

Pathways into learning in the Creative Arts

**A research study undertaken by Sid Hughes on
behalf of The Creative Way**

June 2009

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1 Introduction and overview

The purpose of this research was to listen to the views of students who are or have recently been engaged in creative arts programmes offered by organisations in East London, mainly though not exclusively by organisations involved in Creative Arts Newham^{*}. The aim was to identify what constitutes successful practice particularly from the student perspective with a view to strengthening existing provision and building new, flexible and collaborative approaches to education and training in the creative arts. By working with arts organisations operating in a defined geographical area like East London, it might be possible to address issues of progression between informal and more formal routes in education and training, increase access to some of the wider services such as information and guidance, and consider and respond better to the needs for work experience relevant to the needs of those engaged in learning across the range of provision.

Despite the origins of the study coming out of already well-established links between HE and 16-19, this project provided an opportunity to consider creative arts provision across different learning environments including not only full-time and part-time HE/FE programmes but also those offered by smaller, independent organisations in East London. The environment in which these organisations operate has a considerable impact on what they can offer their clients. Attitudes to risk, the importance of entrepreneurship and what constitutes quality in provision are often quite different in these more informal settings compared to FE/HE; that isn't to imply that they are either better or worse, but simply to recognise that they are different. Interestingly at a time when some organisations are concerned about their ability to meet recruitment targets, there would appear to be no shortage of demand for

^{*} Creative Arts Newham (CAN) was established in 2008 by ten organisations offering creative arts programmes in Newham. It aims to improve access to these opportunities, provide clarity on the qualifications on offer and signpost progression routes within and between programmes and providers.

informal, flexible and part-time provision and it might be interesting to consider from the student perspective why this might be the case.

The following initial observations might seem obvious to some, but perhaps less so when viewing from a position of formal, nationally funded education and training;

- There is already a range of well established and successful organisations offering interesting opportunities for people to access the creative arts outside the formal learning environment of a school, college or university. These generally recruit well and provide quality opportunities that are not always available in a more formal setting.
- These opportunities are related both to enhancing personal experience through the creative arts and to improving longer term employment prospects.
- Successful provision often involves active and dynamic partnerships or collaboration between two or more organisations/providers. In the main this collaboration has been achieved through personal contact between innovators in different organisations - rather than from any strategic decision taken at senior management level. The most successful collaboration between independent organisations and colleges and universities are based on mutual benefit and bring opportunities for students which would otherwise not exist.
- FE colleges may not however always make for ideal partners leading to successful and sustained collaboration. Strategic priorities in colleges can change quickly as a result of external, mainly national priorities. Aversion to risk, responding to externally driven funding priorities, a culture of imposed targets and inspection, all contribute to an organisational culture or mindset that is not always shared nor understood by other organisations. Potentially valuable and publicly funded resources can also be lost as programmes close as a result of changes to the curriculum offer.

Even in a climate of financial shortages and organisational uncertainty there are still opportunities to engineer collaboration between the different sectors which would

- extend the range of experience and opportunities for learners
- build upon and maximise the value of the different specialisms and resources that already exist in the different delivery agencies
- provide development opportunities for staff

2 The learning experience

This research provided a rare opportunity to hear from students across a wide range of provision based in HE, FE and with private providers. What was immediately apparent in discussions with students was that colleges and universities have made real progress in listening to student feedback. Students referred to student advisory groups, formal and informal course reviews and to tutors taking time to listen to students about their programmes. What this research also provided however was an opportunity to build an objective picture of student experience and perceptions across the local region rather than simply at institutional level.

A number of organisations* responded positively to my request for support by putting me in touch with students. In advance of my meeting with students I outlined the project and sent them details of the questions we would discuss. Extended interviews were then undertaken with a number of those who are or have recently participated in some aspect of study or training in the creative arts. In the main there was considerable interest from the participants themselves; they were eager to talk about their experience and were insightful with their comments in response to my questions. Most participants were 18+ though I did also interview some younger students who were at school but taking creative arts programmes in their own time.

I explained to the participants that I was interested in hearing about routes into their chosen courses, about their experiences and about their aspirations and plans for the future. In the process I explained I would be attempting to identify key issues which might help decision makers planning for future provision address what is most important for students continuing with their education or training in the creative arts.

2.1 The key areas for discussion with students were presented as a series of open questions:

- What were the key influences that had led to a route in the creative arts - including the impact of any or all of the following:
 - home
 - previous education
 - friends
 - developing personal interests
 - longer term plans

* For details of organisations that contributed to this research see Appendix 2 on pages 20-21

- What had contributed to the decision leading to a particular course or programme?
- What had been the most effective ways of finding out about available courses/programmes?
- What if anything would have made this process easier/more straightforward?
- What plans were participants making for after course/programme completion?
- What information would be of benefit now to help the student with future plans and choices?
- What agencies might be of assistance?
- Has the course/programme lived up to expectations? What were the most important/attractive/useful aspects of the course/programme?
- What have been some of the challenges in continuing with study and training?
- Learning from experience what advice would the participant give to others who might be interested in doing something similar?

2.2 The following section is a summary of students' responses.

What were the key influences which had led to a route in the creative arts?

Almost inevitably this introductory question drew a wide variety of responses. However there were some points which might be of particular relevance to FE and HE when considering future recruitment.

For younger students engaging in the arts for the first time, parental influence is understandably the major factor. Many parents want to extend the range of worthwhile experience for their children beyond that which is available in schools. This is the most significant factor with the younger age group but the influence of parents is still relevant when it comes to decision making post-16.

While parental influence figured highly, schools, both primary and secondary were identified by several as having been a major influence in developing their interest in the creative arts. Schools, including primaries that had good resources and had given particular attention to the arts curriculum, had

clearly had an impact on those now engaged in continuing education or training in the creative arts. Organisations that are working alongside schools and particularly with schools that are strong on the arts curriculum are therefore well placed to encourage participation and progression.

Several of the organisations in the region have recognised the importance of developing an interest in the creative arts from an early age. Stratford Circus with its highly popular 'Stratford Circlets' programme, Point Blank's partnership work with colleges, and UEL's extensive arts programmes which involves local schools and college are just some of the many successful examples.

The recently introduced Creative and Media Diploma programme offers a new opportunity for colleges and HE to work alongside schools to develop local provision, though there is generally little evidence yet of truly collaborative engagement, particularly on the part of HE. This is not however always due to lack of interest on the part of the universities, several of which are looking at how they might contribute in what is still a developing qualification. Local 14-19 partnerships should be seeking ways of engaging colleges, HE and independent organisations in diploma development and delivery.

Far less developed are links with primary schools and early years. Local authorities are best placed to take a lead on establishing these links and ensuring young children have the widest possible access to the facilities that are available. Whilst recognising that parents and carers who are particular keen and able to do so, will ensure their young people gain access to additional opportunities out of school hours, colleges, well equipped secondary schools, and universities need to be encouraged to make facilities available through a funded and strategic approach to widening access and experience in the creative arts for all.

What had contributed to the decision leading to a particular course or programme?

The key factors here were availability and quality of information about particular courses. Students want to know the detail of what is to be studied. They often arrive at this point with some previous experience of the creative arts; some have extensive experience and therefore quite specific individual requirements. They also want to know what will be required of them.

Several recognised that formal education would assist with developing communication skills. This was interesting given that most participants were articulate and many had performed in public. Many valued the opportunities provided by HE in particular to access additional support for developing communications skills in addition to their main programme of study.

A recurrent theme throughout these discussions was the importance given to part-time study. Those engaged in these programmes needed to support themselves through their studies and therefore needed to have paid employment. Some were mixing study, paid employment and voluntary work in the creative arts; the last to maintain direct engagement with the industry and to build a strong CV.

Other factors in determining course choice are referred to below and in particular in the section dealing with expectations of the course or programme

What were the most effective ways of finding out about available courses/programmes? What if anything would have made this process easier/more straightforward?

In the main, the students I spoke to were confident of their own ability to find out about what was available to them. None of those I spoke to had used formal careers advice. Accessible, detailed and up to the minute websites, supported by an equally informative prospectus or course booklet were all considered useful. However the opportunity to discuss programme opportunities with a course tutor was considered by most to be of greatest benefit. The open information and recruitment events organised by the universities were seen to be extremely helpful; Birkbeck's approach in this respect was rated very highly indeed.

The influence of friends also figured as an important influence though generally it had less impact on the decision to take a particular course, but more by way of general encouragement. One student for example had gone along with a friend who was taking a creative arts course at Stratford Circus and once in the building discovered what else was on offer and signed up for another programmes. The critical moment for this student was coming into the building in the first place.

The evidence would point to the value of open events not always linked to a single provider. Such events are common in formal education; schools and colleges for example run annual HE and careers events. It might make sense for organisations which already work well together, such as those associated with Creative Arts Newham, to run joint information and careers events which would attract numbers of potential clients and raise the profile of the individual organisations.

Has the course/programme lived up to expectations? What were the most important/attractive/useful aspects of the course/programme?

Few of those interviewed suggested that their course had not lived up to their expectations. Whether or not those who volunteered to speak to me were the most positive members in their group it is impossible to say.

However even for students who were able to identify some aspect of the course which had not gone well for them, they were still able to describe action taken by the provider to remedy the situation leading to a positive outcome. The importance of sound, ongoing and easily accessible tutoring was a key to a successful experience.

Many of the students recognised the importance of the programme for social networking and group support. This may be a feature which is of particular importance to creative arts students. Several regarded themselves as unsuccessful in their previous education. Some suggested that they had felt no real sense of purpose in their secondary education, others referred to a general lack of direction, or even an inability to 'fit in' with others. For these, the enjoyment of the course was to be found not only in the formal aspects but in the informal and probably less intended outcomes of group identity and peer support. This places a considerable expectation on the skills of teachers and tutors who may not always be working with those who have a well developed awareness of what might be required by formal education. It is also an issue for student progression when the support mechanisms of the group are taken away. The concern for the future did not only relate to their potential for the job market but to a number of more general concerns and greater attention might be given to progression on from these programmes. For many students the opportunity to continue to be involved in arts organisations in some way, even if not in paid employment was considered by them to be essential.

In most cases teacher expertise was recognised and highly rated. For some this was a key factor in deciding on where to study. Having teachers, tutors and support staff who have had previous successful experience in the sector beyond college or HE, was of major importance to most students. The professional experience of staff rated more highly than academic qualifications with the learner. Learning first hand from experienced practitioners was certainly what gave the edge to some courses over others. In a competitive market and with students paying for their courses this is an important consideration. Similarly access to professional and well equipped environments for learning was also rated as highly important. Access to studio time was for example a vitally important factor for those engaged in music programmes at Point Blank but there is a lesson here for other creative arts programmes. It is something that is particularly important for students on part-time study programmes. Access to studio and rehearsal space, to IT and multi-media for personal study are all important considerations for those developing and delivering successful creative arts programmes. Many students identified this as an area for improvement.

For many creative arts students, access to courses also means access to facilities. Therefore although direct tuition time may be quite limited, and often well below what formal FE might consider to be the norm - this is not always a major consideration for the learner as long as these wider access issues are addressed.

The quality of facilities is a major consideration for students particularly for those on courses where technical expertise is a priority for the learner. Technical capacity clearly needs to be more advanced than that which is available at home. However the rapid expansion of readily available technology makes home learning a viable and attractive possibility which has yet to be fully explored by FE/HE. Some of the private providers however are moving in this direction.

One aspect identified by a number of students as missing from several programmes was the teaching of business skills related to the creative industries. Subjects considered relevant by students ranged from basic HR to marketing, finance, bid writing and planning. There are opportunities for colleges and universities to work alongside other departments and faculties in course design to ensure students have access to develop these skills.

Over the last 15 years in FE there has been an expectation/requirement that virtually all provision is accredited using a national framework of accreditation. This is not the case in non formal learning and therefore the picture about the importance of qualifications for different programmes is understandably mixed. Open College Network (OCN) qualifications are often used to provide some formal structure to programmes – however the achievement of these qualifications is not considered to be that important for many of those engaged in learning. Nationally accredited awards are however also used because of their relevance for those wishing to progress academically. There is common ground here with college experience though the quality assurance and assessment requirements that apply to colleges (e.g. national norms, targets, inspection, etc) have less profile in non-formal settings.

What information would be of benefit now to help the student with future plans and choices?

This question led to discussion about advice and guidance available to students while on the course. The evidence for this was generally quite patchy. When I visited the students on the Theatre Venture programme one Sunday afternoon at Stratford Circus they were in the middle of a session on writing and presenting their CVs, and students on other courses referred to the helpful advice they had received. However this was not generally regarded as a significant element of the programme in all cases. These students are generally resourceful and most were confident in their own abilities to find out what they needed to help them with choices for the future. This fact may possibly explain why organisations are not always addressing this aspect of provision as well as they might.

A related observation is that many of those who currently run or deliver courses (teachers, instructors, trainers, course leaders and managers) have

not themselves come through formal educational and career routes and are therefore not always familiar with bureaucracies or strategies associated with some aspects of what might be considered of importance for a fully developed programme, including accreditation and career guidance. It is also the case that some modes of delivery are changing – in response to the need for more individual tutoring, mentoring etc. Some staff however feel less comfortable with this development as they feel it takes them away from delivery.

Many of those interviewed mainly wanted to gain experience and had modest professional ambitions – some simply wish to improve their skills. For these, accreditation was not their priority and cost not always a major issue. For some participants however accreditation and progression are vitally important considerations. They recognised that experience alone wasn't adequate for a future career and that qualifications were essential for the job market and for building confidence. These regard the end qualification as part of their value for money assessment of the programme. The problem is that it is by no means always clear that this is the case from the outset. Some of those who begin the programme simply to gain experience and develop skills at some stage in the course begin to realise the value of gaining a qualification. It is quite possible for these aspirations to go unnoticed by teachers if sufficient time is not set aside during the programme for individual tutoring.

The quality of tutorial provision is not consistent across providers but it is difficult to judge how important this is to students. If it doesn't exist, then students do not necessarily notice its omission. However I sense from the comments made by students that where tutoring is delivered well it is highly valued and in any case it makes strong educational sense to ensure that adequate provision is made because of the role tutors can play in advising, supporting and monitoring the learner. Such a view is central to provision in schools and FE where tutoring is a requirement – though this doesn't mean that the quality is always as it should be. There were however quite mixed views on how successful tutoring appears to be in HE. In some cases the tutoring on part-time programmes appears to be given a greater prominence than it is on full time programmes.

What have been some of the challenges in continuing with study and training?

Surprisingly the most usual response to this was not the one I had expected. Financial considerations were not top of the list. This may be because, for most of those I spoke to, financial challenges were simply a fact of life to which they were already well accustomed. Many students were used to holding down one or more jobs alongside their study and saw this as the norm for their chosen career path.

The most significant challenge referred to was being able to meet the demands of the course itself and in particular the formal written work elements. This was particularly an issue for those in HE though it was also referred to by other students as most programmes had course requirements of this nature. Although there were some exceptions, many of those interviewed had not had great success at school or college and were therefore lacking in confidence with essay structure, vocabulary and what they saw as the more theoretical aspects of the course. Where there were additional workshops to help students improve their skills these were welcomed and well used. For some students it was the support that they were gaining in these additional workshops that they said contributed most to their increasing levels of self-confidence.

Learning from experience what advice would the participant give to others who might be interested in doing something similar?

None of those interviewed suggested that they would advise others not to take the particular route they had taken. This was clearly a most positive endorsement of the programmes studied. The main advice that they would offer related to course information; encouraging others to find out as much as possible about a course before embarking on it. This was related to the fact that several students discovered that the emphasis of the course they had chosen was not always as they had anticipated and although this didn't appear to have led to any major problems, at least not for those interviewed, it was none the less something they would advise others to look out for.

Other emerging themes

Work experience

A major factor for nearly all students who were wishing to pursue a career in the arts was the value placed on the opportunity to undertake a period of work experience. Several had already addressed this themselves by volunteering in arts organisations. Virtually all of those interviewed did however believe that their programmes would be considerably enhanced, and their skills developed if they were given the opportunity for work experience of some kind with a placement or internship with a creative arts organisation being the ideal. The two universities did have schemes to enable students to do this however there are a number of factors which make it difficult to meet the demand. Many of the arts organisations in the region are small and although the opportunity of having a student on placement might be welcomed they simply do not have the capacity for structuring a programme or for mentoring and supervision.

An ideal scenario might be for a group of providers to work together to develop a generic programme for internships. Creative Arts Newham does have some potential for this. Individual organisations are already providing work placements for undergraduates, Stratford Circus is aiming to provide placements for Birkbeck's new Foundation Degree in Arts Management and there is a pilot underway to provide research opportunities for post graduate students on Birkbeck's Masters Degree programme.

It is also important to consider how work placement opportunities can be made available to those not currently engaged in formal education.

Conclusions from interviews with students

The responses to each question have been summarised in such a way as to highlight the important messages for providers. Rather than attempt to summarise these again here, the following is a list of some of the key features of successful practice as identified by students.

- Considerable care should be taken to explore with students details of their prior experience, their aspirations for the course and their longer term plans
- Clear signposting to other possible programmes would be helpful
- Details of the programme and the expectations of students should be clear and checks made to ensure that students are fully aware of these. Students should also be made aware of where the course leads
- Some early analysis is made of individual student need e.g. communications skills, and that these are addressed either within the organisation or by reference to other support available
- Information about teachers and tutors, their professional backgrounds and their areas of expertise are of interest to students particularly when making their choices
- Student feedback should be a regular feature on all programmes
- Both induction on to and progression from the programme need to be considered seriously by teachers and tutors if students are to maximise the opportunities available to them
- Organisations should consider how students access facilities outside of course hours
- Wherever possible programmes should provide opportunities for students to access a range of employment related skills and knowledge

- Students greatly value opportunities to meet practitioners and employers as part of their programme

3 Partnerships and collaboration

A developing strategy is for providers to seek partnerships with FE and HE that will provide credibility/status for their provision and progression opportunities for their clients. The key to the success of these schemes seems to be found in personal links; staff in partner organisations who know each other, who have worked with each other or who have a third party known to both. The origins of these partnerships seldom appear to be strategic or institutionally driven. Strategic value is however soon recognised by the institutions and may become a rationale for the continuation of these innovative programmes. The most successful schemes offer mutual benefit, or at least they seem to begin in this way. A university will potentially benefit through new recruitment; the provider attracts new clients interested in the possibility of progression to university. Where the provider is responsible for the foundation year of a degree course, students who had previously not considered HE may now see this as an option because the first step in this direction is provided by a local and familiar provider; more attractive perhaps in the first instance than a more distant HE provider.

It is generally quite difficult for organisations to find the time to meet and explore issues of mutual interest though the evidence provided by the students suggested that were there to be more opportunities to do so there might be some benefit to be gained from any such investment. Those who had been engaged with this current project were invited to attend a half day workshop to consider opportunities of further collaboration, to share information about innovative and successful strategies for improving access and achieving progression, to identify and address gaps in provision and to consider the impact of cultural strategy on future developments.

The following are some of the key points arising out of discussions at the workshop which are particularly relevant for this study.

- One of the main problems in sustaining collaborative work over a period of time is project based funding which supports innovation but falls short of embedding successful practice
- Many collaborative projects rely on individuals who may move on. Organisations need to prepare for this eventuality through long term planning, ensuring clarity of roles and regular review and evaluation; some external evaluation might be useful

- Projects that work well are those that develop out of mutual benefit. There is a need for a forum to allow discussion between groups to explore possibilities for ongoing collaboration
- There needs to be a greater focus in the longer term of progression agreements. Problems often arise as there is a tendency to rely on individuals to make these work rather than them being part of a long term institutional or even departmental commitment. Related to this point was the need to ensure all parties are equally committed and share in the delivery of agreed responsibilities
- Collaboration was seen as being valuable from the institutional perspective but also for individuals with advantages of access to different providers and peer groups
- There are many advantages to be gained from an opportunity to work outside one's own organisation
- Recognising and giving scope to student potential from an early age is a challenge - there is a need to increase knowledge of the creative skills in schools
- Employer engagement is a particular issue in the creative arts - more might be achieved if employers worked with providers to identify the necessary business and industry skills appropriate for the industry. There is a need for more entrepreneurial people to lead provision and deliver these skills and for tutors to support employers offering work experience
- Approaches to programme delivery need to be flexible and relate to student need; educational establishments are however constrained by their responsibility to deliver qualifications
- There is a need for more opportunities for internships if students are to gain appropriate levels of experience for future employment
- There are long-term developments already underway that will change the way east London looks and feels. It is necessary to ensure that any new developments are based on the best of what is already there.
- Establishing models of shared investment between education providers and industry would lead to improved sustainability over the longer term for developments in the creative arts
- There is a concern that investment in FE is not sufficient to meet the rapidly changing needs of the region

- Organisations need to be encouraged to think beyond their own institutional concerns and look at a longer term vision which can encompass the whole student experience
- East London is changing rapidly but there is very little evidence to suggest that there is a need for more HE provision. We do however need to focus on more specifically targeted and niche provision.

4 Conclusions

To conclude this research, there are a number of proposals to add to those referred to above

i There would be value in establishing a forum for providers to meet at least once a year to share information on factors which impact on provision and to consider opportunities for future collaboration. The leadership for such a forum might be based with a single organisation. One or even both of the universities UEL and Birkbeck working with Creative Arts Newham would be able to support such a forum. It would however be essential for the forum to represent the full range of providers and ideally employers. Stratford Circus with its 2008-2009 programme of 'Circus Forwards' events has some experience of these thematic based workshops run in collaboration with UEL and others. However for such this proposal to be sustained over a period of time, one or more host organisations would need to provide support.

ii A collaborative approach to internships should be considered. Although a number of organisations are currently looking at how they might make some provision, in order to meet the potential levels of demand a more strategic approach would be required.

This approach would ensure:

- access for those engaged in both formal and informal learning
- a structured approach with placements offered at different levels
- the inclusion of the widest possible spectrum of providers/employers that individually might find it difficult to support placements by themselves
- robust support structures are in place for participants
- less duplication of effort on the part of those organisations involved

iii Many of those involved in the delivery of courses have themselves come through informal routes and their career pathways are quite different to those that exist for those in a more formal educational setting. For some, future career development is an issue. There are few natural progression routes available to them and where these do exist, the lack of formal qualifications can be a barrier. This is a need that HE might help address through part-time professional qualifications. The two universities which are

clearly open to developing flexible and responsive programmes might consider how their existing programmes might be adapted to meet the needs of those already engaged at this level in the creative industries.

iv There must be an improved dialogue between providers and the local authority about the wider provision of creative arts in the area. Recent developments in the Creative and Media diploma provide one such opportunity, particularly now that there has been one year's experience of delivery and schools and colleges will be looking for ways of building and improving the programme. However, the opportunities of engaging young people in the arts are much greater than this and a local strategy should be considered.

v Whilst it is too late to do much for those starting programmes this autumn term, providers might consider joint promotional events in the future. This would bring together, in one place, information about opportunities for creative arts programmes, both formal and informal, and would give students the opportunity to meet a range of staff and other students, encouraging them to explore what is on offer. Such an approach would also raise the profile of the range of provision that exists in the area, it would encourage take up of places and may go some way to avoid students making inappropriate choices. Finding 'neutral' ground for such events might be a challenge but Newham does have venues such as Stratford Circus and the Theatre Royal which would be ideal.

vi There is some broad in agreement with the view expressed at the invitation workshop referred to above; that as far as the creative arts are concerned what is needed is not an increase in the quantity of provision in East London, particularly in full-time provision. What is required is a flexible approach to delivery which will enable participants to access a range of existing opportunities and at the same time be able to support themselves through their studies. They need to be able to benefit from experience which is both relevant to their programme and which will prepare them for future employment if this is their objective, as it is in many cases. Organisations, both independent and nationally funded, working collaboratively, are likely to be in the strongest possible position to offer this flexibility for the benefit of their students. Collaboration however needs to be well planned and properly supported if this approach is to be made secure for students over the longer term.

Appendix 1

Some examples of student profiles

Birkbeck students All three Birkbeck students described below arrived at their degrees programmes with no formal qualifications beyond GCSE level. This may account for why, according to these students, BBK takes teaching, skill support and tutoring seriously.

Student 1

Studying for BA in Theatre and Humanities

Has no formal qualifications after GCSE level. He Left school to work in a bookmakers. His introduction to the arts came through his brother in amateur dramatics. Loved it, particularly the group dynamic. He decided in his early 30s that he needed some qualifications and studied business and humanities – though continued with some performance. Eventually he got an agent in London and some auditions. He also attended workshops and was involved in a number of productions. He recognised a need to develop his writing and presentational skills, particularly if he was going to be able to produce work himself.

Saw a poster for Birkbeck – the attraction of Birkbeck was in part its prestige but it was also part-time and affordable. He attended the open day which was useful and applied for BA in Theatre Studies and Humanities. The interview was both supportive and challenging. Interviewer was keen to ensure that the programme was appropriate. He wants a qualification to be taken seriously, and sees the needs to develop his skills.

Challenges – for someone who had been out of education for some time, the language was challenging. However he attends a theatre writing course and an eight-week essay writing course. Both are worthwhile and useful. Would also benefit from access to some wider elements appropriate to a career in the creative industries at a basic level – finance, marketing, personnel

Quality of teaching is high. There is a passion for the subject and most lecturers have good awareness of their audience. The university is keen to receive feedback in order to improve. He has evidence that students' constructive criticism is taken seriously and addressed

Like other students – he has built an impressive portfolio of experience – across a range of arts related activity – but sometimes without a clear goal or plan. Initial attempts at education are not arts related – as the arts are not considered a viable career – but then other subjects don't work out and

there is a return to the arts and an eventual realisation that this is their main interest

Student 2

Studying For BA in Theatre and English

The chief influence was primary school – music, poetry, and plays with quality teaching. An early introduction to Theatre (Chicken Shed). Then at secondary school (Holland Park) had an excellent tutor and enjoyed drama though didn't see this as a likely career route and started A levels in other subjects at college.

However family and other issues contributed to severe disruption in formal education. Homeless then hostel accommodation. Took a one year theatre certificate. Enjoyed quality tutoring, purposeful group dynamic which was a contrast to A-levels at college where students had seemed less mature in comparison to herself. Even during period of some personal difficulties she continued with performance workshops, and volunteer working with young people on a range of youth projects; youth mentoring, journalism evening course, Paddington Actor Group etc. She won a bursary to the BBC – for six months training. Valued the opportunity for experience – researching, contributing ideas, assisting with programmes. Had issues however with how social networking favoured some. But it did make her realise that she had skills which she needed to develop and with qualifications she would be taken more seriously.

Became a teaching assistant in a primary school, sorted out her accommodation. She found the post creative and was working alongside an excellent teacher. School offered to support her to train as a teacher which made her think about a degree. Then saw the Birkbeck degree in Theatre and English. The interview was a good experience – plenty of consideration given to whether this was the right course for her and of her likelihood of success. She had to produce a piece of work for the interview.

The course turned out to be even better than expected. Excellent teaching – tutor is a powerful communicator; a skill the student identifies with as something she wants to improve. She sees her tutor as an example of a successful person in whom she trusts. Pastoral support is taken seriously, but there is also access to essay writing skills class. Good variety of teaching – seminars, lectures, portfolio work, 1:1 discussion and also following creative writing module, and critical thinking. Sees writing as the single most important skill she is developing.

The course is however challenging and she is aware of the sacrifices needed to be able to keep up with the demands of the course

Her aim is to get into the theatre or developing arts projects and sees that she needs to develop some people management skills in order to do this.

Looking back on her career – she has an extensive CV – much of it creative work, but also hands on experience of project development, teaching and media production. Personal life hasn't been easy but this has not stopped her remaining active in developing skills and experience. She feels that guidance at school might have been better – the idea of a career in the arts was never considered. Even when she chose to do A- levels, the decision wasn't a well informed one. The experience may be very different for young people with supportive homes with parents who have good knowledge of education, but this was not her background and she felt alone in the process.

What is impressive about her is her determination and independence. Her ability to see how each experience contributes to her developing attainment of skills. Like others spoken to the need for qualifications becomes apparent, but also the need to develop some underpinning skills e.g. writing, people management skills, etc

Student 3 Studying for BA Theatre and Humanities

Left school immediately after A levels to go to Los Angeles dance school for a year. Knew of its reputation and also the school visited where she was living in NZ. There were no doubts in her mind about this – even though teachers did ask her about it; she admits that she wasn't going to accept any other advice. No problems with leaving home, being independent or working hard to meet the rigorous demands of the school. She had worked to help pay both in advance of the course and then when she was in LA

What was good about it – best teachers and choreographers – teachers had outstanding skills as dancers; students at the dance school took it very seriously. There was no pastoral provision in the school – though this may have been different for scholarship students. Students simply picked classes and attended. There were casualties as the regime was demanding. Some direction and advice at this point might have been helpful.

There followed a period of dance contracts in Japan, Taiwan, and turned down others. Came to London (though found standard of dance classes in London well below LA) - also returned to LA and took more classes.

Her interest in performing in musical theatre was however diminishing and she saw the need for qualifications. Took a units in psychology at Birkbeck; excellent teaching, affordable, evening provision and inspirational – the teacher was outstanding, recognises personal success of the teacher and the approach to teaching was accessible and not over academic.

This made her consider a degree in psychology – she had also applied and offered places on BA Theatre and BA Media. However the BA psychology proved to be a disappointment for her as it was not what she had anticipated – but she was able to transfer almost immediately to Theatre and Humanities

The academic demands of the degree are a considerable challenge – however tutors very supportive. She is reconsidering her interest in the theatre and feels the need for hands on experience of theatre production, event organisation etc. She is considering the MA in theatre production at Stratford. She has used careers service – and discussed with tutors. She values the quality of teaching; teacher almost as role model. Tutoring has also been very important.

Similar to other students interviewed - she is independent minded with originally no long-term clear career pathway – but intent on building portfolio of experience. At some stage she recognised the need for qualifications and the need to acquire employment related skills.

Study at Birkbeck for this student is attractive because it is part-time and affordable and she can sustain her studies by working. Would greatly value hands on experience - work placement or internship.

Appendix 2

My thanks to the following who supported this research by providing information, advice, staff time and student volunteers.

Rob Cowan: Point Blank

Mark O'Thomas, Marianne B Lorentzen and Andrew Blake: University of East London

Ben Cranfield, Caroline McDonald and Christina Seely: Birkbeck, University of London

Gary Horsman and Ray Downing: Theatre Venture at Stratford Circus

Pamela McComick and Natasha Bergg: Urban Development at Stratford Circus

Sammy Gildroy: Circus Media at Stratford Circus

The invitation workshop held at Stratford Circus on May 5 was supported the Creative Way: Lifelong Learning Network for the Creative and Cultural Industries in the Thames Gateway

Mat Ball, Sarah Comerford, Andy Forrest, Judy Kenney Richard Pyle, Lindsey Pugh and Sarah Williams

Speakers included

Clare Connor: NewVIc (Newham Sixth Form College), Stratford Circus

Andy Cole: NewVIc

Liz Pearson: Creative Way

Rob Cowan: Point Blank

Ben Cranfield: Birkbeck, University of London

Graham Hitchin

With contributions from the following:

Sue Baynton	Lewisham College
Rachel Bradbear	NewVic
Sammy Gildroy	Circus Media
Gary Horsman	Theatre Venture
Victoria King	Birkbeck
Rosanna Leal	Point Blank
Pam McCormick	Urban Development
Mark O'Thomas	University of East London
Serena Robins	Theatre Royal Stratford East
Beatrix Roudet	NewVic
Lisa Stubbs	Lewisham College
Eliza Williams	Stratford Circus
Justine Wright	

And the staff at Stratford Circus

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