

FEATURE: Apprenticed to a Future: a new way into the creative sector?

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The Singing Butler (Photo courtesy Flickr/gim2468)

The Draft Apprenticeships Bill, recently launched, is nothing if not ambitious. The Bill aims to ‘establish a statutory basis for the Apprenticeships programme, ...set out the relationship between different parts of the Apprenticeship system and ensure employers and apprentices can be confident that an Apprenticeship offers a high quality route to acquiring skills.’

(Department for Innovation, Universities & Skills – DIUS). In recent years the Government has been enthusiastically increasing the number of apprenticeships – according to DIUS, ‘Over the past decade, the Government has more than doubled the number of young people and adults starting high-quality apprenticeships, with 184,000 starts last year.’ This, of course, is very positive news. But where does it leave the creative and cultural sector in particular – a rapidly growing sector with a workforce of 542,470 people, contributing £23.5 billion to the UK economy each year? Enter, the Creative Apprenticeship.

The Creative Apprenticeship, a scheme which, following a number of pilots, sees its launch this September, is to be the first officially recognised apprenticeship framework for the creative and cultural sector. But why does the sector need one in the first place? There are a number of reasons.

One of the key factors is the issue of skills. In a growing sector, having the right people for the job is essential. There’s no shortage of willing applicants. There’s also no shortage of people on courses. But employers are finding that, in some cases, there’s a lack of relevant skills, and that it can be difficult to access the wealth of talent that is out there. There’s also the issue of diversity.

Currently the creative and cultural workforce is 61% male and 95% white – figures which don’t reflect the sector’s audiences or society in general. And thirdly, unlike many other industries, routes and pathways aren’t clear in this sector – making it difficult for people to get in and progress.

Creative Apprenticeships can challenge these issues – both by providing new routes of entry and by helping diversify the workforce. This September sees the launch of 200 Creative Apprenticeship places with a further 200 to follow next Spring. Apprentices will follow one of six pathways and have the chance to achieve a Level 2 (GCSE equivalent) or 3 (A Level equivalent) qualification.

An apprenticeship, therefore, offers, not just experience, but the chance to gain sector knowledge, competence in one of six areas and valuable key skills. It also, as Paul Smyth, of Creative Apprenticeships Liverpool notes, gives people a way in. ‘Getting employment in this sector is difficult,’ he says. ‘A lot of people end up undertaking unpaid work, internships or voluntary work, even after a degree. The Creative Apprenticeship scheme gives young people without qualifications access to the creative sector – this is a huge barrier lifted. The scheme gives work, experience and qualifications – it gives people a start.’

One of the projects to launch this September, Creative Apprenticeships Liverpool is consortia-based, a collaboration between eight cultural organisations working closely with Liverpool Community College. ‘Partnership is a key issue,’ explains project consultant for the scheme, Susanne Burns. ‘The organisations involved have been able to develop this scheme because they’ve worked collectively. A collaborative approach has enabled the consortia to address issues such as capacity building, and enables the offering to the young people to be more comprehensive.’ She also stresses the crucial role of the Paul Hamlyn Foundation as a principal partner in driving the project, and in providing critical financial support.

Those recruited to the scheme, which will take 10 young apprentices aged 16-24, will follow a Level 2 Community Arts Management pathway – a route involving outreach work, project planning and partnership projects. The apprentices involved will engage with communities, learn about networks, organisations and projects and how they are funded. ‘They’re gaining a toolkit as well as experience,’ explains Paul Smyth, ‘skills and knowledge that they can use in the future.’

And if the benefits to apprentices are obvious, then the employing organisation gains too.

‘The scheme was seen as an innovative way of getting young people into the workforce,’ says Susanne Burns. ‘The whole thrust of the project is cultural change, making a business case for taking on young people.’

‘It’s about a change in ethos,’ adds Paul Smyth, ‘about organisations not seeing themselves as elitist or academic. These organisations are customer focused – and they need to relate to the customer base. There’s an image out there of who theatres and museums are for. By recruiting apprentices, this scheme will help to break down these perceptions.’

Another participant in the Creative Apprenticeships programme, Creative Apprenticeships North East, is working with 50 apprentices over three years. Like Creative Apprenticeships Liverpool, this North East scheme is delivered by a consortium, this time comprising 11 organisations and Gateshead College. Wendy Smith, Head of Practitioner Development at The Sage Gateshead, the lead organisation in the consortium, explains that Creative Apprenticeships offer The Sage Gateshead and other employers, ‘the opportunity to continue to widen and diversify the workforce and learning offer within the region. Creative Apprenticeships create a new progression route and employment within our Learning and Participation Programme, and for the region as a whole.’ Apprentices in this scheme can be of any age and will be studying for a Level 2 or 3 qualification.

As Elizabeth Appleby, Apprenticeships and Young Persons manager for Creative & Cultural Skills, a key player in the initiative, says about Creative Apprenticeships in general, ‘We’re trying to say to employers that there’s a different way of recruiting,’ she explains. ‘It’s about unlocking untapped talent, opening doors.’

So, given that the benefits are clear, both to individuals and to employers, is this new progression route plain sailing, or could there be potential storms ahead?

One significant challenge to those involved in the programme, is encouraging employers to take on apprentices. Younger people, or those without qualifications, can find themselves competing with graduates, many of whom are prepared to work voluntarily or for low wages, just to get a foothold in the sector. It’s a difficult situation for which there are no easy answers. With Creative Apprenticeships employers are being offered another option, a wider choice. There’s also the issue of awareness: ensuring employers are sensitised to the needs of people from varying backgrounds and of different ages. Then, crucially, there’s the issue of funding. As Susanne Burns notes, ‘A fundamental issue is the payment of wages to apprentices. Most creative organisations aren’t resource rich – initial wage support is a key issue in assisting employers in taking on apprentices. The will is there to make Creative Apprenticeships work, but organisations need the support.’

Funding for wage support, at least initially, and particularly for small organisations, is, it could be argued, a key factor in the long term success of the Creative Apprenticeship. Creative & Cultural Skills certainly feels it’s an important issue. They’re campaigning for funding to assist SMEs in taking on these apprentices.

And it’s not just funds that are the issue. Ensuring a high quality learning experience can be challenging, especially for the smaller company. In fact, smaller organisations frequently find themselves with neither the time nor the capacity to get involved and meet the requirements of the scheme. This is where being part of a consortium or working in partnership helps, with larger organisations working collaboratively with SMEs.

It seems apparent that, despite all the obvious benefits of the Creative Apprenticeship programme, there are still a number of fundamental issues to be ironed out, if more organisations are to come on board. But it’s early days yet, and there is plenty of potential, if organisations, particularly SMEs and micro companies, can achieve the support they need. As Wendy Smith says, ‘Employing a Creative Apprentice can enhance your organisation and help you to learn new ways of working. Creative Apprenticeships offer employers the opportunity to create a workforce (even if it is one person) that is trained specifically to work in your organisation with the values, ethos and skills required by you. And Creative Apprenticeships offer the apprentice a unique opportunity to work and learn in the creative and cultural industries – offering people employment and training in areas where their skills and passion lie.’

So what’s the way forward? If your organisation is thinking about becoming involved or taking on a creative apprentice, what next? As Wendy Smith notes, ‘There’s a lot of support and advice available from the Creative Apprentice Training Provider in your area, from Creative & Cultural Skills and from the Learning and Skills Council.’ Why not find out more? You’ve nothing to lose, and maybe quite a bit to gain.

Websites:

Creative & Cultural Skills
Learning and Skills Council

Sources:

Creative & Cultural Skills, Access all Areas

Creative & Cultural Skills, Creative Apprenticeships

Tom Bewick, chief executive, Creative & Cultural Skills, launches the second round of Creative Apprenticeships pilots, December 18, 2007, www.youtube.com/watch?v=N87MZu91bLI&feature=related
Department for Innovation, Universities & Skills (DIUS), Draft Apprenticeship Bill, Summary, DIUS, Draft legislation to create more high quality Apprenticeships fit for the 21st Century (Press Release, July 16 2008)

