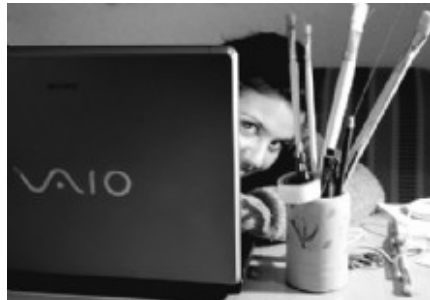


On Course for Your Career

By [Ellie Stevenson](#) ArtsHub | Thursday, March 12, 2009

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So you want a career in the creative arts... but where do you start? Should you jump straight in or take a formal qualification first? And what kind of qualification? There are lots of decisions to be made – we flag up a few of the key issues.

If you're thinking about training, much depends on the type of work you're going for. And if you want a lead in, for some careers, an access or foundation course can be a useful starting point. But it's not easy to make the right choice of course. The sector is oversupplied and under-skilled, with over 500,000 students in FE/HE chasing 6000 annual vacancies ([CCSkills website](#) – Qualification Reform).

It's a graduate-rich sector but research shows there's a lack of the right skills and experience, with twelve per cent of businesses in England having recruitment difficulties in the last year. And despite the extent of provision, routes are not clear, and there's a lack of certainty as to which qualifications are valued and needed – both for entry and for career progression.

These concerns are currently being examined and addressed; Creative Blueprint, the Sector Skills Agreement for the creative and cultural industries, highlights a new and ongoing programme of action. But what do these issues mean for you, now?

“Research, research, research,” says Jane Atkinson, college careers adviser, University for the Creative Arts. “When choosing a career, it's important to do something you're passionate about. But if you're thinking about your future, then you're going to want something that's going to help you get work in this area. I always advise people to really research the work area they're thinking of going into.” For entry to a course, this means checking destinations of past students and drop-out rates (see your university of choice and the Quality Assurance Agency for HE). It also means visiting the institution, and investigating the course, its modules and options, to see if they suit.

The right course can make all the difference. As Emma Summers, a visual artist, says about arts courses, “A good course will give you a recognised industry standard qualification and will provide facilities and studio space to experiment. It will enable you to learn specific practice-based skills and to create a portfolio.

“It’s also important to find out from the course admissions tutor about links with industry,” adds Jane. “Is there a strong list of associated organisations or companies that students can go to for work experience?”

“Some courses offer an assessed module in professional practice, an invaluable option” she says. “This generally involves job search techniques and a period of work experience - which is assessed - as well as reflection afterwards. The feedback we get is very positive,” she continues. “If students undertake this in their second year, which is generally the case, they come back to the third year transformed by that work experience – they know what to focus on for their last year. And in some cases, it can lead to a permanent job.”

Jane stresses the importance of having both the qualifications and the experience. “Work experience is essential for getting into a creative job – there’s so much competition in this area so you’re going to have to offer more than just the qualification. You can do work-based projects, and many courses do, but it’s so different in the workplace – the language, the culture and the really up-to-date-equipment. Work experience is great, and the more you do, the better. Even experiences that were different from what you thought they would be can be presented as useful to an employer.”

Emma Summers comments, “You need to consider carefully what you want to achieve; doing an arts degree now is a costly business, and will put you in debt. So you really need to be dedicated and be prepared to work extremely hard in order to be successful.”

But what if you don’t want to do a degree, or want to start your career at an earlier stage in your life?

There are a number of ways in. Young Apprenticeships, where students at school work for a Level 2 qualification in art and design or performing arts, and get work experience with employers, have been running since 2004. And for those out of the school sector, the newly launched Creative Apprenticeships provide a different route, combining academic study with practical experience – and they’re not always just for the young. Other options are technician level courses and the newly launched Creative and Media Diploma (September 2008 onwards), available at three levels.

But it can be difficult getting a foothold if you haven’t got that higher qualification – 45 per cent of people in the UK creative and cultural industries have a degree. You will certainly need to have talent and motivation. Emma Summers advises emerging or aspiring artists: “Have a strong portfolio, talk to other artists to gain advice, and join organisations like Axis (www.axisweb.org), a-n (www.a-n.co.uk) and Arts Hub. You need to exhibit regularly and apply for arts competitions. Talk to galleries and volunteer for arts-related jobs until you gain experience – and attend lots of exhibitions. Talk to people in the industry.”

Jane Atkinson adds, “You might want to add to your qualifications later on, or while you’re training on the job. There are also lots of short professional courses you can do, in all different disciplines.”

And there’s another issue: according to Creative Blueprint, ‘...a quarter of employers perceive some form of skills gap across current employees.’ There’s a need for development of business skills within the sector – such as management, marketing and ICT – particularly amongst freelancers and small and micro-businesses. So whether you’re looking to attend a course or jump straight in, this is expertise you’ll want to develop. As Emma says about her undergraduate course, “There wasn’t enough emphasis on how to make a living as an artist – vital skills such as how to get a commission, gain contacts, approach galleries, and issues like pricing and selling and running a business.”

Equip yourself with such skills as well as professional expertise and as much relevant experience as possible, and you'll be giving yourself the best chance. Emma says, "Arts jobs are difficult to get and the competition is high so you need to be persistent, you have to be prepared to live on a relatively low income for some years until you become established. An arts-related career can be very rewarding but there are no shortcuts. Success in the arts usually comes from working hard and being very dedicated in your chosen field."

Notes

1. Jane Atkinson suggests you might want to visit *New Designers*, which showcases the best of what's coming out of all the institutions in the UK. "It's an annual event that I think is really helpful for people to go to. It's held every year and is very inspirational for potential students." (www.newdesigners.com)
2. University and college students should check out their careers service and what it offers. Some universities offer support to past graduates for a number of years.

Source

Creative & Cultural Skills, Creative Blueprint (England): the Sector Skills Agreement for the creative and cultural industries, June 2008

