

Sandra Booth, a former dance and drama student now a freelancer and Director of Policy and External Relations at CHEAD the Council for Higher Education Art and Design. We are the leading sector advocacy network for art and design schools in 73 UK Higher Education Institutions with over 1000 individual creative education practitioners as members. Our links to external creative organisations include the Design Council where we are the lead on embedding a skills for planet blueprint across higher education so that creative graduates have a solid grounding in green skills when they enter the industry and we can play our part to deliver on the mission to upskill 1 million designers by 2030

CHEAD are also a co-author of a framework for freelance education which equips students with freelancing and enterprise skills as a structural norm for the creative economy. The creative industries are characterised by project-based work, high levels of self-employment (around 30%), and a predominance of SMEs (around 94%). 61% of students These features make conventional, linear skills pathways, apprenticeships and work experience programmes less effective.

CHEAD recognises that -

The subject of Art and Design is at the forefront of transformational change, where evolving paradigms and emerging technologies are reshaping how we create, communicate and engage with visual, material and digital culture. These shifts are offering opportunities for new modes of Art and Design practice, expanding creative possibilities, and introducing innovative forms of exploration and expression across different disciplines. The practice of Art and Design shapes contemporary cultural and societal values through creative research, making, empathy, storytelling, critical and speculative thinking, engagement with complexity, and the building of meaningful connections. And we have lobbied for these reforms which are now embedded in the new QAA subject benchmark statements for Art and Design alongside commitments to incorporate skills for planet, embrace creative AI practices, enterprise education and EDI into degree pathways and to ensure these are formalised as graduate outcomes.

Furthermore, we are working with our industry partners such as the Design Business Association to strengthen university and industry links to upscale opportunities for a diverse range of students to have access to the fantastic careers the creative industry sector offers.

Research and innovation underpin all of this activity and whilst we celebrate the investment being made by Innovate UK, UKRI and the AHRC into cutting edge interdisciplinary research - especially CreaTech - there is still a gap between

public sector research investment into creative sector innovation and our ambitions.

To summarise, for us, this translates into 4 Key Issues

1. Misalignment across policy areas: Education reform, post-16 skills policy and industrial strategy are progressing on parallel but insufficiently coordinated tracks.
2. Gaps in post-16 and adult provision: Skills England's own assessment identifies **shortages in high-skilled creative roles**, yet the LLE currently excludes creative subjects at the very levels where gaps are most acute.
3. Funding and access risks: Proposed changes to **higher education funding**, teacher training bursaries and maintenance grants risk narrowing access to creative education, particularly for students from low-income backgrounds.
4. Careers guidance weaknesses: **Poor awareness of creative career routes** continues to limit entry into the sector, reinforcing regional and socio-economic inequalities.

This is a leadership issue - However, as evidence from the PEC demonstrates -

- **Underinvestment in management skills and development in our sector remains a challenge.** Their analysis indicates that training rates for managers and leaders in creative firms (33%) fall below the whole-economy average (44%), and have in fact declined since 2017.

And we are all acutely aware of the decline in creative education in the school curriculum. Whilst this is being addressed through the adopted recommendations in the Curriculum and assessment review, it could be a decade before we see these reforms biting. We need to urgently address the decline in teacher recruitment and retention in creative subjects and to put creativity back into the heart of our education system. To this end CHEAD will be publishing the second iteration of a **Creative Education Manifesto** with renewed 'asks' of government for joined up policy to supercharge investment in creative skills including lobbying for the inclusion of skills funding to support mainstream and upskilling pathways to address the exclusion of creative disciplines from the initial LLE modular offer at Levels 4-6, and Office for Students funding guidance that risks deprioritising high-cost creative subjects, and uncertainty created by the transition to new post-16 qualifications.

CHEAD's other asks align with Creative UK and include:

- Ensure seamless alignment between school-age education, post-16 provision and lifelong learning.
- Align Office for Students funding guidance with Skills England's identified priorities. Remove the deprioritisation of Media, publishing and journalism.
- Empower devolved and combined authorities to tailor education and skills responses to regional creative economies.
- Protect equitable access to creative education through maintenance grants and appropriate funding bands.
- Strengthen careers guidance through a cross-departmental Creative Careers Service and amplified major public facing campaign across influencer platforms.

We are not alone in this quest and today is another great example of how by coming together and speaking with one voice - government, industry and the third sector can realise the creative industry's Sector vision and plans.

Questions responses as panel member-

With the wholesale review of the apprenticeship levy and skills reform, and the curriculum assessment review, are there meaningful changes in education pathways available into the creative sector?

Short answer: yes, in theory – but not yet at scale or with sufficient impact for the young people and employers who need them most.

The starting point: a graduate-dominated creative workforce

The UK creative industries are **exceptionally highly qualified**, with approximately **72–75% of the workforce holding a degree or higher-level qualification (Level 4+)**. This significantly exceeds the **45% average across the wider UK economy**, underlining the sector's reliance on graduate-level talent.

Key characteristics of the current workforce include:

- **83% of creative roles are classified as higher-level occupations** (managers, directors, professional roles)

- Among **25–34-year-olds**, nearly **90% of media professionals hold a degree**
 - Despite this, **67.8% of creative businesses report skills gaps**, particularly in specialist, role-specific skills
 - There is growing recognition that **academic routes alone are not meeting industry needs**, prompting interest in vocational and hybrid pathways
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What pathways currently exist?

1. Higher education (still the dominant route)

- **Undergraduate degrees (BA/BSc)** in creative subjects (design, fashion, film, illustration, acting, etc.)
 - **Foundation Diplomas in Art & Design** (portfolio development and progression into HE)
 - **Conservatoires** for music and performing arts
 - **Postgraduate degrees** for specialisation or career conversion
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2. Vocational and technical routes (important, but constrained)

- **Further Education (Levels 1–3)** in creative media, art and design, performing arts
- **UAL Level 4 Professional Diplomas** and other higher technical qualifications
- **Access to HE Diplomas** for adult learners (19+)
- **Skills Bootcamps** (short, intensive training)

However:

- **BTECs, foundation years, and higher technical qualifications are being reformed or squeezed** to make room for new pathways
- **T Levels** remain limited:
 - Only **2 creative T Levels** currently exist:

- Craft and Design
 - Media, Broadcast and Production
 - Creative routes represent **less than 10% of all T Levels**
 - **V Levels are not yet live**, though creative pathways are expected
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3. Apprenticeships: available on paper, limited in practice

There are **80+ creative apprenticeship standards** across Levels 2–7, spanning:

- Screen and live production
- Media and journalism
- Craft, fashion, heritage and museums
- Technical theatre and events

Important distinction:

These are **standards**, not guaranteed programmes. Many have **low or no active delivery** due to employer and provider constraints.

In practice:

- Creative and Design apprenticeships account for **only 2–3% of apprenticeship starts**
- Only **5% of creative employers currently offer apprenticeships**
- **63% say they are unlikely to do so in the future**

Barriers include:

- Freelance and project-based business models
 - Short contracts and production cycles
 - Time, capacity, and programme fit – **not primarily cost**
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So what is actually changing?

Yes – there are meaningful reforms on paper

The **Growth and Skills Levy**, apprenticeship reform, and curriculum review **could significantly improve access** if implemented well.

Key opportunities include:

1. Flexible, modular training (from 2026)

- Introduction of **short courses and apprenticeship “units”**
- Allows:
 - Bite-sized training aligned to production cycles (8–12 weeks)
 - Stackable learning that can build into:
 - Apprenticeships
 - Higher technical qualifications
 - Freelance careers
 - Bootcamps

This model fits **project-based creative work far better** than traditional apprenticeships.

2. Pre-apprenticeship and transition pathways

New funding flexibility enables:

- T Level → short specialist programmes → jobs or apprenticeships
- FE/HE → industry conversion programmes
- Returner and career-changer pathways

These routes are especially important for:

- Underrepresented groups
 - Those without industry networks
 - Learners outside major creative hubs
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3. Shared and multi-employer models

Reforms support:

- Shared apprentices across studios, venues, productions
- Industry-led training hubs

- Levy pooling across employers

This is **essential in a sector dominated by SMEs and freelancers.**

4. A more realistic relationship with freelancing

For the first time, levy-funded training can:

- Explicitly prepare people for **freelance and portfolio careers**
- And Include:
 - Business, IP, contracts and tax
 - Portfolio-based assessment
 - Multi-disciplinary skills

This reflects the reality of work in film, TV, music, design and live events.

5. Rapid response to skills gaps and technology change

The new system allows faster training development such as bootcamps in areas such as:

- Virtual production and XR
 - AI-assisted creative workflows
 - Games, animation and immersive media
 - Sustainable production and green skills
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6. Regional and place-based pathways

Alignment with devolution and mayoral powers enables:

- Local creative pipelines anchored in:
 - Creative clusters
 - Studios, venues, galleries, theatres
 - FE colleges and universities
- Improved local retention and reduced reliance on London

But also: No – the reforms are not enough on their own

There are **nearly 1 million young people not in education, employment or training (NEET)**. These reforms, on their own, will not meaningfully reach them.

Key structural challenges remain:

- **10-year decline in arts participation:**
 - 48% drop in GCSE arts entries
 - 31% drop at A Level
 - 27% decline in arts teachers
- Apprenticeship starts have **fallen for years**
- Cost is **not the main barrier** for SMEs – capacity, risk and suitability are
- Removing employer contributions will help marginally, but **won't transform take-up**

Direct interventions such as **wage grants**, brokerage, and hands-on delivery support would be far more effective.

What's currently filling the gap?

Programmes such as:

- **Roundhouse Creative Futures**
- **TikTok Creative Academy**
- **Factory International: Creative Careers Festival**
- **BFI Film Academy**
- **National Saturday Clubs**

These are **high-impact but small-scale**, reaching only a fraction of young people. Crucially, they must **work alongside – not instead of – the formal curriculum**.

Conclusion: a qualified yes

Taken together, the reforms create the opportunity to move from a **single, rigid entry route** into the creative sector to a **blended ecosystem of pathways**, including:

- Short courses and bootcamps
- Pre-apprenticeships and transition programmes
- Shared apprenticeships
- Freelance-ready skills routes
- Stackable technical progression

If – and only if – these reforms are co-designed and delivered with creative employers, freelancers, sector bodies and educators, they could fundamentally reshape access, progression and diversity in creative careers.

Without that intent and infrastructure, the risk is that **the system changes on paper, while the lived reality for young people barely shifts at all.**