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Tackling precarity and disadvantage: an analysis of mentoring provision within the UK's creative industries

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ABSTRACT

How can the UK's creative industries become better, more responsible employers in the face of continual challenges including endemic precarity, the Covid-19 pandemic and the cost of living crisis? What roles can mentoring play? Several studies have demonstrated the value of mentoring within creative enterprises in relation to both personal career development and increasing equitable access to creative occupations. However, these accounts offer only a limited depiction of the huge variety of mentoring practice which exists across the variegated set of industries which constitute the UK's creative sector. This article draws upon survey data generated in 2022 by an interdisciplinary research project which was supported by an industry policy body. We examine mentoring as a set of developmental, helping relationships, primarily at the formal initiative level across all sectors of the creative industries in the UK. Our investigation offers a new understanding of the nature of mentoring programme provision and the challenges the creative industries face in developing sustainable mentoring programmes since the Covid-19 pandemic. The findings indicate that while many mentoring initiatives are instigated to tackle the barriers of inequality for new entrants and existing employees, their outcomes are often compromised by sectoral precarity in the creative industries.

KEYWORDS

Mentoring; creative industries; precarity; diversity; inclusion

Introduction

The vital importance of the creative industries' outputs for mental health and social cohesion was clearly demonstrated by the experience of lockdown during the Covid-19 pandemic. For those facing isolation and loneliness, digital culture such as videogames or streaming film and TV services offered much more than escapist entertainment (Barr and Copeland-Stewart 2022). Meanwhile others desperately missed shared experiential culture like theatre and live music. But whilst the pandemic reminded us of the value of culture and creativity, it simultaneously laid bare the precarious and fragile circumstances of much of its production. By 2022, the World Economic Forum

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estimated that 10 million creative jobs had been lost worldwide since 2020, and also argued that economic gains from the much-discussed 'winners' of lockdown - primarily digital services - had failed to balance out catastrophic losses elsewhere (Bateman 2022). Whilst job losses in the UK may not have been as severe as elsewhere, it is notable that the pandemic happened at a time when many creative sectors were attempting to tackle issues around workplace diversity and widening participation, and it seems likely that modest successes in these arenas were unfortunately wiped out. So, what tools do industry leaders and policymakers have at their disposal to try to counteract the toxic effects of structural precarity combined with the external shock of the Covid-19 crisis? How can they help creative workers to build stable careers in these challenging circumstances?

One of the most common interventions in this area is mentoring, which can be both cost-effective and transformative for workers, if managed sensitively (Stokes, Fatien Diochon, and Otter 2021; Gannon and Washington 2019). For the purposes of this article we initially rely upon a traditional definition of mentoring, as a helping relationship where a more experienced mentor supports the development of a less experienced mentee, and through a supportive and challenging dialogue there is a transfer or shift in awareness, skills or knowledge (Gray, Garvey, and Lane 2016). Dyadic mentoring, where the mentor typically provides guidance and support for a mentee who is either starting out or going through a career transition, is the most common form of mentoring (ibid.). This framing of mentoring is often akin to apprentice-master relationships, which have formed the basis of creative or skilled crafts training within many artistic cultures across the world (Grugulis and Stoyanova 2012). In its modern, professionalised incarnation, such as the schemes managed by policy bodies including PACT, Creative UK and the BFI, mentoring continues to perform these socialisation and training roles, but is also tasked with other objectives, such as increasing productivity and sector growth, helping to bring workers from under-represented and disadvantaged backgrounds into the creative workforce, and enhancing workers' career development (Gray, Garvey, and Lane 2016).

In this article, we consider mentoring in the creative sector in the context of both the circumstances of the Covid-19 pandemic and the underlying structural precarity which defines much contemporary creative endeavour. Following the work of Guido Kristen, we define 'precarity' as:

...a new form of social insecurity, which is generally seen as the consequence of a neo-liberal policy regarding job market de-regulation and the dismantling of the Fordist welfare state, in times of an ever more dynamic globalization... - [and] as a social phenomenon which cannot be defined by objective data alone. An important component of it is the feeling of insecurity, which is subjectively experienced as, transformed into, or articulated through affects and emotions. (Kristen 2022: 17, 8).

The specific 'consequences' of neoliberal policies which affect the UK's creative industries in particular include a heavy reliance upon freelance contracts as well as un- or low-paid labour such as interns. However Kristen's definition of precarity knits together the socioeconomic impacts with their consequent toll upon the psychological state of creative workers, and is therefore particularly applicable to the process of mentoring which relies upon building a shared emotional connection over time. In order to assess the extent and value of mentoring within the UK's creative industries,

our team of interdisciplinary researchers based at Oxford Brookes University worked with policy body Creative UK (a non-profit organisation that supports the creative industries in the UK) to gather primary data. Using a mixed methods approach we were able to build a detailed picture of the range of this mentoring activity, including its geographical spread across the UK, and its stated goals and purposes.

Our article is structured as follows. Firstly, we evaluate the existing literature from our inter-disciplinary perspective. This process allowed us to begin to unravel the complex nature of precarity in the creative industries. We explore how this concept has developed and why it remains a relevant and controversial aspect of employment and talent development across the creative sectors. Secondly, we examine the relationship between precarity and the issues of equality, diversity and inclusion which characterise the creative industries. The final section of our literature review explores the nature and role of mentoring, generically and in specific relation to the creative industries. We then provide insights into our methodology, primary data collection and analysis, before we present the findings of our examination of mentoring initiatives in the creative industries in the UK. We close our article by framing how forms of mentoring in the creative sector attempt to triage and amend the impacts of exclusion and precarity directly and indirectly, before suggesting future research routes to be pursued.

Literature review

Precarity is pervasive in all sectors of contemporary neoliberal economies. Temporary contracts, job insecurity, freelancing, and an increasing individualization of labour, have resulted in an exacerbation of workplace inequalities, as well as an overall deterioration of workers' rights and quality of employment, with obvious consequences for people's private lives. In this context, Mark Deuze (2007) has theorised the emergence of 'liquid labour' – a shift from traditional work models to more flexible arrangements, marked by the erosion of boundaries between work life and private life. The creative industries sector is severely affected by this phenomenon, and the ensuing social inequalities. Due to its overwhelmingly project-based nature, creative labour has served as a model for precarious employment. Ross (2009: 47) has linked the long-standing stereotype of the 'struggling artist' with an acceptance of sacrificial labour and self-exploitation amongst workers in the creative industries. On the other hand, Hesmondhalgh and Baker (2013: 7-8) have highlighted the need to embrace a more balanced view of labour in the sector, one that takes into account what constitutes 'good work' and 'bad work'. While the authors acknowledge that precarity is definitely more pronounced in the creative industries (*ibid.* 113), they argue that the overall experience of working in this sector is highly ambivalent (*ibid.* 137). Building on this work, Mark Banks has argued that the cultural industries need to radically broaden and expand their uptake of workers from all parts of society, and to abandon the use of 'talent' as a selection criterion, as talent 'is best understood as misrecognised social advantage.' (Banks 2023: 56).

Ethnographic research into working conditions within the creative industries often illustrates the effects of precarity upon businesses and workers. Crucially, whilst these studies may reflect the 'ambivalent' range of experiences described by Hesmondhalgh

and Baker (2013), they also tend to indicate that the negative effects of precarity (such as unpredictability of income due to freelance contracts and lack of long-term stability) are far more likely to be felt by those workers who have traditionally been disadvantaged or disenfranchised by the workplace in general. For example, looking at the British independent television sector, Lee (2011: 562) argues that the continued dominance of 'networking culture' has led not only to a lack of diversity in the workplace, but also to an erosion of 'creative diversity' due to a lack of new ideas and different voices. On a similar note, Grugulis and Stoyanova (2012: 1326) examine employment practices in the screen production sector, and conclude that working class, BAME and female workers receive far fewer high quality career opportunities than their white, male, middle-class colleagues. Other work focuses on race and gender in the cultural industries (e.g. Saha 2018, Nwonka 2021); the relationship between social class and precarity in creative work (e.g. Vachet 2022); or the intersection between class and gender (e.g. Scharff (2017) on the classical music profession). Meanwhile Genders' study of freelancers working in film and television in the Bristol area (Genders 2019) found that women were more likely to have undertaken unpaid work than men, and much more likely to struggle with the demands of freelance life (such as mobility) in relation to caring responsibilities.

The everyday challenges faced by creative workers in the UK have certainly not gone unnoticed by the policy sector. The eye-catching, polemical report *Panic! Social Class, Taste and Inequalities in the Creative Industries* (Brook, O'Brien, and Taylor 2019) draws similar conclusions to Banks (2023) on the issue of 'talent' and attempts to dismantle the belief that the creative industries are a 'meritocracy'. Other studies on social mobility in the UK's creative sector have identified a need for shared responsibility between policymakers, educational institutions and businesses, with recommendations including better mentoring for students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds (e.g. Randle, Leung, and Kurian 2007; Carey, O'Brien, and Gable 2021). However, much of the academic literature around precarity (including Deuze 2007; Ross 2009) takes a pessimistic view of policy interventions, suggesting that such efforts are - at best - 'sticking plaster' temporary quick fixes, and, at worst, part of a neoliberal political discourse which actively creates precarity for creative workers (e.g. McRobbie 2016). Others argue that larger systemic changes are required to tackle social inequality. Eikhof and Warhurst (2013: 502) describe a system of creative production which is inherently precarious, with project-based employment being inevitably disadvantageous to women, those with minority ethnic backgrounds or from lower socioeconomic groups.

While the structural and systemic issues of precarity and exclusion appear ingrained in the creative industries, approaches to ameliorating their worst effects have emerged in recent years (NESTA 2014). Mentoring is one such approach, whereby a more experienced and established figure offers guidance and support to a new entrant into a working or social domain. Informal mentoring, where an unofficial nurturing and supportive relationship develops between a mentor and a mentee, has given way to formal mentoring relationships developed by organisations to replicate the benefits of the naturally occurring variety (Garvey and Stokes 2021). As well as developing knowledge specific to a particular setting (for example, a profession or an organisation), mentoring has also emerged as a way of socialising new entrants,

building confidence and psycho-social ties, role modelling behaviours and creating bonds and ties (Daskalaki 2010; Grugulis and Stoyanova 2012). These outcomes, it can be argued, not only benefit the individuals concerned but also the organisations and occupations, where there is seen to be better knowledge of talent development with the potential for succession planning and growth (Stokes and Merrick 2013; Gannon, Clayton, and Klenert 2021).

The shift towards the deployment of formal mentoring initiatives has also been prompted by concerns over informal mentoring offering access and support to those with pre-existing contacts, privileging those with social capital and the characteristics of those who have the resources and power, further exacerbating existing inequalities (Sheerin and Hughes 2018). Formal mentoring has also led to the development of a wide variety of forms of mentoring, including peer mentoring (where mentoring partners at a similar stage support each other's development), group mentoring (where a mentor supports two or more mentees in their development), reverse mentoring (where the less experienced mentoring partner, who will typically have a background unfamiliar to the experienced mentoring partner offers insight and guidance to their perspectives) and reciprocal mentoring (an evolution of reverse mentoring where both partners learn from each other's personal perspectives and backgrounds) (Haddock-Millar et al. 2023). These variations have been particularly prominent in mentoring initiatives attempting to address issues of inequality, such as women's leadership development, and widening participation to occupations and advanced career stages for those less well represented in particular careers, sectors and settings (Sheerin and Hughes 2018; Gannon, Clayton, and Klenert 2021).

The adaptability of mentoring is also evident in the extent to which technology has informed the ways mentoring is delivered, from e-mentoring using various online platforms to specific mentoring applications which support mentoring participants' interactions (Bierema et al. 2017; Bierema and Hill 2005). Mentoring systems and applications are also increasingly used to assist with operating and managing mentoring initiatives and have helped many schemes increase the number of mentoring relationships within initiatives. These developments were particularly valuable during the Covid-19 pandemic when face-to-face meetings were not possible due to public health guidance. Yet, little research appears to have taken place about the Covid-19 impact on mentoring initiatives and the potential for full-scale shifts to forms of virtual mentoring. The creative industries offer a particularly valuable setting in which to investigate the evolving forms and nature of mentoring due to the particularly drastic impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on creative sectors and the diversity of responses across the industry (Khlystova, Kalyuzhnova, and Belitski 2022).

While the benefits of mentoring are widely acknowledged, more recent investigations have highlighted the dark side of mentoring where unrealistic expectations, manipulative behaviours and poor mentoring programme framing and support can lead to unfavourable outcomes for participants (Baker 2017; Washington and Cox 2016). Unless toxicity is 'designed and managed out' of mentoring programmes there is evidence that unfavourable practices in specific dyads can adversely affect other mentor-mentee relationships and the success of programmes overall (Barker, 2017).

Finally, other studies have highlighted that the social dimension to mentoring stretches beyond the opportunity to exchange and enhance social capital between

mentoring partners (Gannon, Clayton, and Klenert 2021; Gannon and Washington 2019; Cumming-Potvin and MacCallum, 2011). Others have used social capital theory to identify how mentoring can be understood as offering relational resources and access to essential networks (Feeney and Bozeman 2008; Hezlett and Gibson 2007), building further value for participants and stakeholders, and enhancing trust and reciprocity across organisations and settings. Examples have emerged of mentoring initiatives working beyond the development of individuals to address deeper social issues, such as disadvantage and access, and providing participants with the opportunity to engage in a variety of mentoring events (e.g. mentee only, mentor only, current participants with alumni). These evolutions in mentoring programme management have been explored through applying theoretical lenses such as communities of practice (Gannon, Clayton, and Klenert 2021; Cumming-Potvin and MacCallum 2011), and, as mentioned above, social capital theory. They also suggest that mentoring needs to be continually revisited as an area of practice which is tailored by users and participants to address contemporary development and learning challenges. As such, examining mentoring programme practices in response to issues of precarity and inequality in the creative industries offers the opportunity to evaluate the current management of mentoring and identify adaptations emerging in this diverse set of sectors.

Methodology

The research question that guided our initial study was: 'What is the provision of formal mentoring in the creative industries, and how has the Covid-19 pandemic changed this provision?' In order to address this question, a pragmatic research paradigm was identified as appropriate to understand the provision and nature of formal mentoring in the creative industries. Creswell and Plano Clark (2011) suggest this 'problem-focused' paradigm offers researchers meaningful ways to identify provision and answer 'real-world' practice questions. It is important to note that we adopted a participatory research approach (Chambers 1994; Cornwall and Jewkes 1995; Lilja and Bellon 2008) with our industry partner, Creative UK, as they were involved in several stages of the research, including design of the research instrument, initial interpretation of findings, and dissemination through a cross-sector workshop at the end of the project.

Using a two-stage data collection approach, we began by using the foundation of previous studies of mentoring (Gannon and Washington 2019; Abbott, Goosen, and Coetzee 2010) to frame our investigation. We used a popular internet search site to find mentoring schemes across the sectors of the creative industries, deploying the UK's Department of Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) and the Creative UK sector definition terms. Both sector categories were used to enable us to scrutinise both broader and more specific sectors across the CIs. From this stage 93 mentoring schemes were identified and contact information for 86 of these initiatives were collated. The following information was sorted into a spreadsheet for initial analysis: the name of the organisation, the name of the mentoring scheme(s), the occupational group(s) linked to the organisation/initiative, the postcode, address, geographical coverage of the initiative, webpages, social media accounts, main contact information and key features of the mentoring scheme(s). This initial analysis offered a platform for the next stage of data collection.

We modified a survey - developed originally by Abbott, Goosen, and Coetzee (2010) and later revised in another mentoring investigation (Gannon and Washington 2019) - abridging the number of questions to focus on mentoring scheme details. Questions included the history, size and scale of the mentoring programme concerned, operational practices, challenges faced and managed. The questions were a mixture of closed, multiple choice, and open responses in short and long formats, as well as some scales used to reflect on the degree of challenges faced. We also added to the survey some questions referring to the Covid-19 response and post-pandemic practices. Moreover, the survey included a number of questions that reflected our focus on the geographical dimension of mentoring provision in the UK, with the aim of taking into account digital poverty and regional gaps.

Following full research ethical approval, the survey was subsequently launched *via* the online platform Survey Monkey. All those mentoring scheme contacts found in the first stage of our study were invited to participate in the survey and we also tagged these organisations through their social media profiles (where appropriate Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn) to support these invitations. The primary participants sought for this project were mentoring scheme coordinators, administrators and managers, or mentors or mentees who were familiar with mentoring schemes in the creative industries.

In addition to inviting organisations with mentoring schemes we posted social media invitations to participate on the following platforms: LinkedIn, Facebook, Twitter, and specific academic networks, such as BAFTSS (British Association of Film, Television and Screen Studies) and MeCCSA (Media, Communication and Cultural Studies Association). Our industry partners (Creative UK) featured the invitation to participate in the research *via* their regular e-newsletters. The survey was open from early December 2021 to May 2022. Overall, we received 104 responses with 34 full completions of all survey items. In addition, more than twenty emails were received regarding reasons for non-completion, partial completion or with requests to talk to the research team. These requests were followed up by the principal investigator. The majority of these contacts entailed explanations about the challenges of completing the online survey due to interruptions to mentoring scheme provision and funding, changes due to Covid-19 and changes in scheme personnel. In itself, this type of response to our survey is also indirect evidence of sectoral precarity, where instability and funding issues threaten the very activity which these organisations were set up to deliver.

Findings

In this section we present the major findings from our two-stage analysis of mentoring provision with the UK's creative sector. Broken down into three sections, we outline the creative industries sectors which have the most and the fewest mentoring schemes, the purpose and type of those schemes, and the geographical location of mentoring, as well as the schemes' funding and duration. The findings illustrate a complex picture of provision, highlighting many of the obstacles and challenges faced by mentoring schemes working within the creative sectors.

Frequency and concentration of mentoring schemes

Both the website analysis and the follow-up survey confirmed that mentoring schemes exist across all the industries included in the DCMS definition and Creative UK taxonomy but at different scales and levels. According to the mentoring organisations' goals stated online, the creative industries with the most mentoring schemes were 'music, performing and visual arts' (23% of the sample) and 'film, TV, radio and photography' (22%). 'Advertising and marketing' and 'crafts' had the fewest schemes, making up only 5% of the sample respectively. For the survey, mentoring organisations were asked to identify which sector best represented the focus of their scheme, and were able to select several options from a more detailed list of 18 industries. Even when differentiated, 'performing arts' (43% of sample), 'visual arts' (41%) and 'music' (35%) remained the industries with most schemes, followed closely by 'film and television' (35%). 'Crafts' (16%), 'IT, software and computer services' (16%) and 'Architecture' (11%) were the least well-represented. Text responses in the 'other' box on the survey reinforced the overlap across sectors that mentoring schemes often represent. For example, 'architecture' was often identified alongside 'design', whilst 'animation and VFX' was selected along with 'video games' and 'IT software and computer services'.

Whilst our findings confirm that mentoring schemes exist right across the creative industries, it is nonetheless important to note that the sectors where we found most schemes are also the ones which studies have found to be most associated with precarious employment practices. For example, a recent review of the quality of employment in the UK's creative industries found that self-employment was least common in 'IT and software' and 'Museums, galleries and libraries', and most common in the 'Music, performing and visual arts' sector (Carey, Giles, and O'Brien 2023). Given that precarity tends to hit disadvantaged employees the hardest (Eikhof and Warhurst 2013), it is not surprising to find that the stated objectives of most schemes focused around issues of diversity and inclusion. Goals were related not only to protected characteristics such as gender, ethnicity and age, but also to socioeconomic drives to widen participation. Secondary objectives were also common, such as support for a specific career stage (often entry into the industry), or building skills across a particular sector.

Purpose and type of mentoring initiatives

When organisations were asked to detail their purpose, the most common responses were also around diversity (based on gender, neurodiversity, disability, ethnicity and socio-economic groups), widening participation, and supporting career transitions. Several websites and responses made explicit connections between precarity and issues of inclusion, for example:

With the knowledge that much harassment relates to insecure work in an industry that remains male-dominated, [the scheme] ...also acts as an alternative professional network for young women (Second Source 2020).

The geographical position and spread of some organisations also implies particular objectives. Although most schemes were national (or international) in their scope, others focused upon particular home nations (e.g. Scotland) or English regions (e.g. Yorkshire), with the clear aim of ‘levelling up’ those workers living outside from the major cultural hub of London and the South East.

Our findings on the type of people participating within these schemes as mentees and mentors also reinforced the sector’s general drive towards greater inclusivity within the workplace. When asked to define their principal target for mentees, just over half of the organisations identified some aspect of diversity, alongside other characteristics such as young artists or creative professionals. As an example, one organisation responded:

Loosely, it is young people from backgrounds under-represented in the arts, we take an intersectional approach when it comes to disadvantage and take into account socio-economic background, ethnicity, care experience, disability, refugee/asylum seeker[s.] (MMI_CIs: Q13:33).¹

Whilst many schemes aim to support young people entering the industry, others focus on those at a mid-career stage, or specifically groups such as entrepreneurs or new business owners. When recruiting mentors, most organisations had very broad criteria (e.g. established professionals, managers or creatives), although some specified that at least three years’ experience was required. Several schemes only recruited female mentors or members of a particular association (e.g. RISE, a mentoring network set up by Channel 4). Mentors were found through a range of different recruitment methods including self-referral, social media campaigns, or through existing professional networks.

Nearly 50% of the organisations offered dyadic relationships as the main modus operandi. However, we also found evidence that the sector is willing to experiment with less traditional styles of mentoring, with 10% of organisations offering group mentoring and a similar proportion using either speed or peer-to-peer mentoring methods. Many organisations also offered a combination of different mentoring styles and experiences. The balance between face-to-face and online mentoring was a significant area of flux and change, largely due to the effects of the Covid-19 lockdowns which prevented many areas of physical interaction during 2020 and 2021. This aspect is explored in more detail in the discussion section below.

Funding and duration of mentoring schemes

Our survey revealed a complex picture of funding arrangements for mentor schemes in the creative industries. Most schemes relied on a combination of different elements such as public funding (e.g. Arts Council), corporate sponsorship (e.g. videogame developers Electric Square), or support from Local Enterprise Partnerships and educational facilities (e.g. University of the Arts London). Many schemes depended upon volunteers or in-kind donations. [Figure 1](#) illustrates the major funding streams for each organisation in our survey, although the majority required multiple sources of income to operate.

Several mentoring schemes discussed fundraising in a positive light, as a way to build networks, connections and special interests. However, it is clear that overall the financial arrangements of responding organisations were necessarily short-term (e.g. based on successful grant bids) or otherwise unstable, such as reliant upon the time of volunteers who are often creative freelancers and therefore subject to unpredictable working patterns.

The instability of provision which results from such funding arrangements was also illustrated by survey responses on the length of time in which the scheme had been operating. Over 40% of our respondents' schemes had been operating for less than a year, with 15% having been set up in the last six months. At the other end of the longevity scale, only 13% of schemes had existed for over 10 years, with the oldest reported scheme lasting 17 years so far. [Figure 2](#) illustrates the range and spread of longevity of the mentoring schemes within our sample.

This chart illustrates a noticeable dip in the number of schemes which were between 1 and 2 years old. As our survey was completed between December 2021 and May 2022, this anomaly can be attributed to the negative effects of the Covid-19 lockdowns during 2020 and early 2021. However, as lockdowns eased during the latter part of 2021, several schemes indicated that they had been set up in direct response to the pandemic. This flexibility and ability to pivot in response to external crises could be seen as a positive effect of the instability and constant change that characterise labour patterns in the creative sectors.

The length of time in which schemes can operate has implications for the duration of the mentoring relationships themselves. Around one third of our respondent organisations were offering mentoring placements lasting six months or less, with a further third suggesting relationships lasting between six months and one year. According to mentoring handbooks, this relatively short duration of the schemes is not unusual within industries which are considered to be fast-paced and characterised

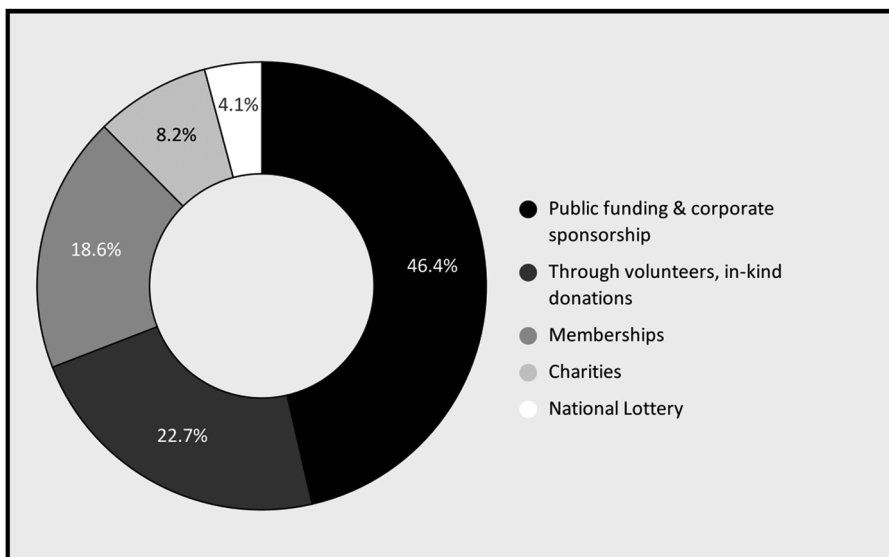


Figure 1. Types of funding for creative industries mentoring schemes.

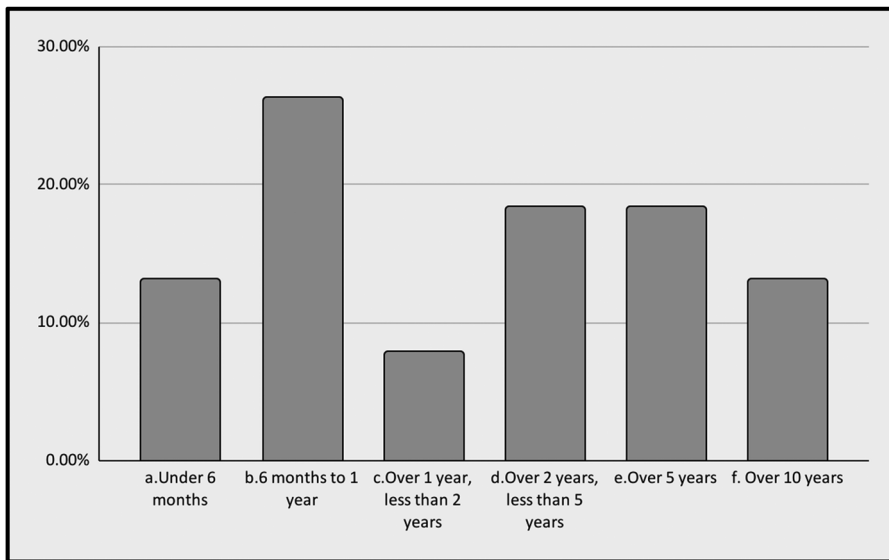


Figure 2. Operating duration of creative industries mentor schemes.

by high turnover of personnel. e.g. Lunsford [2022]). Only 10% of mentor schemes ran for more than one year. Some respondents indicated that the duration of the relationship was flexible and that a number of sessions were recommended (e.g. 6 meetings) rather than a fixed period of time. Interestingly, when asked about particular challenges faced by their scheme, several respondents reported issues related to the scheme's longevity. There were problems with engagement, keeping the momentum going and communication issues, and one longer-term scheme acknowledged the danger of mentees becoming dependent upon their mentors (MMI_CIs: Q21: 26).

In summary, our findings indicate that mentoring has an established role across all sectors of the UK's creative industries. Within our sample, schemes were most common within the sectors most associated with precarious employment practices (e.g. 'Music, performing and visual arts'). The most commonly stated goals of these mentoring schemes, alongside general professional development, were tackling issues of equality and diversity. To support such objectives, mentees were often drawn from under-represented groups within the industries' employment profile, such as neuro-diverse creative practitioners. The complexity of the funding arrangements for these schemes and the fact that a large number had been running for less than a year suggests a turbulent picture with a great deal of change. In the following section, we discuss these key findings in more detail and explore whether these schemes are able to have an impact upon longer-term, structural issues within the creative sector.

Discussion

Whilst presenting and discussing the findings of our two-stage analysis of mentoring provision for creative industries in the UK, several key themes emerged which we explore in more detail in the following section. These areas of wider significance coalesced around three areas: the effects and impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic; the

use of mentoring to tackle issues of equality, diversity and inclusion; and the move beyond traditional dyadic modes of mentoring towards more social and flexible systems which are arguably better suited to solving the particular types of precarity which are found in the UK's creative industries.

The impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic

As part of our collaboration with Creative UK, one of the initial goals of the research team was to produce data on the geographical spread of mentoring in the UK's creative sector in order to identify gaps in provision, and therefore to enable future initiatives to better tackle regional disparities. However, as we began to analyse the survey's findings we quickly realised that this objective had been in some ways superseded by the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, with participants in online mentoring schemes no longer being constrained by geographical distance. In response to a question about the format of mentoring meetings, we found that only 13% were currently being held entirely face-to-face either inside or outside of an office setting, whereas 87% were either entirely or mostly online. When asked how their provision had changed due to the Covid-19 pandemic, many organisations confirmed this online shift and the increased spatial flexibility which resulted, for example:

Anecdotally, we know that the increased digital working during the pandemic meant that more sessions took place online, and also that mentees were less restricted by location in their choice of mentors as a result. (MMI_CIs: Q16a:20).

The longer-term rebalancing of the spatial dimension of mentoring provision towards cross-regional patterns, as opposed to offerings strictly linked to specific locations, has resulted in a positive shift that has the potential to address the tendency to exclude those who do not live in or do not have access to creative urban clusters (typically in the South East of the UK).

Several of the more recent mentoring schemes pointed out that their initial objectives were focussed around supporting creative workers during the pandemic lockdowns, and some had even accessed funding which was earmarked for this specific purpose. For those schemes already running pre-2020, the pandemic served to sharpen their focus; for example, one respondent stated that Covid-19 had simply made their operations 'more imperative' (MMI_CIs: Q23:6). However, whilst the demand for support from creative workers struggling with furlough or unemployment as a result of lockdown was clear and demonstrable, the activities which mentor schemes could realistically provide were inevitably curtailed in similar ways. Several schemes reported problems with promotion and marketing during this period which affected their ability to recruit both mentors and mentees. And although the widespread shift towards remote working was generally seen in a positive light, some schemes also pointed out the obvious drawbacks of this mode of delivery, for example: 'We have missed the sociable and informal elements of these events online' (MMI_CIs: Q23:32). Nonetheless, much like the creative industries' response to the pandemic crisis in relation to funding discussed above, the sector has demonstrated resilience in the face of adversity, and there is potential for the move online to become a useful tool in the ongoing battle against regional disparities for creative workers. Further research is required to monitor the impact of this shift.

Tackling equality, diversity and inclusion through mentoring

As we noted above, dyadic mentoring is the most recurrent type of relationship among the schemes under scrutiny, which is in line with existing literature on this topic (Gray, Garvey, and Lane 2016). This type of mentoring relationship depends on a trusting and confidential relationship between two participants, who may have been specifically selected for the scheme due to their membership of a group which has traditionally faced discrimination within the industry concerned. Therefore, it is not surprising that this modality has been used to address issues related to equality and diversity, as well as providing targeted support to professionals from marginalised and minority groups.

As the responses below demonstrate, mentoring is understood as a tool to tackle the difficulties or obstacles encountered by individuals who might be discriminated against or disadvantaged based on diverse identity categories, for example around gender:

The overall purpose of [...] is to achieve a diverse and gender balanced workforce across the broadcast media and entertainment technology sector, specifically within the areas of engineering, technical operations, sales, marketing and business. The Mentoring Scheme is one of the key pillars in achieving this goal. (MMI_CIs: Q8: 4).

In addition to addressing the under-representation of women some schemes specifically identified supporting ethnic diversity as the remit of their mentoring scheme. For example:

Mentoring underrepresented ethnicities in the video games industry which has only 11% Black, Asian and other underrepresented ethnicities. (MMI_CIs: Q8: 7).

Several schemes were aimed at tackling social or class-based inequalities. For instance: 'People from lower socio-economic backgrounds are not fully represented in the creative workforce' (MMI_CIs: Q4:2). Some schemes were designed to support people with neurocognitive disabilities: '[...] we wanted to build a scheme which reflects the relatively high incidence of dyslexia in the creative industries' (MMI_CIs: Q8:11). Not surprisingly, a significant number of schemes concentrated on helping people at the entry point, with young people as their main target: '[we] support young people from backgrounds that are under-represented in the creative industry' (MMI_CIs: Q4: 34).

This vision of mentoring's potential to address social injustice, can also be seen in the language used to define mentoring provision in our secondary website data. For example, one scheme is described as tackling the 'patriarchal battlefield' (OK Mentor: 2023). The objective of supporting young people shared by many schemes in our sample is, arguably, an attempt to address the phenomenon of young professionals working for low or no pay traced by Hesmondhalgh and Baker (2013: 114): 'The large reservoir of labour from which the cultural industries can select its employees [...] enables a form of exploitation of junior workers in the form of low pay, especially when we take into consideration the number of junior workers who are willing to gift their labour to companies in order to accrue the experience needed to eventually attain (better) paid positions.' The authors also note that 'many workers leave the

cultural industries at a relatively early age, burnt out by the need to keep up to date with changing ideas of what is fashionable, relevant and innovative, a process that requires not only hard work at work, but also a blurring of work and leisure' (ibid. 221). In light of this, mentoring schemes' focus on young workers is crucial not just from the point of view of access and entry, but also in relation to retention and larger issues around the sustainability of employment in the creative sector.

Our survey also asked for examples of both positive outcomes and challenges of the mentoring process, and the responses here provide evidence that mentoring can be a useful tool against sectoral discrimination, particularly with regard to neurodiverse or disabled workers. One scheme reported that they had 'been able to support a number of people with disabilities and or serious illnesses... to establish sustainable businesses' (MMI_CIs: Q22: 14), whilst another noted that their neurodiverse mentees had been supported to 'grow their business, promote neurodiversity and create opportunities for other ND [neurodiverse] students and graduates' (MMI_CIs: Q22: 15). Whilst clearly there was some evidence of success in terms of meeting goals around diversity, several schemes also described significant difficulties with recruitment of both mentors and mentees from underrepresented groups. For example, one scheme found it challenging to find 'the hardest to reach young people, those who have more needs' (MMI_CIs: Q21: 8), and other hurdles included '[f]inding mentors from backgrounds that match those that our young people come from – we know this makes a difference to have a more relateable role model.' (MMI_CIs: Q22: 39). Considered together, the good practice and successes in this area need to be balanced against the practical and logistical challenges, presenting a mixed picture overall.

Beyond the dyad: networking and community building

Our data indicates that mentoring provision is progressing beyond the traditional and still prevailing dyadic model. There is now an understanding of mentoring as a phenomenon that transcends the exclusive relationship between mentor and mentee, while putting a strong emphasis on community building and networks. This emphasis is linked to a clear awareness of inequality and social exclusion based on the EDI issues mentioned above. [Figure 3](#) represents our conception of the interrelationship between these key elements and represents a visual model of our overall analytical approach.

This diagram illustrates our conclusion that the challenges of precarity and EDI within the creative industries are mutually reinforcing, and that mentoring provision has had to evolve to address these issues in different ways. This relationship is evidenced clearly in the responses to open comment sections of our survey, regardless of the creative industry sector in which respondents operate. The particular concerns emerging from our data revolve around the fact that for specific groups of people it is more difficult to join and build networks and professional communities, as well as to develop and sustain their own careers.

Mentoring schemes oriented towards community-building aim at, for example, offering 'networking for people with little experience' (MMI_CIs: Q8: 12), 'reduc[ing the] requirement of one to one mentoring [and] increas[ing] artist networks' (MMI_CIs:

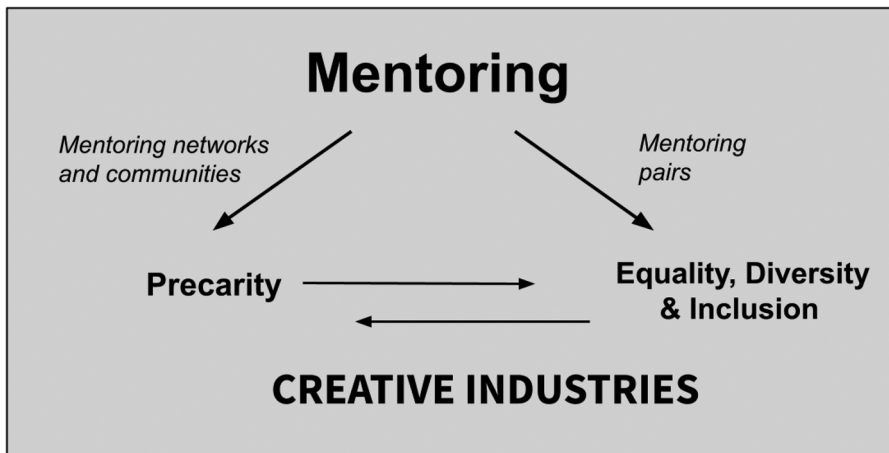


Figure 3. The relationship between mentoring, precarity and EDI issues.

Q8: 5). Some of our respondents acknowledge explicitly the isolation associated with creative labour. For example, one survey participant claimed:

We have over 7500 professional director members on our database and we know that directors often work along - *not getting the chance to meet each other* - we know that a black book of contacts still exists and that people with whom you come into contact with and work with can offer support and guidance - we wanted to *help members find and connect* with other to this end. [emphasis added] (MMI_CIs: Q8: 26).

Another respondent reflects on the Bullingdon Club, a network of students at Oxford University which has become notorious in recent years as an example of elitism, cronyism and bad behaviour (Sheerwood 2019). While recognizing that, in spite of its reputation, it provided evidence for the importance of networks when it comes to ‘people get[ting] ahead’ (MMI_CIs: Q8: 32), this encouraged their organisation to create a mentoring scheme. This emphasis on networking and creating communities addresses a problem that, according to Ross (2009: 6), is a key feature of precarious labour: ‘isolation from any protective framework of social insurance.’ This issue is felt even more severely in the creative industries sectors, where pervasive freelancing, while offering autonomy and flexibility, ‘can also involve isolation and a lack of solidarity with other creative workers’ (Hesmondhalgh and Baker 2013: 221).

Conclusions

That the creative industries have the power to enrich lives and spark social change, or as the title of this special journal edition suggests, to help build ‘a better society’, is beyond doubt. This group of businesses remains, despite widespread challenges elsewhere in the UK economy, a dynamic and vibrant growth sector. However, employment practices within these sectors can be far less enriching for those employed in precarious conditions and/or regularly facing endemic discrimination. Based on the evidence we have gathered on the mentoring schemes’ push towards greater diversity, we would wish to echo Hesmondhalgh and Baker’s rallying cry:

Those concerned with equality and social justice need to consider ways in which access to the means of cultural production might be broadened in order to make these aspects of good work more widely available to other sectors of the population. (2012: 23)

We also believe that mentoring schemes *can* work as part of a larger tool kit to broaden access to the means of production. These initiatives are commonly critiqued as unsuitable for addressing systemic problems within the sector, but rather function as ‘band-aids for individual workers’ (Eikhof and Warhurst 2013: 503), or even worse, as interventions which merely pay tokenistic lip-service to continuing inequalities. Nonetheless, the need for structural change - the like of which can only be achieved by large-scale political consensus - should not necessarily preclude a first response from the sector itself, especially when the impact of these schemes upon the ‘individual workers’ involved can be so profound. As Kristen (2022: 8) notes, precarity is not simply an objective economic problem, but also a subjective, emotional one, and our survey responses indicate that mentoring is certainly capable of addressing this important aspect, with schemes commonly reporting increased confidence, resilience and better support networks for their mentees.

Despite this evidence of transformative experiences with an affective dimension, our study also provides evidence for a worrying lack of sustainability in the provision of these schemes. This means that schemes which have the potential to mitigate the worst effects of precarity for creative workers can sometimes fall foul of precarious structures themselves, especially regarding their funding arrangements. Further research is required to investigate this problem and to formulate recommendations for the sector and their policy support. We also found promising signs that mentoring managers had successfully pivoted their operations online during the Covid-19 pandemic, and that this shift towards remote communication tools had potential to provide positive benefits in terms of geographical reach and flexibility. In addition, experimentation with different models of mentoring practice, such as group or peer mentoring, indicate a willingness to move beyond the traditional dyadic relationships, and we suggest that these developments have potential in relation to tackling sector precarity and disadvantage. Again, we call for further investigation of these evolving techniques and technological possibilities in order to provide better evidence with which the sector can argue for greater support. Moreover, further research is needed in order to paint a more detailed picture of the differences between various sectors within the creative industries in relation to structural inequalities and the interventions provided by mentoring schemes in response to those challenges. In addition, the particular effects of precarity within the UK’s creative sector, such as the reliance upon freelance contracts, must be taken into account when evaluating the benefits or otherwise of mentoring schemes. Finally, we would like to express our gratitude to our survey respondents, whose generosity with their time is further testament to their commitment to improving working conditions within the UK’s creative sector.

Note

1. Survey responses are referenced using the abbreviation MMI_CIs (‘Mapping Mentoring Initiatives in the Creative Industries’), the question number and response number. The survey data is archived and held securely at Oxford Brookes University.

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