

Future Directions

...is getting involved in the creative sector really open to all?



Summary Report of Discussion Session

Future Directions – Session 1

Chaired by Pauline Tambling

(20 October 2010)

Is it all about who you know?

About Future Directions

Throughout Autumn 2010, A New Direction is hosting a series of discussion events exploring issues and ideas in relation to how young Londoners develop careers in the creative industries and the arts. These debates will be followed online by young people through a facebook community contributing-to and commenting-on the conclusions. Future Directions will help shape an agenda for developing London's future creative workforce.

Who took part in this discussion session:

Chair Speaker	Pauline Tambling Munira Mirza	National Skills Academy - Managing Director Mayoral Advisor on Arts and Culture
	Alice King-Farlow	National Theatre
	Anna Cutler	Tate
	Anne Appelbaum	Arts Council England
	Barbara O'Brien	The Roundhouse
	Ben Cackett	GLA
	Catherine Large	Creative and Cultural Skills
	Dan Williams	Royal Opera House
	Deborah Bestwick	Oval House
	Elizabeth Lynch	Freelance Consultant
	Fiona Davison	Museums Hub
	Gill Henderson	Create Kings Cross
	Hilary Carty	Cultural Leadership Programme
	Hilary Hodgson	Esme Fairbairn
	James Stevens	DCMS
	John Kieffer	Sound and Music
	Karen Freyer	New Deal for the Mind
	Kate Danielson	Jerwood Creative Bursaries
	Kayte Lawton	IPPR (Institute of Public Policy & Research)
	Lucy Crompton	Apples and Snakes
	Matt Lane	Royal Opera House
	Nii Sakey	Bigga fish
	Steve Moffitt	A New Direction
	Steven Foulston	Royal Opera House
	Tim Buchanan	Host Boroughs Unit

Is it all about who you know?

The first Future Directions session brought together a group of London based arts leaders with a shared interest in engaging young people. The participants were primarily from arts organisations in receipt of public funding.

The central topic for debate was *fairness* in terms of how young people get work and build careers in the arts sector.

The title of the debate – Is it all about who know? Was intended to encapsulate the perception that the only way to ‘get-on’ in the arts is to have personal contacts and a network of support. We wanted to know – is this true? Does it matter? And does the arts sector in London need to work together to change the situation?

To help develop the discussion we asked the Royal Opera House to give a short presentation on the Cultural Quarter Programme and we asked Munira Mirza – the Mayor’s advisor for Arts and Culture - to provide a personal perspective on the issues raised. Pauline Tambling – the Managing Director of The National Skills Academy chaired the session.

This report summarizes some of the themes of the debate and the main ideas that emerged.

Do you have to be middle-class to work in the arts?

The discussion began with a look at how the people in the room had started their careers in the arts. Individual stories spoke of commitment, sacrifice, flexibility and tenacity.

There was general agreement that the sector (especially the subsidized arts) is predominantly middle-class in terms of its workforce. It is difficult to find statistics to corroborate this assumption but it reflects people’s lived experience of working in the sector. However it should not necessarily be assumed that this is because of prejudice:-

- There is a sense that young people, from all backgrounds, are enterprising and will use the internet and other technologies to find their own ways of getting exposure or starting a career. Therefore they may be building creative careers for themselves rather than taking a more institutional route and this is invisible to the traditional arts sector.
- Young people may be actively choosing not to go into jobs in the arts because they don’t feel it is relevant to them and they know that the financial rewards are not that great. Lack of diversity is about choice not exclusion. Is the sector actually making a strong and relevant offer to young people?
- Munira highlighted the fact that we should not judge the opportunities open to the current generation of young people by the norms of our own experience. Not only is the context very different but routes to employment are more varied.

It is all about hard work and passion – not demographics

Deborah Bestwick from Oval House described her own career journey and contrasted her experience of doing any job she could get in the theatre ('the wardrobe assistant, the dog handler at Unicorn') with some of her contemporaries who did not want to do the 'non-creative' jobs. She worked hard – made sure she was in the right place at the right time - and this paid off.

This story represents a key policy question – are the people who thrive in the arts simply the most committed and passionate? If this is true then the sector is a genuine meritocracy. Or are there barriers to entry – implicit or explicit - that are unfair to certain groups of young people.

It was agreed that passion and commitment are crucial to building a career in this sector where jobs are challenging and rare – to quote Matt Lane from the Royal Opera House *'any job in the sector is precious – people place value on their role and have fought hard to get their role because they believe in what they do'*. However there is a genuine concern that some young people – who would have the passion and commitment to pursue a career in the arts - are not getting close to be able to progress.

Young people from low income households– particularly in the Not in Education, Training or Employment (NEET) category – may not have the exposure to the arts that would mean they had a chance to develop an interest and the possibility of a career. Even those with some interest may not have the right mentors and support networks to be able to develop.

There was a general consensus that all young people need some access to the arts at a young age to enable them to not only enjoy the arts and explore their passion for the work, but as a crucial stage in helping them understand whether they want to build a career in the sector. Arts (in an of itself not simply as an adjunct to other topics) within the education system was seen as a crucial factor in building a more diverse workforce.

Karen Freyer from New Deal for the Mind made the point that if the arts sector is unable to engage with people from all social backgrounds it is missing out on developing excellence and talent. New talent is essential if the sector is going to grow, stay relevant and remain internationally competitive and successful into the future.

Is higher education a barrier or an opportunity?

The arts workforce is disproportionately highly educated. Catherine Large from Creative and Cultural Skills reported that the sector has 20% more people with a higher level degree qualification than the average within the economy as a whole. The impact of this is that, to some extent, a degree is worth less than in other parts of the economy. It is a basic prerequisite for a job in the sector not really a meaningful skills-based qualification. Catherine also reported that CCI Skills employer members are often disappointed with the skills of graduates and have been requesting 'top-up' courses for graduates.

It was suggested that the sector uses qualifications not as a way of setting a bar which people need to rise above but as a filtering system which helps employers cope with the high demand for entry level positions.

There was a debate about whether the sector really needs to recruit from the graduate pool – what about people with vocational or experiential skills only? It was pointed out that there are a lot of jobs which don't require academic type skills – and graduates themselves may not be 'job ready'. Therefore the bias towards employing graduates may be based less on an analysis of certain skills and more – as Pauline Tambling suggested – 'a default for bright and sparky'.

Munira argued that in a sector which is incredibly popular with young people, using a degree as a basis for selection was justified because it was evidence of greater commitment than with a candidate who had not gone on to higher education.

Staff from the Royal Opera House described a future jobs programme they were part-of which addressed some of the issues around graduate/non-graduate recruitment and fairness.

The Cultural Quarter Programme www.culturalquarterprogramme.co.uk

In this scheme interns, subsidized by the Government's Future Jobs fund, were taken on to a six month traineeship involving a number of the largest cultural organisations in central London. The programme was 50:50 graduate/non-graduate. The principle behind the programme was to address the problem that young people can't get a job without experience, but can't get the experience they need without a job.

A key objective was to open up the Royal Opera House (and other partner organisations) to young people and show them the many and varied roles and careers that exist in the arts. This enables them to envisage a career in this sector.

Standards for internships

There was an acceptance that unpaid work is prevalent within the arts sector. The majority of people in the room had worked for free at some point in their careers and it is an extremely common way for young people to get the experience they need to get-on.

It is common sense to say that it is easier for people with greater financial means to undertake unpaid work than those on low incomes, however this does not necessarily mean it is in itself a barrier to entry. The group acknowledged that the tenacity involved in being able to work for free indicated commitment and this would not necessarily be out of reach for lower income young people.

Munira pointed out that volunteers have always been a crucial part of the arts workforce – and in particular the museums and heritage workforce. The London museums hub had developed guidance on good practice in taking on unpaid interns – the key point is to make sure these opportunities are advertised fairly and that the young person gets a quality experience when they are with the institution. Munira suggested that organisations could think more creatively about the kind of opportunities they offer to young people – they could offer bursaries to pay interns and fundraise on this basis. She counseled that we should not consider volunteering an inherent barrier to entry that 'young people are not victims' and can make sensible choices about the benefits of sometimes working for free and juggle living with parents or part-time working to make it happen.

Munira also stressed that the arts and cultural sectors needed to focus on recruiting talent – getting the best people for their roles. They must not let other concerns – or a sense of guilt – cloud this ambition. The reality is that the sector is very competitive and if young people are going to succeed in this sector then they would need to work hard to stand out.

Conclusions

The session was relatively brief and only able to touch on the main issues. Whilst there was some consensus across the room on certain themes – there was no agreement as such. However a set of issues and suggestions for action did emerge:-

Understand the challenge of diversity

- There is a strong perception that sector is currently lacking in true diversity, particularly in relation to class – but this is not necessary because of unfair practices or a culture of discrimination. It would be useful to have a more detailed understanding of the underlying causes for a lack of diversity and whether this picture is changing.

Exposure to quality arts at an early age

- In order to build a career in the arts you have to know about the arts – therefore providing opportunities for young people to gain exposure and understanding of the arts at a young age - within an educational context (where the state can reach everyone) and/or through out of school hours / voluntary sector activity is a crucial building block.

Enable passion and commitment

- Passion, commitment and a willingness to sacrifice are all important to success in the sector. But some young people never even get to the first stage in developing a true interest because they lack basic knowledge and relevant encouragement.

Be relevant and growth orientated

- While the sector continues to recruit from a shallow pool of people it is missing out on potential talent and stifling its capacity to grow. There are lessons to be learned from the commercial sector in terms of bringing new ideas, new people and new opportunities into play – which is less about ‘fairness’ and more about relevance and making a strong offer to young people.

Develop skills alongside and in tandem with higher education

- Whilst the sector will always be graduate heavy – and this is not seen as a problem – organisations should give real thought to developing access to jobs that don’t require a degree – and the sector as a whole should get behind a broader range of vocational qualifications which can help give young people the hard skills they need to succeed,

Help young people make better choices

- There will always be a complex range of entry routes to the sector – this is inevitable. But young people need to be helped to navigate these pathways and given the right support to pursue appropriate opportunities.

Enhance entrepreneurship

- It's more about fostering entrepreneurialism and giving young people confidence to develop their own passions and skills – rather than the traditional models of training and development. As Nii Sakey from Bigga' fish said – *'its not how do we give Jonny a job, but how do we do business with Jonny?'*

Transparent recruitment at *a//*levels

- There is a obligation on publicly funded arts organisations to be open in all their recruitment – even for unpaid positions. They should lead the way in setting a good example in terms of transparency and good practice with interns. It is ideal to pay interns but it was felt that this is less of a barrier than closed recruitment.

Sharing good practice saves time and money and leads to better outcomes

- There is a lot of good practice but a lack of a consistency, and clarity about bringing this together. A lot can be achieved through better signposting, guidance, mentoring etc and the sector in London has significant resources which it can use to create more opportunities for young people to develop successful careers.

Holly Donagh
A New Direction
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