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The unique value of Creative Arts higher education for preparing graduates for work

Ellen Nielsen
Queensland University of Technology, Brisbane, George St
ellen.nielsen@hdr.qut.edu.au

Ruth Bridgstock
University of South Australia, Adelaide, St Bernards Road
ruth.bridgstock@unisa.edu.au

Paula McDonald
Queensland University of Technology, Brisbane, George St
p.mcdonald@qut.edu.au

Abstract

Participation in Higher Education is often positioned by governments as a key strategy for promoting economic growth and developing the workforce of the future. However, Higher Education Institutions continue to be criticised for not producing job ready graduates. In particular, educators in the Creative Arts (CA) are often targets of criticism around graduate employability as creative career pathways are regularly non-linear in structure and CA degrees are often perceived as providing a specialised, niche education. In an era of budget cuts and a growing emphasis on STEM disciplines, the need to show the value of creative education, beyond its popularity with incoming students, is greater than ever. This paper draws upon the early career experiences of a sample of Australian CA graduates to provide new insights through which to identify the unique value of CA higher education in preparing graduates for work. In doing so, two keys ways in which CA degrees can provide value for graduates are highlighted. Firstly, the primary value of CA higher education is the creative element and in providing a space for graduates to develop creative skills and prepare for creative work. Secondly, CA graduates have creatively engaging careers both within and outside the CA, which shows that CA higher education has broad value, particularly for people pursuing higher education for employment and employability reasons.

Keywords: Higher education, Creative Arts, employability.

Introduction

Around the turn of the century, wider cultural shifts towards the knowledge economy, where creativity and innovation were seen as essential for future growth, saw governments and educators became increasingly interested in the Creative Industries (Bridgstock, 2011; Peters & Araya, 2010). More recently, STEM disciplines have emerged to the forefront as key drivers of current and future economic growth. Underlying this increased investment in STEM disciplines is the ever-present need to develop the employability of young people and prepare

them for future labour markets. For policy makers, both in Australia and internationally, Higher Education continues to be seen as an essential piece of the puzzle in developing the workforce of the future.

However, Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) are often criticised for producing too many graduates (Karp, 2016) as well as graduates who are not job ready (Creighton, 2018). Graduates of creative disciplines have been particular targets of criticism in the past for not being the "high quality industry-ready graduates" that industry apparently requires (Haukka, 2011). Recent cuts to arts funding across Australia (Gill, 2017) and less-than-desirable working patterns and conditions in CA labour markets (Bridgstock et.al, 2015) threaten to dampen the continued appeal of careers in the CA, as does the reality that many CA graduates will work outside creative labour markets during their early careers (Ashton, 2015). Proposed Australian government funding cuts to higher education (Knott, 2017), though yet to be successfully passed (Bagshaw, 2017), also present a challenge for HEIs looking to attract new students, particularly people who are interested in pursuing higher education for employability reasons. In light of these challenges, the need to show the unique value of CA higher education, for current and future graduates, is greater than ever. This paper draws upon the early career experiences of a sample of Australian CA higher education graduates (N=322), collected via online survey, as being a key perspective through which to consider the value that CA higher education provides in preparing graduates for work.

Higher Education and the Creative Industries

Many young people use higher education to facilitate their transition between secondary schooling and labour markets (Dacre Pool & Sewell, 2007). Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) are therefore held to a high standard by governments, industry and students, and are often criticised for not preparing graduates well enough for their post-graduation working lives. While HEIs and educators recognise that they play an important role in preparing students for labour market success (Branine, 2008), recurring criticisms include that contemporary higher education is too academic and does not provide sufficient vocational or applied learning opportunities (Kinash et al 2016; Tomlinson, 2012). However, educators have argued that HEIs are unfairly pressured to adapt curricula and teaching practices to produce job-ready graduates when employers as well as the graduates themselves should also be taking responsibility for building and developing relevant skills and knowledge (Hager et al, 2002). The volatility of labour markets and wider economic influences also makes responding to labour market and employer needs difficult, especially when curriculum re-design can be a lengthy and expensive process (Little & Arthur, 2010).

CA educators have faced similar challenges. Interest in pursuing creative careers has grown significantly over the past 20 years and HEIs have expanded their creative degree offerings to accommodate. In Australia in particular, interest in studying creative disciplines at a tertiary level is at an all-time high (Daniel & Daniel 2015). However, this has resulted in an over-supply of graduates seeking creative employment (Bridgstock et al., 2015), making those graduate labour markets more competitive than ever. And though Arts and Humanities programs have historically been praised for helping students to develop transferable skills (Oakley, 2008), CA degrees have more recently been criticised for not encompassing the full breadth of skills and knowledge that would make a person employable in contemporary creative labour markets (Brook, 2013). Similarly, a recent survey of graduate employers in Australia found that only 43% of employers of CA graduates felt the degree qualification was important for graduate employment in the CA (QILT, 2018a). On-the-job training and practical experience are also highly valued in creative labour markets (Allen et al, 2013; Towse, 2006), so represent further considerations CA educators must make in designing and updating degree offerings. Amidst these criticisms, the value that CA higher education can, and does, offer graduates, particularly in preparing them for labour markets, is often overlooked.

Learning from graduate experiences of Higher Education

Knowledge of how creative graduates move through their early careers is essential for helping educators to identify gaps in and make changes to curricula in creative higher education. While smaller studies have been able to provide a more nuanced understanding of the issues that creative graduates face during their early careers, many studies focus primarily on graduate destinations as the central measure of graduate success (see QILT, 2018). These large scale studies of graduate destinations generally provide broad data around graduates' employment, incomes, and further study, anywhere from four months to 3-5 years post-graduation. Other large studies, such as the National Student Survey in the UK and the Student Engagement Survey in Australia, also survey students and graduates specifically about their tertiary experiences. These studies however focus on graduates' satisfaction with the teaching and services of the institution they attended, without also asking participants about how relevant or valuable the content of their degrees has been during their early careers, invaluable information for educators. As such, there are significant knowledge gaps around how creative graduates value and draw upon their tertiary studies post-graduation, and in comparing destination data with student experience data. It is particularly important that these knowledge gaps are filled because these large graduate studies are widely reported and regularly used to shape education and employment discourse and yet key elements of the graduate story continue to be overlooked.

Methods

The analysis presented in this paper employed a combination of descriptive statistics and non-parametric statistical testing to address the research question: *What factors shape Creative Arts graduates' early careers and employment?* The analysis focuses on three areas of the graduate experience which have been largely overlooked in previous graduate studies: the graduates' career aspirations, the subjective value attributed by the graduates to their CA degrees, and how the graduates add creative value in their early career employment. Not only did the analysis of quantitative survey data allow for these new areas of enquiry to be explored from a broad perspective, it also allowed for non-parametric statistical tests to be used to compare variables of interest. A small number of non-parametric statistical tests were used to test whether the graduates' subjective valuation of their degree was influenced by job holding and other job characteristics, such as median weekly income. Mann-Whitney U tests and Spearman's rank-order correlation tests were used, to account for the combination of categorical and continuous variables in each analysis.

The data analysed in this paper was collected in 2013/2014 as part of an online survey of people who graduated from undergraduate CA degrees in Australia between 2007 and 2012. The survey collected quantitative and qualitative information about the graduates' work and education trajectories post-graduation. This analysis in this paper focuses on the quantitative data. At the time of survey, invitations were sent to functioning email addresses of 1,738 graduates from ten Australian higher education institutions, resulting in 916 completed surveys. For this analysis, ethical approval was granted for the re-use of data from a single Australian metropolitan university, which provided a sample that was of a suitably robust size (N=322) while also relevant for addressing the research question.

Sample Demographics

Of the sample respondents, 76% were female, the median age was 20-24 years and the median year of graduation was 2010, with the majority of respondents 1-3 years post-graduation at the time of survey. 72% of the graduates were employed, holding an average of 1.01 jobs, and 36% of the graduates who were employed worked exclusively in the CA. All

participants indicated that they had completed an undergraduate degree in one of five overarching CA disciplines, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1: CA disciplines of the sample

Discipline Name	% of institution sample	Sub-disciplines
Visual	12%	Visual Arts
Literary	21%	Creative and Professional Writing
Performance	41%	Acting, Dance Studies, Dance Performance, Drama, Technical Production
Music	10%	Music
Film, Television and New Media	16%	Film, TV and New Media Production, Film, Television and Screen, Animation

These five CA disciplines collectively represent the core disciplines which are deemed to belong to the Creative Industries (DCMS 2001) while also representing the CA degrees offered by the sample institution. These disciplines also reflect how the CA are labelled under 'Field of Education' (FOE) codes in the Australian Standard Classification of Education (ASCED). The CA disciplines sampled in this study are all encompassed by the Australian Field of Education code 10.

Results and Discussion

Not all of the graduates pursued creative careers but creativity was a recurring theme in their early career aspirations

Tables 2 and 3 outline the reasons given by the graduates for their creative or non-creative career aspirations, ranked from most popular to least popular reason. As Table 2 shows, the graduates pursued careers in the CA because of passion for their creative practice (73%), for personal enjoyment (55%) and because they believed they had particular talent for creative work (53%). This reinforces the idea that creative workers are often intrinsically motivated to pursue creative careers (Banks & Hesmondhalgh, 2009; Brook, 2013). That only a small percentage of the creatively-aspiring graduates said they pursued a creative career specifically for financial reward (10%) or because of the number of job opportunities (5%) further supports this notion.

Table 2: Graduates' justifications for aiming for careers in the Creative Arts *to some extent* or greater (N=260)

Why do you aim to have a career in the CA?	%
Doing what I love / passion	73%
For personal satisfaction / fun	55%
Talent / aptitude in the area	53%
To express myself creatively	47%
I want to contribute to society via the creative discipline	39%
Seeking challenges	36%

I want to contribute to the creative discipline	32%
Skills development	30%
Lifestyle (maintaining work/life balance)	28%
Seeking recognition	17%
Financial reasons	8%
Change from previous career	6%
Many job opportunities in the sector	4%
Family / societal expectations	3%

However, as Table 3 shows, the graduates who were pursuing careers outside the CA were more likely to be extrinsically motivated in their early career paths. Given that creative labour markets are known to be highly competitive with a greater prevalence of precarious employment relationships and lower salaries than other labour markets (Ashton, 2015), it can be seen why graduates might look for employment opportunities outside their specific CA discipline.

Table 3: Graduates' justifications for aiming for careers outside the Creative Arts
Arts *to some extent* or greater (N=188)

Why do you aim to have a career outside the CA?	**%**
Financial reasons	38%
Many job opportunities in the sector	27%
Lifestyle (maintaining work/life balance)	21%
To add creative value in non-creative areas	20%
Doing what I love / passion	19%
Talent / aptitude in the area	19%
Seeking challenges	18%
Skills development	17%
To contribute to society via a discipline other than the CA	14%
For personal satisfaction / fun	12%
To contribute to a discipline other than the CA	12%
Change from previous career	7%
Family / societal expectations	7%
Seeking recognition	6%

Whether or not the graduates actively aspired to a creative career, it is clear that creativity remained central to the graduates' career aspirations. Not only were the majority of graduates who were pursuing careers in the CA motivated to work creatively, one-fifth of those graduates pursuing careers outside the CA were motivated by the possibility of adding creative value in non-creative areas. The graduates could therefore see relevant applications for their CA skills and knowledge outside CA labour markets and, despite the tension between financial need and creative vocation, intended to draw upon their CA background during their early careers where possible.

CA skills and knowledge are used and valued by CA graduates outside CA labour markets

A key theme within creative careers literature is that many creative workers will be engaged in a variety of creative and non-creative jobs within and outside the CA over the course of their career (Ashton, 2015). It is implied however that jobs which are characterised as 'non-creative' or located outside CA labour markets are unlikely to draw upon CA skills or knowledge. It is then perceived as a loss of creative talent when creative graduates are employed in jobs outside the CA. Two-thirds (N=219) of the graduates worked outside the CA in some way during their early careers, of which the majority, as Figure 1 shows, felt like they added creative value in their jobs which were located outside the CA. This therefore suggests that creativity has relevant applications outside the CA and jobs which draw upon the skills and knowledge developed in CA degrees are not solely located within creative labour markets.

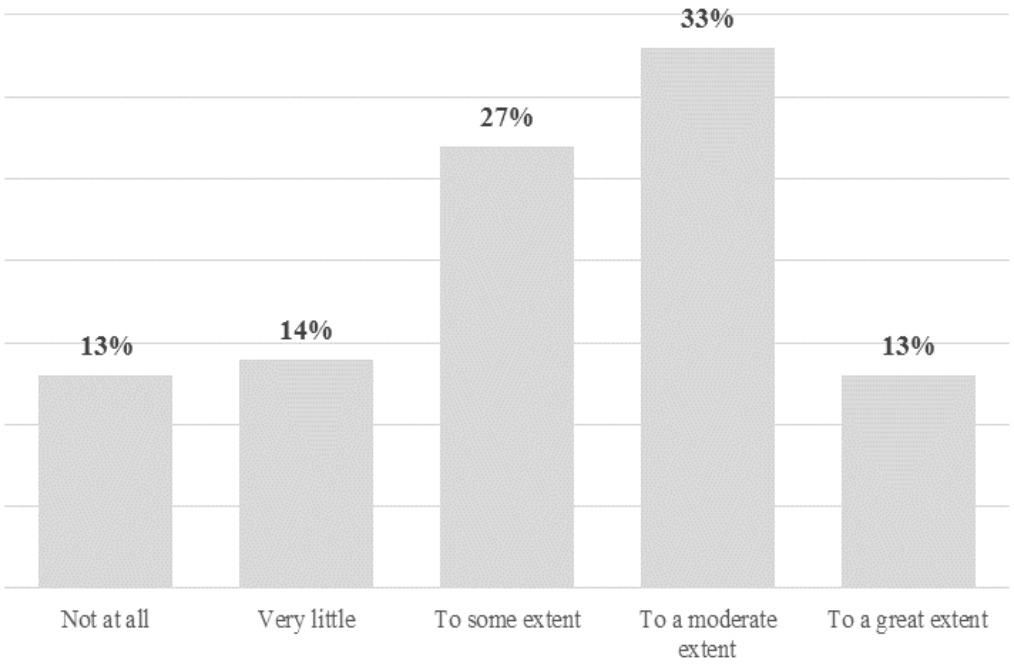

Figure 1: Extent to which CA graduates felt they added creative value in their jobs outside the Creative Arts (N=219)

When the graduates were asked to outline how they added creative value in jobs outside the CA, the top five responses were: Through providing creative viewpoints and ideas (33%), through possessing critical thinking skills (31%), through writing and editing skills (25%), through public speaking and presentation skills (23%), and through providing visual and design skills (22%). Of these five areas of expertise, three (critical thinking skills, writing and editing skills, public speaking and presentation skills) represent generic, transferable skills rather than skills which are specifically related to CA disciplines, though these particular skills are often required by and used in creative labour markets (Hennekam & Bennett, 2017; Oakley, 2008). These transferable skills are also highly valued by employers and have long featured on skills lists of desirable graduate attributes (Clarke, 1997; Holmes, 2013). Therefore, not only do the CA graduates in this sample possess these highly relevant skills, they have also been able to apply these skills outside CA labour markets. For CA graduates who can look beyond CA labour markets, or who are drawn to non-creative labour markets out of necessity, there appears to be creatively-engaging work available. Additionally, for people who are interested

in the CA but do not necessarily want to work in those areas, there are opportunities for them to be creatively engaged in work outside the CA.

The graduates with creatively-engaging jobs retrospectively valued their CA degrees more highly

Figure 2 shows that there is a relationship between the graduates' career aspiration and the subjective value they attributed to their CA degree. The greater the graduate's aspiration to a career in the CA, the more highly they valued their degrees during their early careers. While the graduates who aspired to a creative career *to a moderate extent* or *to a great extent* attributed greater retrospective value to their CA degrees, those graduates who had less aspiration to a creative career still rated their CA degrees as having been valuable *to some extent* since graduation.

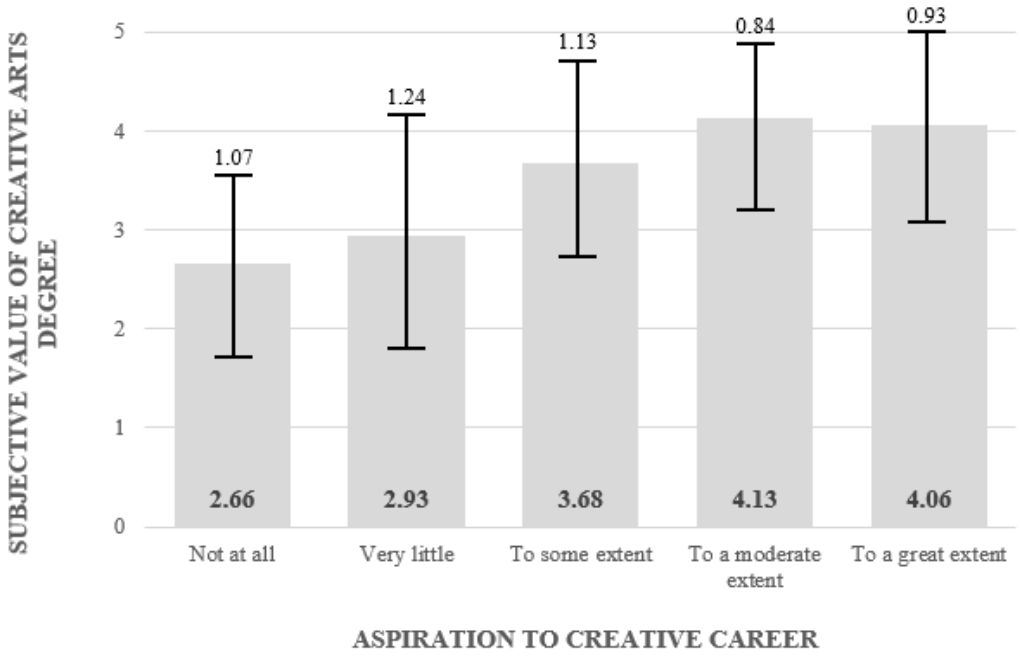

Figure 2: The graduates' subjective valuation of their CA degrees (mean and standard deviation) by creative career aspiration

To further investigate the factors which influenced how the graduates subjectively valued their degrees, non-parametric statistical tests were conducted (see Methods). As a result of these tests, the level of subjective value felt by the graduates was found to be significantly related to being employed ($Z=-2.62$, $p<.01$), having a more creatively engaging job ($\square(217) = .66$, $p<.01$) and working exclusively in the CA ($Z=-3.06$, $p<.01$). Subjective value was not significantly related to having a current job nor to weekly income earned or weekly hours worked. Creativity and creative work, whether located within or outside CA labour markets, again emerge as common threads which shape the early careers of CA graduates.

Conclusion

By drawing upon elements of the graduate experience which have largely been overlooked in previous graduate studies, this paper has explored how the early career trajectories of CA graduates can provide insight into the value of CA degrees for preparing CA graduates for their post-graduation working lives. The data presented in this paper points to two key ways in which CA degrees shape the early careers and employment of CA graduates. Firstly, creativity was a key theme in the early careers of the CA graduates. This manifested in two ways. Whether or not the graduates aspired to work within CA labour markets, a significant proportion were motivated to obtain employment which was creatively engaging in some way. And it was the graduates who were creatively engaged in their work who attributed greater subjective value to their CA degrees post-graduation. It is therefore likely that the graduates originally pursued their CA degrees because they had an existing passion for their CA discipline and that passion stayed with them through their degree and into their early careers, where it influenced the type of work they aspired to. For students and graduates, the primary value of CA higher education appears to be the creative element; having three to four years to immerse themselves in their CA discipline, to develop creative skills, and to prepare for creative work. The specialised and concentrated focus on CA disciplines is therefore a key element of what differentiates CA higher education from other degree offerings in the Humanities.

Secondly, though the majority of the graduates had worked outside the CA in some capacity since graduation, most felt they were adding creative value in their non-CA work during their early careers. While CA degrees can assist people to pursue work and careers specifically in the CA, the data analysed in this paper also shows that CA graduates have been able to add creative value in work outside CA labour markets. Anecdotal perceptions that CA degrees are relatively niche in their transferability and do not adequately prepare graduates to compete in competitive labour markets post-graduation continue to perpetuate however. These findings therefore represent a significant opportunity for CA educators to re-shape the discourse around the broader value of CA higher education, as the data shows that CA graduates do have creatively engaging careers across a variety of labour markets. To facilitate this, CA educators should ensure that CA curricula promote the development of diverse graduate skillsets, encompassing the creative and non-creative transferable skills highlighted in this paper as being of value to non-CA labour markets alongside the specialist creative skills often foregrounded in CA degrees. CA higher education would then continue to appeal to people wanting to work in the CA but could also appeal to a greater proportion of potential students, particularly those pursuing higher education for employment and employability reasons.

Focusing on assisting graduates into creatively engaging work more generally, rather than work solely within CA labour markets, has additional benefits for both educators and graduates. For CA graduates wanting to work creatively, broadening the scope of what creative work means provides them with greater opportunities to fulfil their career aspirations. As a result of being creatively engaged, as the data in this paper has shown, the graduates attributed greater value to having done their CA degree, which reflects positively on educators. Further investigation into the transferability of CA graduates' creative skills and knowledge across labour markets would be beneficial, as it is a key gap in the literature and the data analysed in this paper only provides an initial overview of the topic. Research which encompasses more recent cohorts of creative graduates would also provide opportunities to explore how creative graduates' early career experiences, particularly in the areas analysed in this paper, have or have not changed over the past decade.

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