**Equality issues in higher education work placements in the creative industries**

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With an oversupply of people wishing to enter the creative industries in the UK, in addition to having a relevant academic qualification, employers are increasingly looking for actual experience in industry. Actual experience and industry knowledge is highly valued in the creative industries because of a perceived disjuncture between skills developed in higher education and skills needed by industry (Ball, 2003; DCMS 2006; Design Council and CCSkills, 2008).

Undertaking a work placement is one way for students to gain this experience and knowledge. Work placements are of particular importance as they allow for the development of skills in industry, and often demonstrate individual tenacity to be able to seek out such placements. However, research shows that there are numerous barriers for those seeking to study and enter the creative industries. Burke and McManus (2009) note that admission practices into higher education art and design courses privilege those from middle-class white background. But even after students have managed to negotiate entry onto higher education course some students struggle to get work placements, and this can have significant ramifications for their future employability.

‘Self-driven’ placements which are not formally supported by the higher education institution, but are encouraged and expected are very common in the sector (see Ball, 2003). Often students from underrepresented groups (minority ethnic students, disabled students and students entering sectors where there is a significant gender imbalance) lack the ‘right connections’ or the resources available to seek such placements.

This paper will focus on recently concluded research commissioned by Equality Challenge Unit, conducted by researchers at the Institute of Policy Studies in Education, London Metropolitan University. The research explored how higher education institutions can support students from underrepresented groups, into positive and inclusive work placement experiences so as to enhance their future employment prospects in the arts and cultural sector.

The research involved working with five case study institutions in England and Wales interviewing key staff (placement offices, careers advisors, and academic staff) and students. It also involved interviews with employers providing work placements. The paper will present key findings from the research including the experiences of students from underrepresented groups in accessing and undertaking work placements. It will further outline practices of institutions and employers offering work placements.

In addition to the final report about the research, emerging resources will be two practical toolkits, one for staff in higher education institutions and one for students. The report and toolkits are currently being produced.

**References**

Ball, L. (2003) *Future Directions for Employability Research in the Creative Industries* (A working paper by the Learning and Teaching Support Network and Design Council)

Department for Culture Media and Sport (DCMS), (2006) *Developing Entrepreneurship for the Creative Industries: The Role of Higher and Further Education* (London: DCMS)

Design Council and Creative and Cultural Skills (2008) *Design Blueprint: High-level skills for Higher Value* (London: Design Council)

P. J. Burke and J. McManus (2009) *Art for a few: Exclusion and Misrecognition in Art and Design Higher Education Admissions* (London: National Arts Learning Network)

**Brief autobiographical note**

Gary Loke is Head of Policy at Equality Challenge Unit (ECU). He received his MSc in Development Studies from the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London. His interest is in policy development around issues of equality particularly connected to race, and religion or belief equality. At ECU he currently has responsibility for coordinating the work of, and providing stategic leadership to the ECU policy team. ECU promotes equality and diversity in higher education in the UK.