Shaping Screen Talent:
Conceptualising and Developing the Film and TV Workforce in Scotland

Abstract:

Together with 'creativity', the concept of 'talent' has emerged within UK and global policy discussions as being central to unlocking economic success within the creative industries. At a crucial time of political and technological change, Scotland finds itself competing within a highly competitive global market to identify, attract and retain creative talent and strengthen its skills base. As such, developing 'talent' is a key aspect of the Scottish Government's Strategy for the Creative Industries (2011). However, while creativity has been interrogated across academic disciplines in recent years (Schlesinger 2009; 2007, Bilton 2010; 2006), talent remains under-theorised within the academy and lacks a clear definition across policy and industry. Taking the screen industries as its focus, this paper draws on empirical data derived from a series of knowledge exchange workshops funded by the Royal Society of Edinburgh designed to initiate dialogue between academics, policymakers and stakeholders within Scotland and beyond. In doing so, it examines the various ways in which screen 'talent' is conceptualised by these groups and raises questions regarding how particular understandings may impact on policies designed to identify, attract and retain a diversity of skilled screen industries workers both onscreen and behind the scenes. We argue that there should be greater precision regarding the discourse used in policy to emphasize the importance of the development of particular and discrete craft skills rather than a stress on flexibility and mobility. We suggest that policymakers and educators must acknowledge and encourage transparency regarding the precariousness of building a career within the screen industries.

Keywords: cultural policy, creative talent, screen industries, knowledge exchange, film and television, Creative Scotland

Introduction

Together with 'creativity', the concept of 'talent' has emerged within UK and indeed, global policy discussions as being central to unlocking economic success within the creative industries (DCMS 2008; European Commission 2010; Australian Government 2011). At a crucial time of political and technological change, Scotland finds itself competing within a highly competitive global market to identify, attract and retain creative talent and strengthen its skills base. As such, developing 'talent' is a key aspect of the Scottish Government's Strategy for the Creative Industries (2011) and is a recurring issue in the Film Sector Review (Bop Consulting 2014) conducted for Creative Scotland, the public body supporting the arts, screen and creative industries. However, while creativity has been interrogated across academic disciplines in recent years (Schlesinger 2009; 2007, Bilton 211; 2010), talent remains under-theorised within the academy. Noting NESTA's (2013) definition of the creative economy as 'those sectors which specialise in the use of creative talent for commercial purposes', Schlesinger (2013a) argues that 'a phrase like "creative talent", while it trips off the tongue, carries much more symbolic freight than "creative occupation", its intended synonym'. Indeed, Sennett (2006: 165) now finds the notion of 'craftsmanship' –

the mastery of a particular skill – to be viewed in negative terms as leading-sector firms privilege change and flexibility while talent and merit are redefined 'as a *potential* rather than practice'. This complicates traditional understandings of career narratives, reward systems and the existence of a skills ladder and poses challenges for policymakers and practitioners alike.

Taking the screen industries as its focus, this paper draws on empirical data derived from a series of knowledge exchange workshops funded by the Royal Society of Edinburgh (RSE) designed to initiate dialogue between academics, policymakers and stakeholders within Scotland's screen industries and beyond. In doing so, it examines the various ways in which screen 'talent' is conceptualised by these groups and raises questions regarding how particular understandings may impact on policies designed to identify, attract and retain a diversity of screen industries workers both onscreen and behind the scenes. In terms of the structure of the paper, the next section outlines how the term 'talent' has emerged within policy discourses in recent years before setting out a brief introduction to the screen industries in Scotland. Following this, the knowledge exchange workshops are summarized before the remainder of the paper sets out some initial findings and draws reflections and conclusion.

What do we mean by Talent?

The term 'talent' has become somewhat ubiquitous in creative industries policy and is a key element of the Scottish Government's 2011 Strategy for the Creative Industries, 'Growth, Talent, Ambition'. While the document defines what is meant by the creative industries, e.g., the 13 distinct industries which the UK Department of Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) consider to make up the wider sector, the concept of talent remains less clear, with the primary focus being on 'skills development' rather than 'talent' per se (2011: 6). In his exploration of 'craftsmanship', Sennett notes how (2008: 37),

> the modern era is often described as a skills economy, but what exactly is a skill? The generic answer is that skill is a trained practice. In this, skill contrasts to the *coup de foudre*, the sudden inspiration. The lure of inspiration lies in part in the conviction that raw talent can take the place of training.

This common understanding of the difference between talent and skill complicates the way in which creative industries policy, while perhaps not going so far as to conflate the two, certainly views them as complementary and indeed, views formal training to be a key component of developing talent.

The importance of 'raw', 'natural' or 'innate' talent to achieving success within a particular field has begun to be questioned elsewhere, however. For example, drawing on Ericsson's (1991) extensive work around expert performance, Gladwell (2008), Syed (2010) and Horton (2012) argue that the most significant element in achieving high levels of success in fields such as music or sport, is not the primacy of talent people are born with but the quantity and quality of purposeful practice that particular individuals engage in. This is combined with environmental factors ranging from place and date of birth to having access to instructional resources and family support. At a rhetorical level then, it becomes questionable whether the use of the term 'talent' within creative industries policy is helpful given that it must be combined with a focus on skills development through formal training, not to mention access to opportunity, if high levels of success are to be achieved.

This becomes more complex when we look at the media industries in particular. For Sennett (2006: 165), one of the few scholars to engage with the concept of talent from a social and cultural perspective rather than Ericsson's psychological approach, an examination of workplace changes in the new economy revealed 'craftsmanship' – the mastery of a particular skill – to be viewed in negative terms as leading-sector firms privilege 'change' and 'flexibility' while talent and merit are redefined 'as a *potential* rather than practice'. In highly mobile environments, such as the high-tech, high-finance and media industries, Sennett (ibid: 16) found that workers who learn to do one thing well over a significant period of time gradually become deskilled because they are regarded as being unable to adapt if the business changes. This is especially true in media companies where

> people in their late forties and fifties, unless they become really mogul-like, and even though they've done long service in the firm, will end up working at an inferior skill level compared to young people who have just come in. There's the presumption that the modal efficient age in media companies is between 32 and 38.

If media is therefore believed to be a young person's industry, this poses challenges for policymakers and practitioners alike in terms of traditional understandings of career narratives, reward systems and the existence of a skills ladder. Raising further issues we also know that, in terms of make-up, the screen industries are disproportionately white, male, able-bodied and well educated (Leadbeater and Oakley, 1999).

Further to this, despite the view of creative workers as the "harbingers of entrepreneurialism" (Oakley, 2009), a number of critiques have also emerged of the highly 'suspect utopianism' surrounding employment in the sector (Banks and O'Connor, 2009). The screen industries, often considered a paradigmatic sub-set of the creative industries, have historically been an early adopter of flexible and freelance work. As Banks and Hesmondhalgh (2009) point out there has been a tendency in recent policy to present creative industry labour as an intrinsically progressive form of work. They suggest that flexible labour is regarded as a "positive spillover effect" within UK policy documents such as 'Staying Ahead' (Work Foundation, 2007) with "high degrees of labour turnover and increased levels of second-jobbing" portrayed as "useful external economies" (Banks and Hesmondhalgh, 2009: 416). It is common for screen industries workers to be self-employed and there is a preponderance of project-based temporary employment, 'bulimic' patterns of work, long hours, high levels of mobility as well as the blurring of boundaries between work and play (Gill and Pratt, 2008; Higgs et al, 2008; Leadbeater and Oakley, 1999; McRobbie, 2002).

In relation to the screen industries, the notion of talent takes on added meaning as it refers to those who appear onscreen as well as those working behind the scenes. In addition to the proliferation of talent formats on television, such as *The X Factor* (ITV 2004-), *Strictly Come Dancing* (BBC 2004-), *Britain's Got Talent* (ITV 2007-) and their multiple international incarnations, are numerous debates around the value and diversity of talent onscreen. In the UK television context, this ranges from criticism directed at the BBC for the high salaries paid to primarily white, male presenting talent (Luft 2008; Kelly 2010) around the same time as the 'elision of older women specifically from British factual programming' (Jermyn 2013: 76) and the continued lack of representation of BAME groups (Deans 2014). In terms of film, there is likewise recognition of the under-representation of women and minorities in lead roles (Hollywood Diversity Report 2014) while the high salaries paid to film 'stars' regularly make the headlines. Bennett (2011: 35) argues how 'ideas of work and talent have been understood as crucial to the construction of celebrity' and, despite various

contradictions, has led to a certain hierarchy existing between 'film stars' and 'television personalities'. For example, while differentiation between the on and offscreen personas of film stars has resulted in a discourse in which 'acting is valued as an achievement', the emphasis on the 'authenticity' and 'ordinariness' of television personalities, who are often regarded as simply playing versions of themselves, 'serves to erase any notion of talent, skilled performance or hard work that goes toward the construction of their on-screen persona' (ibid). As Banks and Hesmondhalgh (2009: 418) identify, the discourse that creative work is talent-driven and meritocratic has been adopted by politicians and policymakers emphasising that "anyone can 'make it'".

This short summary of some of the rather limited literature that exists around the concept of talent highlights a lack of theorisation or a clear definition of the term across the academy, policy and industry. These differences and complexities thus provided a starting point for our knowledge exchange research workshops which set out to explore the various ways in which screen 'talent' is conceptualised and consider how particular understandings may impact on policies designed to identify, attract and retain a diversity of talent both onscreen and behind the scenes. Before going on to introduce the framework of the workshops in more detail and the resultant themes to emerge, we will first explain our focus on Scotland's screen industries and the importance of the knowledge exchange element of the project.

Scotland's screen industries

The screen industries in Scotland are strategically important not only in terms of economic benefits but also cultural impact across the country as a whole, yet there exists a key problem in retaining and sustaining talent once it has been trained and developed and encouraging new talent into the industry (Bop Consulting 2014: 50). According to an Economic Contribution Study of the Arts and Creative Industries carried out by DC Research in 2012, the film and video industry in Scotland directly employs 3500 people and generates £120m GVA for Scotland's economy. Direct employment for the combined TV and radio sectors is 3500 with £50m GVA, a figure that does not capture the full impact of induced effects and indirect impacts (ibid). Recent success in attracting a number of international film and television productions to film in Scotland, such as *Cloud Atlas* (2012), *World War Z* (2013) and *Outlander* (Starz 2014-), has been attributed to 'world-class talent, crews and facilities, as well as [Scotland's] fantastic locations' (Creative Scotland 2013). Indeed, further inward investment is expected following the introduction of UK tax incentives for high-end television and animation in April 2013 (Midgley 2014) and the Scottish Government's pledge to deliver a film studio (Miller 2014). The ongoing decentralisation of TV production activities away from London has also led to key companies expanding north of the border, along with the short-lived relocation of BBC drama *Waterloo Road* (2006-2014) to Greenock (Plunkett 2014). In addition to the ongoing production of the Glasgow-based continuing drama *River City* (BBC Scotland 2002-), such developments are significant as the resulting production activity acts as a 'training and skills base for new talent' (Hibberd 2007: 119). Yet in order to maintain and expand Scotland's talent pool, issues of diversity, skills development and retention must continually be addressed and questions frequently arise as to how best to position the screen industries in Scotland within an increasingly global landscape.

The knowledge exchange workshops

Whilst knowledge exchange has become increasingly important for securing funding for academic research in recent years, it is not necessarily straightforward or without problems,

as highlighted by Williamson, Cloonan and Frith (2011) in their discussion of 'knowledge resistance'. In the UK context, there is also a need to consider how research can lead to 'impact ... *beyond academia*' following the introduction of the new Research Excellence Framework (Schlesinger 2013b: 10). This changing landscape is something that both established and early career researchers have to grapple with and, although the type of work carried out within cultural policy is often naturally outward facing, research workshops in particular enable issues of knowledge exchange and impact to be considered in the early stages of developing a research proposition. Conducting knowledge exchange workshops were preferenced over alternative methodological approaches given the purpose of the project to develop a research agenda in co-operation with partners outside of academia. As Pain et al. (2011) stress, whilst the marketisation of knowledge should be rejected, a focus on knowledge co-production with a two-way impact can develop and improve research agendas, design and outcomes. This conceptualisation of impact as two-way means that it can be argued that collaborative research processes can result in "more embedded, responsive and socially relevant research amongst academics" (ibid, 186).

Two themed knowledge exchange workshops, funded by the RSE, were held in Glasgow and Edinburgh 2014 bringing together a diverse group of 20-25 stakeholders at each from Scotland and beyond. There was a broad range of contributors from policy, the academy and industry, including representation from key broadcasters and institutions (A full list of contributors and attendees from both workshops can be found in Appendix 1). Many of the participants crossed over practitioner/industry/academia boundaries with at least eight participants across the two workshops taking on multiple roles, for example being media education expert and also a film maker. Across the workshops the presence of UK and international comparators was seen as a key tool for engendering reflection amongst participants and generating additional value for their involvement. After short position papers presented by participants, the subsequent discussion was conducted under Chatham House rules in order to foster an open and honest exchange of views. We would also like to emphasise the advantages of undertaking work with a knowledge exchange component in the early stages of a developing a research proposition. While research workshops do not necessarily offer space to provide definitive answers, if indeed, there are any, to the questions set out, they do enable reflection from both the external participants and academics involved and offer an opportunity to gain a better understanding of the ways in which academic research can add value and offer insights into key areas of concern for policy and practice. The remainder of this article scopes out several key strands of an agenda for future research based upon key points which emerged during the discussion: the breadth and depth of activities included under the banner of talent; the complexity of routes of progression within the screen industries; and the synergies and tensions involved in building critical mass within the sector in Scotland.

Breadth of 'Talent'

For assembled participants there were variations in the breadth and depth of activities which constitute 'talent', with many taking in a multitude of roles both on and offscreen as well as below-the-line, craft and supporting work. Narrow conceptions were problematised as creating a hierarchy in which onscreen talent along with directors, producers and writers were

afforded higher status than, for example, cinematographers or composers. However, in the converse, aggregating all aspects of the screen industries together under one 'Rubicon of talent' was also regarded as problematic due to the technical expertise or media and film literacy which is required for particular roles. As well as confusion within the sector in terms of drawing boundaries around a definition of talent, it was argued that policy conceptions tend to vary widely. While cultural policy leans towards looking at talent from the point of view of a narrow grouping, e.g., the artists, the rationale for industry support is often related to economic impact and involves aggregating a much broader group of activities. Overstating the weight of the sector and grouping a multiplicity of activities under the term 'talent' might therefore obscure what is actually happening in the industry. Due to the disparate nature of the creative industries, it can also be difficult to speak with one voice which is in conflict with the preferences of government policy for a single coherent approach.

During the position papers, the broadcasters tended to emphasize the examples of unconventional on-screen talent to demonstrate a growing willingness to engage talent from a diversity of backgrounds. Maxims used by participants when describing the key attributes of screen talent include 'good story telling', 'passion' and 'creativity' which possibly serve to understate the value of craft skills and formal training. A risk was also further identified with emphasising atomised and innate forms of creative talent as this does not recognise the collaborative nature of work within the sector which is often characterised by the assembly of teams on a project-basis (Davenport 2006). This chimes with Banks and Hesmondhalgh (2009: 418) who suggest that the 'anyone can make it' discourse denies the "institutional and collective basis of cultural production".

Complexity of routes of progression

One of the key issues highlighted in terms of the role of higher education in identifying and nurturing talent was the need for recognisable 'routes of progression' within the screen industries, particularly if academic institutions are to attract individuals from diverse backgrounds, instil confidence in students and ultimately ensure a broader range of stories reach the screen. This is challenging given the non-linearity of career paths and involves not only demystifying specific roles but also offering achievable narratives of how to make a living in the screen industries. Previous research suggests that workers in this sector make complex trade-offs between creative autonomy and job security and as such must maintain a balancing act (Gill, 2009) with regular oscillation along a pleasure=pain axis (McRobbie, 2002). This makes it very difficult for education to provide clear examples of making a living, but it was suggested by participants from higher education that this may include emphasising the importance of a mixed economy through, for example, advertising, corporate or community projects that offer civic as well commercial benefits, an approach adopted by the Creative Media Academy at the University of the West of Scotland. Practice-based PhDs may also offer a less precarious route for emerging talent within the screen industries, especially for those looking to play with the form of docu-fiction which can be prohibitively expensive. A successful example of a filmmaker who has pursued this route includes Joshua Oppenheimer, the multiple award-winning director of *The Act of Killing* (2012) who is Reader in Media, Arts and Design at the University of Westminster.

It was also argued that higher education institutions also offer alternative, more instrumental approaches to the creative industries however, such as the Creative Skillset Media Academies, of which there are four in Scotland. These act as a feeder for the screen industries and are more likely to attract talent from a wide range of backgrounds than practice-based PhDs. One problem identified in terms of widening access was the need to mitigate the risks of entering the screen industries, with low pay, precarious work and unpaid internships characterising the sector. As has been identified by Oakley (2009: 291) there is a tension between the promotion jobs in this sector and improving the labour market prospects of marginalised young people as the conditions of work in the sector (over-supply of labour, high self-employment and very small firms) mean that the employment of those "without relevant social contracts or unable to support unpaid work" is very problematic. Beyond this, it was suggested that while policy and industry are primarily focused on barriers to entry, socio-economic factors can continue to present challenges over the lifetime of a career and that this should be addressed. As was raised within the workshop, Creative Skillset's (2012) figures reveal there are still significant issues in attracting and retaining a truly diverse workforce within the creative industries in Scotland. This poses further questions around the level of self-censorship and the reasons why people choose not to enter the sector and whether common conceptions of talent may be a contributory factor.

Figures derived from Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) and presented during the second workshop also demonstrate that the job market tends to discriminate between academic disciplines, with graduates not trained in a creative subject more likely to secure creative roles than their counterparts from film, media and associated disciplines (Faggian et al, 2013). This raise questions as to whether the types of skills developed within these courses are either not valued by employers or not communicated effectively due, perhaps, to a lack of confidence within the subject area compared to other more established disciplines. It was contended that these issues should be imbued within screen education to encourage a greater understanding of the realities of working in the industry as there is often a lack of knowledge regarding the opportunities available. Moreover, while the geography of creative courses is well spread throughout the UK, this is not mirrored in the jobs market which is primarily based in London (ibid). Thus, while Scotland may successfully train a large number of creative students in film, TV and media, a high level of migration occurs after graduation resulting in problems retaining talent and developing a skillsbase.

Building critical mass in Scotland

Broadcasters argued that there has been a considerable decentralisation of production to Scotland, along with the other nations and regions. Yet, many believed that Scottish drama production in particular could be seen to be struggling against continued metro-centrism and competition from Wales which has been successfully established as a drama hub. There were also concerns expressed about the practice of 'warehousing' and how far regional production quotas were approached in a box ticking manner. The gap for returnable drama was also yet to be filled, despite the BBC's episodic series such as *Case Histories* (2011-) and *Shetland* (2013-) being produced in Scotland. Conversely, the move of *Waterloo Road* had acted as a 'pump-primer' by enabling the depth of talent required to deliver the large-scale US

production *Outlander*. This in addition to the continuing production of *River City* which similarly offers a training ground for workers in the sector.

The importance of non-drama-based production in building capacity in Scotland was also emphasised. The example of STV's *The Link* (2014-), a quiz show produced for the BBC before being acquired for global distribution by Warner Bros, was used to demonstrate the importance of factual entertainment formats in building a sustainable base with IP and revenue flowing back into Scotland and bolstering production (Barraclough 2014). Another issue relating to the importance of scale was the amount of mobile freelance talent in the industry for both film and television production, as it was argued that the full range of opportunities for talent will only exist if a film studio with a large visual effects centre is developed in Scotland (Miller 2014). Having a critical mass with more productions coming through every year would boost the number of below-the-line and craft positions, yet the importance of the cultural aspect of film should not be overlooked at the expense of commercial and economic activity.

Reflections and conclusions

We maintain that more research should be undertaken to capture the patterning of work within this highly complex set of activities constituted by the screen industries and how this compares to the discourses of talent and creativity which pervade policy. This is particularly important within the Scottish context as there is significant scope for change given the political landscape (with the Smith Commission set up following the unsuccessful referendum on independence on 18 September 2014 likely to lead to increased devolution of powers to Scotland and possibly influencing broadcast provisions); the revision of film policy being undertaken by Creative Scotland; and the proposed new film studio complex in Scotland.

A thread running throughout the workshops was the tension between the discourses associated with policy aimed at increasing critical mass and building the profile of the screen industries in Scotland and those associated with more nuanced and specific representations of the specialist skills, highly distinct roles and wide ranging organisations which characterise the sector. Accounts highlighting the weight and importance of the screen industries, which are important for attracting policy attention and subsidy, tend to emphasise the sector as an unproblematic single voice when the reality is more fragmented and complex. Indeed, this attempt to overstate economic weight and homogeneity for purposes of political expediency and instrumental gain is a recognised trend within the creative industries, as demonstrated by Selwood 2006; Tepper 2002; Garnham 2005; and Champion 2013.

Initial reflections on the discussion that took place within the workshops would suggest that the broadening of scope of what constitutes 'talent' and the ubiquity of the term does raise concerns for tailoring policy towards the complex and specific needs of different workers within the sector. We would welcome greater precision regarding the discourse used in policy to emphasize the importance of the development of particular and discrete craft skills rather than a stress on flexibility and mobility. Building local capacity in particular craft skills may have the added advantage of allowing places, often seen as on the periphery, to

build a competitive advantage as a source of specialist highly skilled labour which cannot be replicated in other areas. The positioning of talent as an unproblematic and inclusive encapsulation of all individuals undertaking activities within the screen industries fails to acknowledge some of the structural inequalities which dominate access to this work and the precarious nature of employment which may limit long-term engagement. We argue that policymakers and educators must acknowledge and encourage transparency regarding the precariousness of building a career within the screen industries. We would advocate the extension of paid internship provision and modern apprenticeships to help ensure barriers to entry into these industries are reduced particularly for those from a wide range of backgrounds.

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Appendix one

Attendees	Institutions	Job title
Workshop One		
Karen Boyle	University of Stirling	Professor of Feminist Media Studies
Raymond Boyle	University of Glasgow	Professor of Communications
Donald-Iain Brown	BBC Scotland	Head of Production Talent Network, BBC Production and Head of Editorial Operations, BBC Scotland
Katherine Champion	University of Glasgow	Postdoctoral Researcher
John Cook	Glasgow Caledonian University	Professor in Media
Alan Clements	STV	Director of Content
Henry Eagles	Creative Skillset	Creative Skillset Academy Network Manager
Iain Hamilton	Highlands and Islands Enterprise	Head of Creative Industries
Ken Hay	Edinburgh International Film Festival	CEO
Nick Higgins	University of the West of Scotland	Chair of Media Practice
Deborah Jermyn	University of Roehampton	Reader in Film and Television
Nina Jones	University of South Wales	Doctoral researcher
Lisa Kelly	University of Glasgow	Postdoctoral Researcher
Tiernan Kelly	Film City Glasgow	Director
Kate Kinninmont	Women in Film and TV	CEO
Erica Horton	University of East Anglia	Doctoral researcher
Ian Mackenzie	Channel 4	Media Project Manager
Ruth McElroy	University of South Wales	Leader of the Culture, Communication and Media Studies Research Unit
Amanda Millen	Screen HI	Director
Ealasaid Munro	University of Glasgow	Postdoctoral Researcher
Caitriona Noonan	University of South Wales	Lecturer in Media, Culture and Communication

Inge Sorenson	University of Glasgow	Research Fellow in Digital Economy & Culture
Workshop Two		
Robbie Allen	Creative Scotland	Film and Broadcast Partnerships Portfolio Manager
Katherine Champion	University of Glasgow	Postdoctoral Researcher
Martin Clark	Connolly Clark Films	Director
Roberta Comunian	Kings College London	Lecturer in Cultural and Creative Industries
John Cook	Glasgow Caledonian University	Professor in Media
Lenny Crooks	Consultant	Consultant
Belle Doyle	Consultant	Consultant
Michael Franklin	University of St Andrews	Researcher
Nick Higgins	University of the West of Scotland	Chair of Media Practice
Alison Goring	BECTU	Drama Talent Manager
David Griffith	Timelock Media Ltd	Director
Lisa Kelly	University of Glasgow	Postdoctoral Researcher
Catriona MacInnes	Jumpcut	Producer
Kevin Sanson	Carsey-Wolf Center, UC Santa Barbara	Research Director
Marie Schmidt Olesen	New Danish Screen	Project Editor
Philip Schlesinger	University of Glasgow	Professor of Cultural Policy
Lucy Sneddon	Channel 4	Creative Diversity Intern
Paul Welsh	Digicult	Producer