.



Unrealised opportunity

We have the data on skills shortages; we have the coordination and the motivation to tackle them, but employers and training providers are currently inhibited from fully utilising government skills systems with the speed and flexibility they need. This is despite, in the case of the growth and skills levy, employers paying into it under the same conditions as other sectors.



Without action there is a risk skills shortages become limiting rather than catalytic.

Some small tweaks would make a big difference.

- Firstly, flexible apprenticeship models in Wales have shown promise, mirroring the freelance, fast-paced nature of the film and TV sector. Enabling more of this in more places could unlock further pathways and talent. In England, the new post-16 pathways creative qualifications policy group led by Skills England is welcome and can hopefully unlock complementary flexibility and industry engagement for predominantly classroom-based study.
- Secondly, the introduction of apprenticeship units in England is welcome and if we don't want to change the system, then unlocking shorter form training through them and prioritising the screen industry for their adoption is a real opportunity. It could counterbalance the difficulty the industry has in unlocking apprenticeship levy funding for longer form apprenticeships.
- Lastly, the defunding of management and leadership training in England also means the industry can't use government funding and mechanisms to address one of its primary skills shortages. More support here nationally or regionally through bootcamps would help industry skills investment go further and help sustain and progress more people in the industry.

Unlocking potential

The UK Screen Industry is a success story. 15% of year 11 students in England want to work in the creative industries and a large proportion of them want to work in Screen. The sector contributed roughly £24 billion in GVA to the UK economy in 2024 and supports the employment of around 250,000 people.

The raw materials are there. More flexibility, investment and speed in the skills system could help us make the most of them, spreading growth and opportunity to all parts of the sector and country.





Henry Kobus, Scenic Carpentry Apprentice

There are very, very specific roles in theatre...



***Kath Geraghty MBE is Head of Technical Qualifications at the National Theatre** and oversaw the creation and delivery of their apprenticeships scheme. That scheme, which began in 2012, has recruited over 70 apprentices across 20 departments from carpentry and scenic art to finance and IT, with 90% of apprentices who completed their training going on to paid professional work in the area they trained in. We talked to her on a warm and pleasant day in the maze of National Theatre offices and asked whether there really were skills shortages there, despite a creative career being such a popular path for so many?*

"There's been a shift, post pandemic (in terms of skills shortages). We kind of lost everybody then, we lost all of the freelancers. We lost a lot of very senior people with many, many years' experience, who were close to retirement, and we also lost the entry level. It took a long time to pick up.

Now, people are applying for roles with us, whether that's apprenticeship roles or entry-level roles elsewhere in the organisation. Our Apprenticeships Scheme is part of our pioneering Skills Centre in partnership with Bank of America, which supports nearly 6,000 people across the UK each year through training opportunities, placements and resources. Through this we are helping to build a more resilient and sustainable future for theatre and the wider economy and we're making sure we can be as diverse and inclusive as possible and offer welcoming workplaces. Entry level is not our big issue; our problems are further up. All of that talent that left over the pandemic didn't come back, so we are still low on skills in some of those really key craft and construction areas like carpentry, prop-making and metal work.

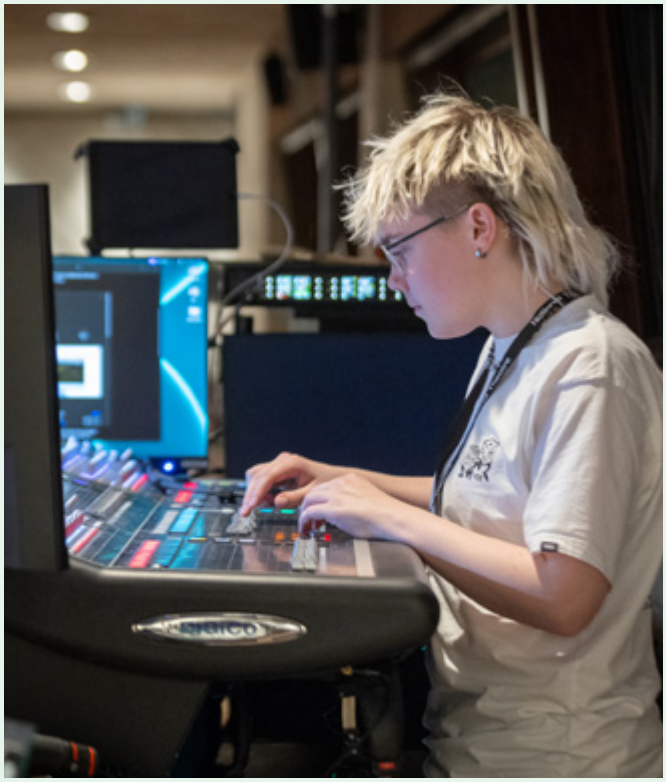
There's a huge gap in experience between those who are about to retire and the nineteen, twenty, twenty-two-year-olds who are just qualifying. There is potential, but in the next five years, there's a whole raft of staff who are very close to retirement and we don't yet have the skilled people to come in and take on those roles. There are very specific roles in theatre, and a kind of craft base. Wig making is such a dying art, for example. Then there are the real technical specialisations in sound, or video and lighting which have gone so far and so fast that there are tech roles that didn't even exist ten years ago. Roles like lighting programmer or really snazzy video roles like video mapping. There's no clear pathway into them and they're very much in demand. So there's a real gap that needs filling there."

Are apprentices from the scheme you set up, and have developed over the last fourteen years, starting to filter in to fix those gaps?

"We have apprentices across the whole organisation. Our IT service desk, for instance, has three former apprentices working in there who are on different levels of seniority. And that is good succession planning.



Sarah Ray-Dobson, Apprentice Prop Maker



Cole Scott, Apprentice Technical Theatre

But in craft areas, apprentices have a good level of skill, but they're still missing years of experience. The full skills package isn't just what they learn at college and what they learn on the job, but how to apply it again and again over the course of production. Our prop making department is focusing really hard on succession planning and we've just recruited our third post-Covid props apprentice there. One of our previous apprentices came back to work for us in props and she's now in a more senior role.

I encourage our heads of department and our staff to really get involved. So we were involved in the creation of various new apprenticeship standards for the sector - scenic artist, scenic automation, scenic construction, wigs, hair, makeup and prosthetics technician, and costume performance support technician, for example. They're all new standards and it was an extremely painful process. Proving that it was a stand-alone competency was really important. But I think if you have a clear qualification programme, then people who weren't brought up coming to theatre, their parents and carers, can better understand what the career looks like.

But since this government was elected and since the creation of Skills England, there's been a focus on collaboration and the expectation is that the employers will pay for the training that's being collaborated on. I understand why, I understand about the black hole and the finances, but in this sector there are lots of financial pressures. Many employers certainly feel they don't have spare money to spend on developing skills, so that's a big chasm that needs bridging".

Finally, do you think Andy Burham's recent announcement about increasing access to technical pathways for 14-16 year olds will be a step forward?

"I really hope so. I mean, like with all of these things, we're waiting for detail. I think the tone of the conversation is brilliant, we've been talking about parity of esteem for years and never got it, you know, nowhere near, so it's great that he's so upfront about lauding technical education. In principle, we'll do everything we can to support that. Obviously, the devil is in the detail. We'll see what it looks like".



Ruby Timmis, Running Wardrobe Costume Technician Apprentice

Unequal chances to develop creative skills are consequential for later creative careers

Sonia Ilie, University of Cambridge

In Creative Subject Choices: Student Pathways through Education and into Employment, a study funded by the Nuffield Foundation, Sonia Ilie and colleagues from the Faculty of Education, University of Cambridge, explore when, how, and why young people choose to study creative subjects (including art, dance, design, drama, performing arts, music, cinematography, and others) and how this relates to their later creative careers. The study draws on English education records, an existing longitudinal cohort study, and insights from students and educators in creative education providers, as well as from workers in the creative sector.

Preferences, skills, degrees, and later creative employment

In England, the creative sector contributes to the economic and social wellbeing of the country, and represents a desirable destination for young people. At the same time, creative education is under pressure, with lowering rates of creative subject take up in schools, creative higher education courses downsizing, and the opportunities to engage with the creative sector dependent on one's background and prior opportunities. Starting by exploring who makes creative subject choices in education, our study suggests the most successful transitions into creative employment involved combinations of opportunities that are not available uniformly to all.

Early creative preferences do not directly translate into creative subject choices.	Young people had substantial early interest in creative subjects: girls preferred creative subjects more than boys, but socio-economic gaps were small. However, educational records suggest this did not translate directly into subject choices at GCSE, post-16, or in higher education. Young people eligible for free school meals experienced a steady decline in the probability of making a creative subject choices from age 16 onwards. And girls eligible for free school meals were the group least likely to have made a creative subject choice consistently across all educational stages. Nonetheless, survey data suggested that, over and above attainment and personal characteristics, early creative preferences were still predictive of creative employment in early adulthood.
Formal higher education predicts creative employment.	Degrees, and specifically degrees in a creative subject, were associated with higher probabilities of employment in a creative occupation in early adulthood. This relationship held even after accounting for people's personal and educational backgrounds. However, opportunities to access creative higher education are not equitably distributed; and are contingent on both prior attainment and the opportunity to gain relevant skills during schooling, with some groups, especially economically disadvantaged women, persistently underprivileged.
Practical and technical skills are key.	Such skills may be gained through creative study of all levels, not just through higher education: students who pursued creative subjects in further education often emphasised the value of the hands-on learning they received. They described building skills in graphic design, music production, illustration, photography, and the use of specialist software and emerging creative technologies. Staff in creative further education also pointed to portfolio-building activities that would strengthen learners' skills, preparing them for later employment or further study.

Self-led technical skill development in non-formal settings.	Participants saw as essential for their creative sector engagement a range of skills achieved through personal projects, self-study, and engagement with relevant (online) communities. Barriers to skill development that participants identified included the need to work to secure basic income, caring responsibilities, and worries about the uncertain nature of creative employment.
Wider professional skills remain important.	Developed through a combination of education and personal creative practice and alongside technical expertise, a wide range of skills emerged as desirable by students in creative education and by creative workers: problem solving, critical thinking, visual communication, and organisation. Students in creative further and higher education were explicit about how their institutions had been deliberate in supporting them to build such skills and saw them as transferable to non-creative sectors, as back-up options.
Practical creative sector experience is important but not widely available.	Students, educators, and creative workers emphasised the importance of practical creative sector experience, gained through personal networks or, when those were not available, through direct support from (further education) colleges and universities. In particular, staff in creative further education were aware that not all of their students had the necessary contacts to facilitate the early engagement with the creative sector that they saw as essential for later success: they therefore actively created these opportunities for their students.

Enduring challenges

The nature of creative work continues to create challenges, despite the creative sector making substantial contributions to the economy and to the fabric of society: the precarity, uncertainty, and complexity of creative occupations were at the forefront of participants' minds. Students in creative further and higher education were concerned about their future opportunities in the creative sector, even when they recognised they had been well prepared and equipped with skills and experience. Some creative workers described how their trajectory into creative occupations had been long, and that even when they did secure employment in the sector, this was not in roles that were creatively fulfilling. Participants saw personal resilience, and the ability to draw on a range of resources, as essential to 'making it' in the creative sector. They were keenly aware, however, that such resources were not available to all.





The challenge is not persuading young people to be creative. The challenge is instead two-fold: one, ensuring that all young people have the same chance to develop the knowledge, skills, and confidence to pursue their creative careers; and two, working across sectors and institutions to make creative careers less uncertain, less precarious, and more representative of the value they hold for the economy and society.

Sonia Ilie
Professor of Education, University of Cambridge

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