Hustling, hybridity and changing attitudes to work in the arts
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For years, entry-level placement schemes have been one of the cultural sector's main answers to broadening the diversity of organisations and recruiting younger practitioners who may not access positions through standard routes. While unpaid internships have been rightly phased out, in their place are paid initiatives that seek to shake up the narrow pipeline for accessing arts jobs and foster a more representative workforce. These inclusive recruitment schemes are sometimes criticised for only making a difference at the junior end of organisations, and for only making a temporary difference to individuals, who still have to navigate the competitive, largely white, middle class, highly educated art world once their placement ends. This is a risk all arts institutions should be concerned about. The short-termism baked into these programmes means that younger, under-represented employees are also the least secure.

But what does job security mean for Generation Z? Do members of this generation want a Monday-Friday institutional job? This text looks at the present day landscape of hybrid careers and generational shifts in attitude towards permanent and freelance work. Drawing from an independent evaluation of *Upgrade Yourself: Kickstart* – a creative industry placement programme led by Somerset House in 2021-22 – this essay explores how these types of placement programmes can stay relevant in the current work environment and offer meaningful experiences for young people looking to build a creative career. There is a clear danger that if arts organisations don't continually evolve their placement offers, listen to young people and equip participants with diverse experiences, these programmes can reproduce precarity and inequality in the sector.

What did we do?

Somerset House, branded 'London's working arts centre', is home to hundreds of resident organisations and practitioners including performing arts companies, creative enterprises, cultural education institutions and individual artists and makers. As a hub for freelancers, start-ups and established organisations it is a uniquely useful place to think about what creative work looks like today.

Since 2018 the Engagement and Skills team have run some form of creative industry placement programme, recruiting young people who are under-represented* in the cultural sector into temporary jobs in organisations and teams resident at Somerset House. I evaluated what was then known as the *Creative Careers Academy* in 2020 (Sim, 2020), and was the external evaluator for the new incarnation of the programme in 2021-22: *Upgrade Yourself: Kickstart*. This more recent version of the programme was part funded by the government's *Kickstart* scheme, which focused on supporting 16-24 year olds into work who were in receipt of Universal Credit.

The headings below reflect some of the findings about attitudes to work that came out of evaluation conversations with seven participants of the programme, eight line managers from host organisations, one worker from Westminster City Council employment services and four members of staff at Somerset House.

It would be problematic to extrapolate too much from a relatively small group of voices, but this research reflects a snapshot of opinion from workers with a range of

lived and professional experiences, who have worked on the programme for six months or more.

What did we learn about Generation Z and creative labour from *Upgrade Yourself: Kickstart*?

The pandemic has thrown ideas about work and security up into the air

Work in the creative industries continues to change at a rapid pace. 49% of the arts workforce in England is freelance (Henley, 2022) and the idea of the *projectariat* – a community of people who move from project to project – is now an embedded reality of the art world (Szreder, 2021). Furloughing and working from home during the pandemic also saw many employees appreciate the benefits of working more independently. And yet the pandemic also brought to light the lack of a financial safety net for freelancers and led to more focus on job security for many cultural workers.

This push and pull effect was reflected in the varied attitudes of the cohort towards work and security. For some of the people on the *Upgrade Yourself: Kickstart* programme, the 'trauma' of the pandemic and the experience of graduating into unemployment and isolation created deep feelings of low self-confidence and anxiety in the workplace. Undoing fears about being fired and building self-belief were big elements of some participants' placement journeys. For some individuals this mentality also fed into their future work plans, spurring them to prioritise finding permanent, full-time work after their placement. One participant said they loved the idea of doing project-based work and want to work independently in the future but they felt they needed to use this time to 'hustle really, really hard' in an office environment.

Several members of the cohort were more interested in being self-employed or starting their own business straight away. Some had creative projects, side hustles and entrepreneurial ambitions that they planned to pursue or were already working on. A few participants said they'd like a stable job for three days a week, then two days a week doing their own projects and starting to monetise those.

Host organisations have also seen a 'swathe of entrepreneurship' amongst young people and the huge growth of freelancing in their industries over the last few years. But organisations said they are also looking for some level of stability in their workforce, particularly during this period of massive uncertainty where there are shortages of workers, increasing costs and where businesses are 'preoccupied by all sorts of stuff, including Brexit'. The financial effects of the pandemic and cost of living crisis are heavily influencing young people's decision-making around their future careers, and this can only spell trouble for the inclusivity of the art sector, which has a reputation for instability and low pay. The contraction of the service industry workforce has also created problems for cultural organisations, and it is inevitable that staff shortages and financial concerns can also lead to less attention being paid to inclusive recruitment. All of these factors combined underline the need to urgently look at whether placement/trainee schemes are fit for purpose in a dramatically turbulent job market.

Hybridity is the future

One of my main assumptions evaluating this programme was that the shift towards hybrid working (accelerated by working from home during lockdowns) would not be good news for junior employees on placement programmes. This was a view shared by several line managers, who believed that early career practitioners benefited most

from sharing a physical space with colleagues and learning through 'osmosis'. While this was the case for most participants, it was interesting to hear that many participants also wanted to work remotely for at least a couple of days a week, and they enjoyed having a varied pace to their work patterns. There are inclusivity issues with enforced remote working – particularly for people who live with their families or multiple flatmates – but the key enabler in this programme was having choice and some flexibility to work in ways that brought out the best in the individual.

Some of the resident organisations involved in the programme have also learnt to adapt their working culture for permanent employees, particularly younger employees, who have different expectations than workers who entered the industry even a decade ago:

> They don't want to do five days a week, they just think we're crazy. Somerset House is such a wonderful place to work. But we've got another junior person who doesn't want to be in the office. So they'll work throughout Somerset House in the cafes, we got them an Exchange pass so that you can go and work there. They don't want to sit in the same place. And, you know, I'm rooted to my desk. Whereas young people seem to want to work in all these different types of ways, which is great - whatever ways they find that can enhance their creativity, I'm all for it. But it's strange to me. (Host)

From speaking with the cohort on the programme and hearing about their experiences of the workplace, it seems that traditional divisions between permanency and freelance are becoming more blurred. The turn towards hybridity in the workplace has also prompted new ways of thinking about co-working. Some organisations have also had to put in place initiatives and networks to support cross-pollination across teams operating in the hybrid work environment.

We discovered that when participating in placements, employees wanted the experience of hybrid working, as they knew this would be required of them in future roles and they valued feeling trusted to work from home as well as in the office. We also learnt that online working did have detrimental effects on the sense of community around the programme. Previous cohorts on the placement programme have hung out together at lunch and benefited from having a peer group to offload with, which wasn't as possible this year. Line managers also regretted the flattening of conversation and social interaction that came with having their host meetings online, but they also admitted that online was easier as everyone was dealing with intense workloads and different work patterns.

If hybridity is the future of the workplace, it seems essential that organisations also think creatively about how to foster togetherness, co-production, and exchange within their workforce. As one senior leader described, the 'corridor conversation' is an important part of how a place like Somerset House creates community and stimulates innovation. And for younger people with temporary contracts, making the most of the creative energy and connection that comes from working in an arts-centred environment is arguably fundamental for their development and visibility.

Placement programmes should offer exposure to different types of work

In the *Upgrade Yourself: Kickstart* programme, participants could attend bi-weekly *Prepare and Promote* sessions featuring guests speaking on freelancing, networking, branding, and marketing, as well as sessions on balancing work and personal development and unlocking your authentic voice and power. Participants also received mentoring during and after their placement, were introduced to different

members of the Somerset House creative community and were invited to networking opportunities. In their placements, many participants had contact with creative freelancers and suppliers, and some were able to shadow suppliers or gain their advice as part of their personal development.

Having exposure to different types of creative work is necessary because, as one Somerset House staff member pointed out, getting started in the creative sector is 'not a linear path' and knowing what route to take is incredibly complex. This is especially true for young people who haven't had lots of engagement with the arts growing up, or who don't have existing links with people who can offer creative careers advice. Perceiving self-employment as a legitimate career option in the arts, learning about day rates and self-management, etc. is important because, like arts organisations, the arts freelance community is lacking in representation. For example, in a 2020 survey of museum freelancers in the UK, 83% of respondents identified as female and 94% described their ethnicity as white. Anecdotally, some of the managers I spoke to for this evaluation said that many of the freelancers and suppliers they worked with appeared to be from economically privileged backgrounds or were predominantly 'white and middle aged'.

Without institutional intervention, there is no professional body looking out for the diversity and inclusivity of the arts freelance community. It is positive to see that policy makers and public funding bodies are starting to recognise the need to collect more data on the diversity of the freelance workforce and work with consortia and commissioners to establish more equitable conditions and oversight for this community (Wreyford et al., 2021; Henley, 2022). These moves suggest that arts organisations hosting placement schemes also need to be supporting younger people into freelance roles, as these are heavily relied on in the cultural sector, and because this is what many young people want:

'The whole freelancing aspect – I think that's sort of the future of everything – people are going to step away from wanting to work for corporate jobs. People are going to work for themselves. They're going to excel a lot more through that.' (Participant)

It is particularly vital that organisations like Somerset House, which provides substantial space and work for freelancers, are helping to support sector-wide efforts to create more representation and security in the freelance workforce.

Generation Z value boundaries, social justice, and mental health

One of the most exciting and confronting things about members of Generation Z is their more boundaried attitude to work, and their willingness to forefront mental health and wellbeing, and be attentive to social injustice.

Placement programmes that aim to attract candidates who are under-represented in the cultural sector bring into focus why under-representation exists and what the implications of recruiting differently are. There were occasions on the *Upgrade Yourself: Kickstart* programme where some participants didn't come to out-of-office hours training sessions and events for instance, due to a range of reasons including caring commitments, exhaustion and having a long commute home.

The concepts of grabbing every opportunity out of a desire to get into the creative industries and considering creative work a 'labour of love' are ideas that are bound up in class privilege (Hesmondhalgh, 2022). The burnout that is synonymous with creative labour and expectations for overworking are also ableist in their

assumptions. As I have seen from conversations with young professionals, members of Generation Z are not afraid to call these unhealthy expectations out.

The *Upgrade Yourself: Kickstart* programme provided structured pastoral support and created spaces where participants could openly talk about their access needs and external responsibilities if they wanted to. Staff in the Engagement and Skills team did not reprimand people for not coming to out-of-hours events but showed understanding and appreciation for their circumstances. They (and many line managers) also encouraged participants to put in place healthy work boundaries and tried to be sensitive to signs that individuals were struggling or dealing with external pressures. Participants equally grew in confidence to vocalise what they did and didn't want from work:

> I do think placements like this are such a step in the right direction, where we can talk about wellbeing, we can say we don't like this. And we can actually question whether it's useful to do something rather than just be like – 'everyone's gone through it, just do it.' (Participant)

This kind of sentiment reflects wider findings on cultural/generational attitudes, with research suggesting that *Gen Z* are less accepting of the 'boomer, grin-and-bear-it attitude to life – one that led us down a path of anti-union consultants and zero-hour contracts from companies with a multi-billion dollar net worth' (Greenwood, 2022). The lure and lustre of the cultural sector that has entrenched organisational and self-exploitation is not enough for many younger people, particularly if this is not mentally and financially sustainable. A more apathetic or boundaried attitude to opportunities can feel alien to those who are conditioned to believe in the kudos of a creative career, and accusations of Gen Z being work-shy are well known to young people. But encountering this resistance can provoke those of us in older generations to question our own internalised ablesim and hidden privileges that have allowed certain behaviours to become normalised.

It would be naïve to suggest that all members of Generation Z feel the same way about work, and as I found in the conversations and in my wider research, there are many young workers who buy into the glorification of hustle culture and competitive individualism, for example. But working with members of this generation highlights the necessity for arts organisations to be prepared to examine and undo some of their accepted practices that have perpetuated exclusivity in the art world.

Placement programmes need to be current, meaningful, and desirable

Placement programmes in arts organisations can have a transformative impact for individuals and provide experience that enables people to break into industries and flourish professionally. They can nurture and develop talent and, with the right support, empower people to bring their whole, authentic selves to their jobs. Many participants (including alumni) speak extremely highly of these programmes and how they have used the platform to go on to fulfil their ambitions.

However the hidden labour and psychological toll of being minoritised or 'under-represented' in a workplace cannot be under-estimated. A couple of participants spoke about their discomfort with being associated with the *Kickstart* scheme, and taking part in additional training, which sometimes made them feel patronised.

> Even though it's true, I don't like to say that I'm a part of a programme that got me into the job. Even in work, I have to say, 'Oh, I have this thing for

Somerset'. And you already feel like you're different because you're the only one that's involved in it. (Participant)

Similar feelings were voiced in the *Creative Careers Academy* programme, where participants sometimes felt under the institutional spotlight and overly celebrated. Somerset House made efforts to tone down internal and external communications around this programme, but it was still the case that some members of the group felt 'demoralised' by the association.

As a sector we clearly need to get better at describing the tackling of under-representation as both a matter of social justice and as a business need, and move away from any language that frames this type of initiative as an act of institutional benevolence. The conversations also demonstrate the importance of placement initiatives being perceived as desirable and prestigious. These issues are very present for the Engagement and Skills team at Somerset House, who think continually about the politics, vibe and feel of their programming.

These comments also highlight the significance of authentic, critical feedback and due praise so participants recognise their professional value, as well as mentorship to support participants to navigate these complex issues. Having members of staff and mentors with lived experience of being minoritised was important in the Somerset House programme. It was also vital that this programme had an explicitly stated ambition to support participants to secure further work after their placement, either with their host organisation or another company or onto self-employment. By making this aim explicit, these programmes have more of an obligation to take participants' career plans seriously and support their longer-term future. And by doing this, institutions can also make efforts to avoid tokenising and creating more extremely precarious workers and instead make a genuine lasting difference to individuals and the sector.

*Underrepresented in this context includes but is not limited to those who identify as:
From the African diaspora
From the South, East and South East Asian diaspora
From an ethnically diverse background
Having a migrant or refugee experience
Affected by a health condition or impairment
Neurodivergent
Affected by homelessness
Unemployed and/or having received welfare benefits
Carer
Care-leaver
Working class and/or first in their immediate family to go to university

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Biography

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