Skills narratives amongst media degree graduates and students: Discourses of hard and soft skills in education-to-work journeys

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Abstract

This article focuses on media students and graduates' subjective understanding and expression of skills acquired while undertaking an undergraduate media studies degree programme. It reports on a single undergraduate media studies programme in Ireland and draws from two questionnaires: a 2019 questionnaire of graduates who reflected on the skills developed during their education as well as their employability; and, following a subsequent skills development intervention in the media programme, a 2021 questionnaire of final-year students who undertook a newly introduced module focusing on media and non-media work, skills development and employment in Ireland. This latter questionnaire had the dual purpose of assessing whether students had benefited from this new module and, more generally, of understanding students' perceptions of their skills and employability. This study was concerned to ascertain whether the provision of a new module that reflected on skills development through a media programme aided students' understanding of how their knowledge and skills related to employability. Ultimately, the study found that the module was successful in developing students' understanding of the alignment between transversal skills and employment. However, despite the intervention, students still perceived employability as related mainly to practical skills and supplemental career development activities.

This article focuses on media students' and graduates' subjective understanding and expression of skills acquired while undertaking an undergraduate media studies degree programme. It emerged from the researcher's concern with education-to-work transitions among media graduates and how such transitions could be better supported. The article reports on a single undergraduate media studies programme in Ireland and draws from two questionnaires: a 2019 questionnaire survey of graduates who reflected on the skills developed during their education as well as their employability; and, following a subsequent skills development intervention in the media programme, a 2021 questionnaire survey of final-year students who undertook a newly introduced module that focused on media and non-media work, skills development and employment in Ireland. This latter questionnaire had the dual purpose of assessing whether students had benefited from the new module and, more generally, of understanding students' perceptions of their skills and employability.

Employability is, of course, recognised as an elusive concept, with inconsistent understanding of what skills are required in the labour market, including the creative and cultural industries (CCIs) (Rees, 2021; Suleman, 2016). Equally, employability agendas in higher education institutions (HEIs) have been seen as aligned with the neoliberal instrumentalisation of education, which puts HEIs in the service of the economy rather than the public and its citizens (Hazelkorn, 2014; Hunt, 2011). Cognisant of these concerns, this study recognises that the national trend towards the neoliberalisation and instrumentalisation of HEIs risks reducing them to labour market suppliers and graduates to 'human capital'. Nevertheless, this study is conscious that HEIs have responsibilities to students and graduates that are not limited to employability but relate to it, despite wider criticisms of employability agendas.

This research was designed to ascertain whether the provision of a new module that reflected on skills

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development through a media programme aided students' understanding of how their knowledge and skills related to employability. Ultimately, the study found that the module was successful in developing students' understanding of the alignment between transversal skills and employment. However, despite the intervention, students still perceived employability as related mainly to practical skills and supplemental career development activities. The implications of these findings are discussed in the conclusion to this paper.

Literature review

Creative and cultural industries and work

The study was, in part, concerned with steering students away from the narrow, specialised skills focus of recent Irish CCI policy, in which education is intrinsically related to practical and hard skills. Irish CCIs have, indeed, been central to Irish cultural policy over the past decade, with much emphasis on the economic development and enhancement of cultural heritage and the arts, audiovisual production and technology innovation (Hadley et al., 2020; O'Brien, 2019). Various national policy reports have positioned CCIs as potential areas of economic growth, and as providing opportunities for foreign direct investment, job creation and regional development (Murphy and O'Brien, 2015; Brodie, 2019). Such reports emphasise the need for a skilled labour force that can meet the skills demands of Irish CCIs, which are specific to specialist rather than general or transferable skills (Crowe Howarth, 2017). HEIs have responded to such CCI policies and, more broadly, to national skills development policies by positioning themselves as in the service of the economy and as creators of employable graduates who will address these labour market needs (Holborow and O'Sullivan, 2017). This repositioning is often resisted by educators themselves, who see education as facilitating democracy and citizenship rather than purely serving labour market needs (Holborow, 2012). The media programme that formed the basis of this study addresses these different educational outcomes through the development of students' critical understanding of subjects such as media ownership and representation as well as media production techniques. The skills development module that emerged from this study was a complement to rather than a revision of these existing subjects.

The skills development module was introduced because the researcher recognised, and, in turn, students came to recognise, the Irish CCIs as challenging sectors in terms of employment and work. The graduates in this study attested to this characterisation. In addition, media work and employment have already elsewhere been described as precarious, with career management perceived as more challenging than in other sectors that have clearer career

routes and more stable employment conditions (Bridgstock and Cunningham, 2016; Curtin and Sanson, 2016; Gill, 2011). The contemporary conditions of media work are said to involve increased casualisation of contracts, 'flexploitation', portfolio work and early exits from the sector, all of which contribute to the construction of a precarious labour force (De Peuter, 2011; Skujiņa and Loots, 2020; Wallis et al., 2019). Aspiring media workers report that finding routes into, as well as sustaining, media work is challenging, with unpaid work and internships common in the wider media sectors (Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2011; O'Brien and Kerrigan, 2020). This precariousness is often seen as evidence of a neoliberal turn in CCIs, in which economic risk shifts from the state or capital to the worker (Bridges, 2017; Ross, 2008). Individual workers are made responsible for meeting the needs of employers or clients through upskilling, financial investment in training, 'lifelong learning', networking and portfolio-building, all adding to the 'self-work' expected in the neoliberal creative economy (Cohen, 2016; Ouellette, 2014: 104; Randle, 2011: 150–151). As scholars have noted, and as this study of graduates demonstrated, graduates of media degrees often report feeling ill-prepared for media work and perceive themselves as lacking various skills necessary for the work, ranging from practical and technical to transversal skills (Ball et al., 2010; Bridgstock and Carr, 2013; O'Brien et al., 2021). In addition, graduates and media workers report challenging education-to-work transitions, reflecting the sometimes 'multiple entry attempts, unpaid internships, travel to follow the possibility of work, more education and/or training, and reliance on non-career jobs, family or social security for financial support' that can characterise media career commencement and development (Bridgstock and Cunningham, 2016: 12). Media education is sometimes, therefore, expected to give these aspiring media workers an advantage in the competitive media labour market through skills development (Banks and Oakley, 2016; O'Brien et al., 2021). The intervention undertaken as part of this study was aimed at drawing students' attention to the skills they had already acquired and demonstrating how they could be applied in employment contexts.

The employability agenda and its criticisms

There are competing views about the extent to which media degrees facilitate (or should facilitate) media career development, as well as the way HEIs have embraced the employability agenda that prioritises labour market needs (Taylor and Luckman, 2020). This transformation in the relationship between Irish HEIs, students and employers has been criticised and recognised as connected to wider socioeconomic forces which include: increasing student numbers alongside the massification of higher education (Hazelkorn, 2014; Loxley et al., 2014); the commodification of degrees

through increased student costs and/or fees (Olssen and Peters, 2005); the globalisation of education, with European-led programmes like the Bologna Process re-shaping Irish HE (Mercille and Murphy, 2015); and con-comitant government reports and policies reframing HEIs' role as feeding the labour market and addressing identified labour market skills shortages, particularly prevalent since the 2008 global recession that impacted Ireland's labour market participation severely (Hunt, 2011). Irish HEIs have therefore followed other European HEIs in subscribing to the human capital ideology and in turning their attention to the employability of their students and the production of industry-ready graduates to facilitate economic growth and to encourage foreign direct investment, which Ireland relies on greatly (Ashton, 2015; Holborow, 2012).

Following the emphasis on employability more generally in the National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030 (Hunt, 2011), Irish HEIs have increasingly turned towards developing student employability, defined as the attainment of work-related skills and competencies useful in em-ployment. The quality of an HEI is then typically measured in graduate destination surveys that place value mainly on labour market participation (Pollard, 2013). In turn, students come to see higher education in these terms and, as both of this study's questionnaires show, students' and graduates' evaluations of and reflections on their studies were en-meshed in thoughts of employability and concerns about the utility of their skills in graduate life. Therefore, while there are valid criticisms of the employability agendas of HEIs at the macro level, this study is concerned with micro-level approaches to developing students' and graduates' under-standing of how they can action their skills and knowledge.

Media education, skills and employability

As has been widely demonstrated, media students and graduates vary considerably in what they understand their degrees to be for, what skills and knowledge they believe they have, and what their attitudes towards employment are. Wallis et al. (2019) found that, in self-assessments of their media degree, graduates perceive skills acquisition as only one aspect of a wider university experience, thus countering the narrow programme-led focus of HEI employability initiatives. Beacham's (2000) study of media programme graduates found that they did not directly align their media degree with specific forms of work, nor were graduates committed to working in one sector above others. O'Brien and Kerrigan's analysis of Irish media degree graduates found that they struggled to generate coherent narratives of the degree programme skills they used in their employment (2020). Such graduates may not make the connection be-tween skills developed during studies, such as communi-cation or research skills, and the application of these in work (English et al., 2021).

In addition, skills acquired in formal educational settings are often perceived to be less valuable than other career entry strategies. For example, many scholars have found that work experience, placements or internships are iden-tified as helping graduates enter work, as is networking, which is a common route into media work (Ashton, 2016; Haukka, 2011; Marsden, 2011; McCabe, 2016; O'Brien and Kerrigan, 2020). O'Brien et al.'s (2021) research on the education–policy–employment nexus of media in Ireland found that there was little consensus about what skills were valuable among policy-makers, educators, industry em-ployers or graduates of media programmes, despite agencies such as Screen Skills Ireland's (2019) focus on skills shortages in Irish CCIs. While prevalent within industry, educational and policy discourse, the 'skills' often referred to are not exactly defined. Nonetheless, this study provides evidence of the need for students to be better guided in understanding the meaning and utility of skills. Equipping students with the ability to define and communicate their skills was one of the benefits of the study, even if there was a persistent focus on practical skills as well as students' desire for a blurring of the boundaries between education and work. The approach to the study is described next.

Methodology

This study commenced with a 2019 questionnaire con-cerned with the graduate destinations of those who com-pleted an Irish media studies programme between 2006 and 2018. This led to a curriculum intervention in the form of a new skills development module and a follow-up ques-tionnaire with enrolled students. The research questions that guided the study were: how do students and graduates experience education to work transitions, and how do students and graduates perceive and value skills acquired during their education? The first questionnaire was un-dertaken to gather data on graduate destinations and to understand graduates' experiences of education-to-work transitions as well as their perceptions of skills and em-ployability. The findings evidenced challenges in graduates' education-to-work transitions that centred on their (lack of) understanding of their own learning, knowledge and skills. This prompted an intervention into the media studies cur-riculum in the form of a new core module that focused on professionalisation, the meaning and value of skills, and the critical evaluation of media work and media industries. The second questionnaire was undertaken to see whether, having undertaken the new module, students could better articulate the value of their learning and the usefulness of their skills, and to assess students' perceptions of employability and skills acquired in media education.

Questionnaires were used to ensure anonymity and to allow respondents to provide more nuanced explanations of their perceptions of and attitudes to their education, work

and skills. The researcher took an inductive approach to data-gathering, with the questionnaires consisting of a small number of multiple-choice questions and descriptive and open-ended questions which allowed for more qualitative responses. The first graduate questionnaire was undertaken in 2019 (57 respondents), followed by one with final-year students in 2021 (72 respondents). Thematic analysis was used to identify experiences and perceptions common and divergent across the qualitative responses and to isolate representative quotations and narratives provided by the respondents. Following the model for thematic analysis offered by Braun and Clarke (2006), this study commenced with the researcher immersing herself in the data, producing codes from the data, and then identifying, refining and defining the themes, which are discussed in the results section below. This was carried out for the initial and the follow-up questionnaires.

The first questionnaire was drawn in part from alumni records of students of undergraduate media programmes in the HEI and supplemented by researchers accessing graduates through LinkedIn public profiles. Snowball sampling proved useful in circulating the questionnaire to a wider pool of graduates. 59 graduates consented to participation, following wide circulation of the invitation and the questionnaire was issued to them; 57 subsequently completed it. This represented around 10% of the graduates of the media programmes between 2006 and 2018. Participants were anonymised at the point of response and any identifying data were excluded. Graduates were asked a selection of questions, including:

- Were there challenges in the education-to-work transition?
- Did the degree prepare you for work?
- Did the degree meet your expectations?
- What would you change about your degree?

Graduate destinations varied greatly, ranging from audiovisual work to digital media, social media and marketing, and non-media work such as teaching. All questionnaires were reviewed for the richness and detail of the responses (not all respondents answered all questions) and codes related to work, skills and employment were identified. Related codes were collated as themes, with 'narratives of employability' and 'skills for media work' emerging as common discussion points in open-ended responses. The research findings included the observation that graduates were unclear about what skills they had developed through their degree, what value they should give these skills, what career routes and opportunities were available and how they could represent and showcase skills.

The results of this initial questionnaire led to an intervention in the third-year media degree programme in semester 1, 2020–2021 in the form of a new professionalisation module. These changes included orientation towards career preparation, portfolio development, skills articulation and communication and industry research. The module commenced with students naming and self-assessing the skills they had developed during their degree, carrying out an audit on their skills and undertaking a skills SWOT analysis. Students were then tasked with identifying roles and jobs (for example, job advertisements) that required these skills and, in turn, selecting roles/jobs that matched their skillset. They then produced a CV and a digital portfolio that reflected their skills, learning and experience. Students also heard from previous graduates about their career and life trajectories and from other industry professionals. They critically analysed different media industries as well as forms of media and non-media work, and other non-work destinations such as postgraduate studies. This module was intended not to develop new skills but to help students to reflect on and self-assess their learning to date and to understand the relevance of their skills and learning beyond their studies.

Students who undertook these modules were then invited to participate in a questionnaire that asked them about their expectations of media work, if they felt their education and skills facilitated employment, what skills and experience they believed employers valued and what challenges they anticipated in seeking media work following graduation. Of those invited to participate, 72 of 89 did so. All questionnaire responses were anonymised, and any identifying information has been excluded. There were 25 closed and open-ended questions designed to capture larger patterns as well as more individualised experiences of participants. Questions included:

- What kinds of skills have you developed on the media programme?
- Give two examples of how and where you have used these skills, either in college or elsewhere.
- What skills and experience do you feel you need but don't have?
- What kinds of things do you think will assist or limit your entry into work?

Thematic analysis was undertaken again to identify and make sense of students' ability to articulate and reflect on their skills, experiences and expectations of work and employment. The findings from this study were then revisited alongside those of the initial graduate study to assess the kinds of work subjectivities and career narratives of both graduates and those preparing to graduate, and to consider what role (if any) the intervention of the new module had played in helping students understand and articulate their skills. The researcher reviewed both questionnaires together, identifying comments and quotations related to

issues around skills, work and employment. These were coded and, from there, individual codes were grouped thematically. These themes form the basis of the results.

The questionnaires are not directly comparable: not only do the responding cohorts and participants differ, but each group will have experienced a different media degree (or a different iteration since there were adjustments to the programme curriculum over the years). Further, the results may not be generalizable since the questionnaires were small in scale and the media degrees included in the study will differ from other media degrees. They are, therefore, indicative only.

In addition, the second student questionnaire was undertaken while Irish HEIs were in a COVID-19 pandemic-related lockdown and students' ambivalence may be related to fears about a recession and a corresponding lack of media work. In other words, similar studies undertaken later may have different responses. However, the results from this study may inform further studies on the relationship between media degrees and work, particularly in the context of skills and experience acquisition. The next section details some of the key themes to emerge from both questionnaires, particularly concerning education-to-work transitions.

Results

The results pointed towards graduates' and students' deep investment in career knowledge and understanding and a significant concern with employability. Several key themes emerged: these are discussed below with reference to individual responses from graduates and students.

Firstly, the responses demonstrated that graduates and students found it easiest to discuss practical skills and to see the relationship between practical work undertaken during studies and the use of these practical skills in employment. An additional finding was that, whereas graduates were less likely to identify transversal skills that they had brought from education to work, students who undertook the professionalisation module could identify a broader range of skills and suggest jobs and roles they could apply for. A third theme concerned work-related learning or career development opportunities that were seen as required features of media degrees, with both graduates and students feeling that the more engagement and interaction degree programmes had with industry, the better. Ultimately, the findings from the student questionnaire evidenced an ability to see a pathway from media education to work once professionalisation initiatives had been embedded in the curriculum. Yet students still expressed a lack of confidence, particularly in practical skills, and an uncertainty about how their transition to work would take place.

Practical skills are paramount

Many graduates and students focused mainly on accounting for their practical skills (or lack thereof) and the role those skills played in gaining media work. The valuing of practical components of media programmes has been noted in other studies of media graduates who saw practical skills as the most applicable to work (Hiles, 2016; Wallis et al., 2020). Many respondents from both cohorts measured the success of their programme and their capacity to enter media work on practical skills acquisition. Both cohorts were also able to list the practical skills they saw as crucial for media workers and assessed their own professional competence in relation to what they perceived to be the level of their ability or experience. Despite the new professionalisation module, then, students retained a belief in a 'skills hierarchy', with practical skills at the top. While some 16% of graduates described their acquisition of practical skills as useful to their career development, 40% felt they lacked the practical skills that would help them into media work. 12% of graduates felt there was too much 'theory' on their degree programme and not enough practical modules and this, in turn, was perceived to be detrimental to entering the media industries:

> 'The undergraduate course was very theoretical with minimal practical experience, I felt this held me back greatly in securing work immediately after completing my degree.' (Graduate 51)

> 'The theory side of media did not benefit me in any way. The practical side was better but it would have been more beneficial to do other practical work such as creative briefs, story boards, etc.' (Graduate 48)

One graduate felt that the main challenge in transitioning from education to work was 'access to the industry and [their] absence of relevant skills for entry level broadcast positions. I was very lucky in that my first employer … made up the deficits in my training' (Graduate 11). Another felt that their education had not been useful since they did not 'have experience in Adobe software such as after effects and illustrator' (Graduate 10). Others noted how the skills they had learned or tools they had used were not industry standard or were already out of date. Therefore, they felt unskilled in seeking out media work and paid less attention to other transversal skills that could be useful in media work contexts.

Equally, among the student respondents who had undertaken modules in professionalisation and career preparation, 29% saw the practical and technical skills as the most directly relevant to media work. Like the graduates, those who prioritised practical skills wished for more focus on these skills and more time spent gaining experience in

media practice as part of their education. One student summed this up as follows:

> 'I feel I need more regular, hands-on experience with film, television and radio production. The experience I have had so far, while very valuable, has been sporadic and I believe that regular exposure to practical scenarios is the only way to significantly improve and be effective in any field.' (Student 72)

Others (12%) used the word 'basic' to describe their media practice experience or stated that they didn't have 'in depth [experience] where I would feel confident' (Student 2) in using media tools. Students anticipating job hunting soon were therefore anxious that their practical and technical knowledge and experience would fall short of the standards expected of new entrants. This is despite research that suggests that media employers often value transversal skills as much as, if not more than practical skills, which can be developed in employment (O'Brien et al., 2021).

Neither graduates nor students referred to in-job training, nor did they feel confident that employers would provide opportunities for developing practical skills on the job. The tendency was to individualise responsibility for having the skills prior to employment, and to task educators with facilitating practical skills development that participants saw employers wanting. In fact, both graduates and students expected to undertake vast amounts of supplemental career preparation – to demonstrate 'an economy of experience' – while undertaking their degrees such as internships, engagement with industry, networking and portfolio-building (Brown et al., 2004: 36).

The next section concerns the narrative of 'skills are not enough' that emerged through graduates' and students' responses and the supplemental labour that was undertaken in the education-to-work transition.

Supplemental career preparation

Both students and graduates felt that employability was dependent on having already gained work experience by the time of graduation; undertaking internships; engaging in career development activities; and establishing networks and contacts in the industry. They tended to individualise responsibility for employment and, if reference were made to structural issues and labour market conditions, this was largely in the context of the recent COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on CCIs. In other words, employability was seen as an individual rather than a labour market issue. In addition, both graduates and students did not see education as distinct from the labour market and instead tended to see their HE years as a preparatory stage of labour market participation. This is evident in the extent to which graduates and students felt that internships, placements,

networking, portfolio-building and CV/interviewing preparation should be undertaken during their media degree, demonstrating what Ashton (2015), following Gill (2011), calls 'work on the self'. While this 'work on the self' is often expected to be facilitated by media education, the expectation is that graduates and students will undertake it to enhance employability. As Ashton (2014: 283) states, activities like undertaking work placements serve to repair deficits that students perceive in themselves. Many of the graduates and students in the present study felt themselves lacking in qualities and experiences that would make them suitable for work, and they saw this lack primarily as a personal failing or a failing of their education. Rarely did respondents see this it as an economic or industry failing.

This narrative of 'lack' was most apparent in graduates' and students' references to having/not having experience, with many stating that they fell short on experience when seeking media work. Experience was articulated as formal employment, placements, internships or doing extra-curricular self-initiated projects during their studies. For example, 14% of the graduates stated that their degree did not provide them with enough experience of media work to be employable. While one noted that this was not necessarily what should be expected of a degree (Graduate 55), another stated that they would have benefitted from more opportunities for work experience and that further training and experience were required on completion of their degree (Graduate 7). While 54% of the graduates went on to gain experience in media work, students were particularly vocal about their lack of experience and how it would impact their career journey. One student stated this succinctly:

> 'Lack of practical work experience within the media industry outside of university may hinder my entry into work initially after graduation.' (Student 72)

Many others saw experience as something for which they were personally responsible. For example, several stated that they should have or wished they had sought out work experience. Students' comments included:

> 'I think that the skills I have gained throughout my degree will be an asset to me [when seeking work] but my lack of experience will be a limitation.' (Student 12)

> '[I] feel the course covered a broad scope of the industry but I need more experience in a work field.' (Student 18)

However, both cohorts referred to a lack of embedded work placements and internships, which they felt should form part of the degree programme. Such encounters with 'real life' work were seen as crucial to entering media work, were perceived as 'demystifying' media work and were

thought to provide networking opportunities. For example, Graduate 15 stated that they would have liked an internship or placement on their programme 'even if unpaid'. Other graduates felt that, while they had developed skills and knowledge on the degree programme, a placement would have given them the experience to make them work-ready (Graduate 19; Graduate 22; Graduate 25).

The new module did not alleviate concerns about experience for students, despite their increased confidence in their skills more generally. Students were especially keen to advocate for more work placements or internships as part of their degree programme, with many seeing these as a preparation for graduate life and as providing them with a CV or portfolio of work that would be attractive to employers. 15% felt they lacked this crucial experience. In this sense, a degree qualification alone was not perceived to be attractive enough to employers. One student stated that 'If we … had the placement option I would feel a lot more secure leaving college as I am competing against marketing students … the majority [of whom] have done placement therefore I feel limited' (Student 28). For some students, the work placements were valuable solely because employers valued them. For others, work placements provided access to contacts and opportunities for networking and these students wished to use them strategically.

Graduates and students also believed that employability could be enhanced through further degree supports for education-to-work transitions – for example, in the form of portfolio-building, training for interviewing and CV writing and developing connections with the industry. One graduate noted that they 'didn't know how to create a media CV' (Graduate 7), while another stated that 'It would have been great to have more of an opportunity to build … contacts throughout college' (Graduate 17). 12% of the graduates referred to direct job-hunting support, with one stating that they would have liked to learn 'how to apply for different jobs and where to approach, be it individuals, production companies directly or agencies' (Graduate 21). Graduates therefore felt that their degree should have offered more opportunities for career development and professionalisation.

Students also identified the same career preparation activities as important for their career advancement, and, following their undertaking of the professionalisation module, felt more confident in this. They reported that the module had assisted them with job hunting, interviewing and CV preparation because it had helped them to reflect on and communicate the skills they had already acquired in their studies and to identify alignment between their skills and job roles. While both graduates and students prioritised practical skills and experience and felt the need to attain and evidence these in order to enhance employability, attitudes to transversal skills differed greatly, with the students far more likely to see a role for these skills in education-to-work transitions. The next section discusses these attitudes to transversal skills and the role the module played in building students' confidence in their employability.

Transversal skills enhance employability

The main success of this study's intervention was the improved recognition of transversal skills, referred to by the students more generally as soft and transferable skills and which featured very little in the graduates' responses, particularly among those who had graduated in more recent years. Subject expertise and specialisation were largely associated with technical and practical skills acquisition, with few graduates referring to research skills, interpersonal or communication skills or teamwork skills, which were also part of their degrees. The capacity to identify and communicate transversal skills is particularly important in the context of employability, since CCI employers and policy-makers have noted that there is a shortage of such skills in the creative labour market (Screen Skills Ireland, 2019). In addition, recent research by Succi and Canovi (2019: 1835) suggests that soft skills now play a more important role in employability in the European context, but attention has tended to concentrate on hard or technical skills. Drawing from an extensive literature on the topic of soft skills, they define them as 'communication, teamwork, problem solving, critical and innovative thinking, creativity, self-confidence, ethical understanding, capacity of lifelong learning, the ability to cope with uncertainty, as well as the willingness to accept responsibility' (2019: 1836–37).

Even though soft skills such as those listed were central to the media programmes undertaken by graduates, few (8%) were able to name them or see their relevance to their employability. However, when asked what they enjoyed most about their current jobs, 33% mentioned creativity, teamwork and collaboration, communication and their adaptability to a changing industry. Graduate 14, for example, stated:

> 'I love being part of a team and creating something that will entertain or inform people. Every day brings something different so it rarely gets boring. I enjoy the variety of different productions you can work on and the energetic and collaborative atmosphere in most work environments.'

In other words, graduates valued the rewards accrued from possession of those skills but did not associate their acquisition of transversal skills with their media programme. As Hurrell (2016) notes, skills deficits are often blamed on 'supply side' issues, with educators and graduates blamed by employers for not having transversal skills appropriate for employment. Likewise, Gleeson and Keep (2004) note that employers can blame educators for not creating work-ready and employable graduates. Ultimately, graduates themselves bear the brunt of this blame-game,

and, as the research undertaken here shows, feel under-prepared and under-skilled for work.

It was, indeed, because of these findings from the graduate questionnaire that the researcher developed the new module in order to develop students' understanding of the alignment between transversal skills and media and non-media work (for example, through industry speaker talks and examination of job roles and job advertisements). Students were tasked with identifying a broad range of skills they had acquired and with mapping these onto roles in the media industries. Exercises included undertaking a skills audit, identifying entry-level roles in media industries, using a SWOT analysis to identify individual and structural factors affecting employability, creating a professional social media account and a CV, and self-initiating a portfolio project that showcased a broad range of skills. Students undertook the questionnaire as part of a reflective exercise to identify the challenges they perceived in gaining media work, the opportunities they saw, the skills they felt they had and the skills they perceived employers to be expecting.

Although this module lasted for one semester only, the vast majority of students were able to articulate the alignment between the soft skills development undertaken during their degree and media work. While technical and hard skills were primarily named as enhancing their employability (44% referenced these skills), there was far broader reference to soft skills including teamwork (25%), research skills (22%), writing skills (21%), communication skills (17%) and critical thinking skills (15%). Students were also able to identify instances in either work or study when they had put these skills into practice. For example:

> 'I have developed many skills I would have never developed before. In soft skills, I have developed my teamwork skills which I was not very good at before starting this degree, and have learnt to not always micromanage the project. I have also learnt to develop and change how I work depending on the situation I am in, which makes these skills easily transferable.' (Student 11)

> '[An] example where I have used [researching, presenting and self-management] skills is during my internship with a marketing company as it was focused on creative business strategies and required me to do a lot of planning and then present my findings to the directors.' (Student 40)

> '[I]nitiative is a skill that I developed both in college and part-time work. I know how to deal with issues effectively and I am not afraid to be the first to step up for a task when no one else will.' (Student 20)

When asked what skills they thought employers valued, transversal skills featured heavily in students' responses. In fact, although students listed technical and hard skills as their greatest deficit, these same skills were not perceived to

be priorities for employers. Instead graduates felt that personal skills (such as adaptability, reliability) (33%), teamwork (26%), work ethic (13%), and communication (10%) were more important to employers. Therefore, while the professionalisation module seemed to have little impact on students' (lack of) confidence in their technical and hard skills, it helped them to recognise the role and importance of transversal skills in work.

Discussion

Further research on the same cohorts is planned to assess, in particular, whether students who undertook professionalisation exercises found that it enhanced employability and supported education-to-work transitions. In the meantime, certain valuable lessons have been learned which may prove informative for other researchers examining education-to-work transitions in CCI-related degree programmes. This article focuses primarily on employability and skills development narratives among one cohort of graduates and another cohort of students, the latter of whom had access to a professionalisation module. The findings highlight the importance of practical, technical and hard skills development to graduates and students, who see these skills as the most directly applicable to all forms of media work. Likewise, graduates reported challenges in education-to-work transitions because of their lack of practical, technical and hard skills, a finding which correlates with research by Bridgstock et al. (2015) on creative graduate pathways.

For graduates and students, such challenges could be mitigated through their degree programmes in the form of professionalisation and career development activities. While perceptions of whether these were provided in media degrees varied within and across cohorts, both students and graduates felt that employability needed to be enhanced through self-work facilitated by their HEI's provision of work-based learning or placements and other career development activities. This demonstrated the eagerness with which students and graduates wished to develop their professional identities through interactions with industry and experience of media workplaces. Given the concerns that students and graduates had about their practical, technical and hard skills, early engagements with industry may help acclimatise students and prepare them for working life (Ashton, 2015; English et al., 2021; McCabe, 2016; Wallis et al., 2020). Indeed, some researchers have advocated for the role of career development activities such as placements as part of degree studies, taking the view that employability is and should be a key priority for HEIs (Helyer and Lee, 2014; Sin and Neave, 2016). According to this view, collaboration between educators and industry provides benefits for the latter. Often, career development activities like internships or industry engagement are seen

by scholars to prepare students for the realities of creative work (Bridgstock et al., 2015; Daniel and Daniel, 2013).

However, concerns have been raised by scholars who see HEI-embedded career development activities as productive of neoliberal worker subjectivities, whereby students become accustomed to unpaid or low-paid labour and see their education as an extension of work (Allen et al., 2013; Garrick and Usher, 2000). CCIs have been especially targeted for normalising precarity and exploiting workers whose ambition to 'be creative' means that they are expected by employers to accept poor working conditions in order to fulfil their creative ambition (Gill, 2011; McRobbie, 2016). This is then thought to be reinforced through HEIs' embracing of placements and internships in order to create job-ready graduates (Allen et al., 2013). While there is a consensus among media scholars that CCI labour market conditions are poor and conditions are often unfair, some see education as the cure and not the poison. Michelle Phillipov (2021), for example, notes that work-based learning initiatives can be used to raise students' awareness of work and sectoral inequalities (and not just to reinforce them). In addition, the use of reflective techniques in students' work-based learning has been said to enable them to look beyond their individual experience and relate it to wider socio-economic conditions (Ramaker et al., 2015: 353–354). Indeed, media degree programmes often synthesise critical approaches to media production, enabling students to engage in more reflective and nuanced practice. Ultimately, while supporting education-to-work transitions may be seen as instrumental and shaped by economic factors, students nonetheless need to understand the learning and skills development that is central to their higher educational experience. And they need to be able to apply this learning in a variety of life experiences, employment included.

Conclusion

This study emerged from a questionnaire which showed that media graduates struggled to identify, articulate and recognise some of the fundamental skills they had developed during their media studies. In essence, then, the study, and the intervention undertaken within it, sought to help students understand what they had already learned and what skills they had developed during their media studies. Although many scholars are concerned about the extent to which HEIs and programmes align with the economy and industries, the view taken in this study was that a focus on employability need not be in competition with the values and ethos of a liberal education, but can coexist with it. Currently, there is polarisation between scholars and educators who see HE, and universities in particular, as distinct from the economy and those who see a close connection between HEIs and the economy, employers and the labour market. Yet, students require not only a clearer sense of what their degrees are for, but more understanding of why they should take a degree, what knowledge and skills they develop and to what use they can put such knowledge and skills.

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