

7-2 Recruitment and Admissions: “Because it’s much more fun”

Introduction

This theme relates to the exploration of the rationale for media studies courses investigated in Chapter Five, Section 5-3. Both academic staff, media graduates and applicant advisors gave their views on the relationships between the courses offered and the reasons prospective students might have for choosing a course. The inter-play between the ways in which academic staff see media studies and the ways in which students and their advisors perceive these courses provides some insight into the discourses of media studies. The responses from eight participants are considered here. When combined with the official materials produced by institutions as part of the recruitment and admissions process the discursive practices begin to emerge. Comparing the ways in which university promotional materials describe courses with the ways university staff and prospective students perceive those courses can reveal the tensions in the provision of media studies courses. This approach relates to and builds on the work of Fairclough (1993, p.133) on university advertisements:

“a text-based examination of the marketization of discursive practices as a process which is pervasively transforming public discourse in contemporary Britain, with particular reference to higher education.”

A striking feature of Fairclough’s work is the way it demonstrates that the angst within higher education concerning the crossing of a line into a ‘*free market*’ has been an issue for debate for over twenty years. Fairclough’s paper is located around the time that the Further and Higher Education Act (1992) was implemented, abolishing the binary divide between universities and polytechnics

and the creation of 'Post-92' universities. This time of significant structural change can be compared to the funding changes introduced by the 2010 coalition government with each being seen, negatively by some people, as heralding a move towards a free market in higher education. This negative view of marketisation has been articulated as:

"...parts of British higher education are pedagogically constrained by the marketisation that has accompanied its expansion. Given that universities once aimed to change the student's intellectual perspective on the world, we use Fromm's humanist philosophy to argue that the current market discourse promotes a mode of existence where students seek to 'have a degree' rather than 'be learners.'" (Molesworth et al., 2009, p.278)

Analysis

For a contemporary analysis of the ways universities use their web sites to promote their media courses to prospective undergraduate students it is useful to consider a range of courses across distinctive institutional settings (discussed below) to capture the richness and diversity of provision across the sector:

"The BA Communications and Media is a challenging academic programme that will provide you with the analytical tools to study and understand the social, cultural and political role of the communications and media industries. This degree offers an exciting and contemporary approach to communications in one of the leading departments of its kind, known for its excellence in teaching and research." (University of Leeds website, 2014)

"This is a unique course, built on our long tradition of teaching interdisciplinary media practice, working across moving image, photography and interactive media. Our approach combines the creative exploration of art school traditions with academic and professional excellence." (University of Westminster website, 2014)

"Our BA (Hons) Film and Television Production course is designed to equip you with a range of skills that enable you to operate effectively in the professional environment of television and film production. Guided by our highly experienced teaching staff, many of whom are practising professionals in the industry, you will explore a range of styles and genres in documentary and film-fiction production." (Anglia Ruskin University website, 2014)

These opening statements from the course description pages, aimed at prospective undergraduate students, illustrate the ways in which different institutions choose to promote their media courses. These three examples can be related to the institutions' perception of themselves and the position they occupy in the higher education sector. In their 2009 strategic plan the University of Leeds, a member of the Russell Group, state their purpose:

“As a research-intensive international university with a strong enduring reputation we strive to: create, advance and disseminate knowledge; develop outstanding graduates and scholars; make a major impact upon global society.” (University of Leeds, 2009)

The description of the course at Leeds echoes the way in which the institution sees itself with an emphasis on research excellence and making a link between the departmental research environment and the course with the words “*exciting*” and “*contemporary*”. The course is described as providing “*analytical tools*” directed towards the “*social, cultural and political role*” of the media. This is combined with an emphasis on academic challenge and makes no mention of preparation for a career or meeting the needs of employers. This course has advertised entry requirements of AAB at A2 Level (equivalent to 340 UCAS tariff points) (University of Leeds, 2014) with an actual modal entry profile of 320-359 UCAS tariff points (with a spread from 280-319 to 560-599) in 2010-12 (Unistats, 2014) that, for UK-based entrants is likely to represent students entering with qualifications at both AS and A2 level; students with high attainment at GCSE level often study four or five subjects at AS level during Year 12 of the UK school system before concentrating on three of these at A2 level during Year 13. With a target recruitment of relatively high tariff applicants,

Leeds chose to highlight the academic and personal development aspects of their offering together with language that echoes some of the participant responses when asked to outline a rationale for media studies courses. There is no mention of future career development and employability in this paragraph. It cannot be assumed that this implies that these elements are of no concern however. An alternative reading could be that the institution's track record and self-confidence lead it to believe that potential applicants will assume that they will be successful in starting and developing their career. This could be due to both their perception of the way Russell Group universities are viewed by employers (Chevalier and Conlon, 2003) and their own existing successes within the education system that have led them to the point of applying for high entry-tariff courses.

The course description from the University of Westminster is also indicative of the institutional context. Here the initial statement draws attention to the longevity ("*long tradition*") of the course, referring to the original UK media studies course that was launched at the Polytechnic of Central London, a forerunner of Westminster, in 1975. Attention is then drawn to an interdisciplinary approach. In this case *interdisciplinary* is viewed as a consideration of multiple media forms and practices ("*moving image, photography and interactive media*") rather than multiple theoretical approaches. Care is then taken to position the course as a combination of "*creative exploration of art school traditions with academic and professional excellence*" with the implication that art schools are *creative* but not naturally *academic* nor concerned with *professional excellence* and that Westminster can bring these things together. This view of art schools

relates to Boyd-Davis' (2000, p.66) characterisation of "art school traditions" as "anti-intellectual". He goes on to elaborate:

"The very emphasis on practical experience in preference to second-hand knowledge, which is a strength of the art school, militates against effective use of written knowledge. It is as if *everything* must be discovered first hand in order to be valid." (ibid.)

It is this approach that distinguishes much (but not all) of media studies from courses in art and design that are primarily focussed on art studio practice. This is an area of overlap though with art and design courses containing elements of media practice that, at least in technologies of production, mirror the practice-based mass media production in some media studies courses. Westminster are using their promotional material to position their course between the practice-based and practice-led courses associated with art schools and the critical theory-led courses associated with humanities courses in universities. The positioning allows the Westminster course to be promoted on the basis of *creativity and academic and professional excellence*. This final element of *professional excellence* does allude to potential graduate career opportunities and can be seen as distinctive from the implied graduate success of the Leeds promotional material. The advertised (University of Westminster, 2014) entry requirements for the Westminster course are BB/BCC at A2 Level (200-260 UCAS Tariff points) with an actual modal entry profile of 280-319 UCAS points (with a spread from 200-239 to 440-479) for students starting the course in 2010-12 (Unistats, 2013a).

The final promotional paragraph is taken from a course description from Anglia Ruskin University and this shows their very clear commitment to the

development of practice-based skills and professional practice. As part of their Corporate Plan 2012-14, Anglia Ruskin put an emphasis on employability within the curriculum:

“Ensure that when we design our curriculum, thought is given to how we maximise the employability of students following it – recognising that academic staff have the greatest influence over student career choice.” (Anglia Ruskin University, 2012)

This corporate statement shows that Anglia Ruskin sees employability as the most important aspect of the course to promote to prospective students and signals that it is an embedded, explicit aspect of current design (“...*when we design our curriculum, thought is given to how...*”) rather than an implicit outcome of completing an undergraduate degree. This approach is followed through in the course promotional paragraph by emphasising that the skills developed are applicable to professional practice in the specific media industry areas of television and film production. This is reinforced by making a link between the media industry experience of the teaching staff and the development of these skills.

The published entry requirements for the Anglia Ruskin course are 200-240 UCAS tariff points (Anglia Ruskin, 2014) with an actual 2010-12 modal entry profile of 280-319 tariff points with a spread of entry qualifications from less than 120 to 400-439 (Unistats, 2014).

Whilst considering just three courses, their institutional contexts and their entry qualification profiles is not a comprehensive survey of admissions to media courses, but it does serve to illustrate the diversity of provision and provides a

context for the participant responses in this area. The evidence from the three courses considered above does suggest that there is a relationship between institutional context, entry qualifications profile and the ways in which the course is promoted to prospective students. It appears from this that employability and graduate career outcomes are more explicitly promoted by institutions and courses with lower typical entry qualification profiles whilst high tariff courses are promoted by linking to the academic research environment and leaving career outcomes as implicit.

Participant 05 (a media graduate now working in the television industry) did consult the university's promotional materials (in printed form rather than online as he entered higher education before online materials were commonly available) but he places greater emphasis on the influence of personal contact with a member of university staff specifically tasked with recruiting students.

...it was two things, firstly I saw the prospectus, it worked [laughter]. Obviously, the printed prospectus. I think that was before the days of digital prospectuses to be fair [laughter]. Yeah it was a printed prospectus. And <name>, who was the university recruitment officer, he came to our college and talked to a few people, and I was chatting to him, and then I came on an open day, and I wasn't too impressed with the accommodation, the facilities team were nice, and the TV facilities were nice. And also that's, because media production wasn't based in a TV studio at all, and TV production was. That's part of the reason why I sort of came here, because I wasn't based in a studio at all, whereas I felt that with TV production, you were actually doing more physical hands on jobs. (Participant 05)

This participant also cites the available facilities as an influencing factor. Access to facilities was a factor in this student's decision to change courses on arrival at the university (Media Production to Television Production) as his perception was that the Television Production course provided access to the better facilities.

None of his response relates to either intellectual development or career opportunities that are typically foregrounded in institutional promotional materials.

This broader range of influential factors is echoed by Participant 02 (a Director of Teaching and Learning) with his indirect view that students' choice of course and university are influenced by what he sees as "*more prosaic factors*" that again do not relate to either intellectual development or career opportunities.

I suspect if you looked at it much more closely, the reasons they have for going and choosing a university have very little to do with quality; the perceived nature of the educational experience when they get there. The factors which are more important are, [laughter] other rather more prosaic factors like, you know, what's the sporting equipment like? Is there a gym? Are there clubs and societies I can join? How far away is it from home? Er, those sorts of things (Participant 02)

Participant 04 points to what he sees as the accessibility and attractiveness of media as a choice for prospective students and conveying something of his passion for the subject ("*it's much more fun than any other subject out there*") and contrasts media studies with history as a subject choice for prospective undergraduates:

I mean, in a way, the question I always want to ask is, 'Why doesn't everyone want to do Media because it's much more fun than any other subject out there?' Erm, (...) so you know, in theory, we should be better off than many other subjects. The bigger puzzle, I suppose, I mean, I love History and I think History is really important but it is at times hard to work out why a young person would want to do History. (Participant 04)

According to UCAS (2013) data, the number of applications from eighteen year olds for courses in Group V Historical and Philosophical Studies fell by 2.0 per cent between 2010 and 2013 whilst the number of applications from eighteen

year olds for courses in Group P Mass Communications and Documentation fell by 8.1 per cent and in Group W Creative Arts and Design by 3.6 per cent over the same period (UCAS, 2013). Recognising that all these UCAS groupings contain subjects other than history and media studies, this differential decline in relative popularity in application terms provides the context for the “puzzle” posed by the participant. The period covered by this UCAS data reflects outcomes of an evolving discourse following the 2008 UK financial crash as the role of the financial services industry in the UK economy came under question and the relative decline of UK manufacturing industry was considered a cause for concern. For example:

“Why doesn't Britain make things any more? In the past 30 years, the UK's manufacturing sector has shrunk by two-thirds, the greatest de-industrialisation of any major nation. It was done in the name of economic modernisation – but what has replaced it?” (The Guardian, 16 November 2011)

The Perkins *Review of Engineering Skills*, published in 2013 by the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills is an example of government policy work that raised the profile of STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) subjects and represents the public sphere discourse around rebalancing the economy away from a reliance on financial services:

“To maintain and enhance this position, and the quality and capacity of the engineering HE system, future investment in facilities, and strong engagement by industry and the profession will be essential. In addition, the industry and profession need to focus on both the stock of ‘potential’ engineers in the workforce, and ensuring that those who have been inspired from a young age to become engineers do not fall to temptations from elsewhere in our economy.” (Perkins, 2013, p.42)

The phrase “*ensuring that those who have been inspired from a young age to become engineers do not fall to temptations from elsewhere in our economy*” is significant as it

suggests that there should be a role for the industry and profession in manipulating the supply of graduates in particular subjects in contrast to the government's approach in its *Students at the Heart of the System* White Paper (Department of Business, Innovation and Skills, 2011) which uses phrases such as "a more market-based approach" (p.73), "makes student-choice meaningful" (p.5) and "student choice drives competition" (p.19). Perkins' reference to "*temptations from elsewhere in our economy*" can also be read as a veiled reference to perceived salary differentials highlighted by press coverage of 'bankers' bonuses' (For example, "*Expect fireworks as bankers' bonuses rocket*" (Watkins, 2014))

It is in this climate that the changing patterns of applications to undergraduate courses should be viewed; over the same 2010-2013 timescale, applications for Group F Physical Sciences rose by 14.9 per cent and Group H Engineering by 8.6 per cent (UCAS, 2013).

So the "*puzzle*" within Participant 04's response can be related to the recent changes in application levels with the traditional and conventional academic subjects contained with Group V Historical and Philosophical Studies fairing better than Group P media courses and Group W art and design courses, despite these being more overtly related to the expanding creative industries sector of the economy (see Chapter One) and better accessibility through their relevance to popular culture ("*much more fun than any other subject*").

Participant 08 (Head of Media in a small specialist arts-based institution) puts considerable emphasis on the role a portfolio of practice-based work plays in the admissions process for their courses:

We wouldn't let them in the door without a portfolio, [laughs] for example. (Participant 08)

Despite this unequivocal commitment to the use of portfolios and interviews as part of the admissions process, the participant elaborates on this and refers to what she sees as significant problems with this process:

Back to portfolio, actually back to not so much the work, 'cause the work actually sort of stands for itself. The actual dialogue between interviewer and interviewee. And about cultural capital and assumptions made about someone's exposure to culture, you know so if you want someone who has been to all these galleries and done all this stuff and seen all these films and read all these books, you might make a decision, if they haven't, they are not suitable for the course. And, of course, actually if you dig a bit deeper you might find out it's because of their social background. (Participant 08)

Similar concerns are also voiced by Participant 16 (Course Leader at a Post-92 university):

I think the widening participation agenda has been problematic more widely because I mean what happened at the start was that, you know, there's this great egalitarian ethos and then what happens is you just get more middle class thick kids who think, "I deserve a degree" and umm, it didn't recruit the students that it was aimed at. (Participant 16)

The response of Participant 08 can be seen as an example of the ways in which the original thrust of widening participation has been dissipated through the impact of some higher education practices. Participant 16 saw widening participation as consistent with a "*great egalitarian ethos*" stemming from the policies of the Blair government to increase age-group participation in higher education to fifty per cent by 2010. The intention was to increase the

participation in higher education from under-represented groups but over the course of its implementation, progress towards this target was achieved with greater participation from groups already well-represented in the student population (referred to by Participant 16 pejoratively as “*middle class thick kids who think, I deserve a degree*”) rather than solely increased participation from under-represented groups (Burke, 2013; Jones, 2008). Participant 08 provides some insight into the ways in which this can occur. Her response refers to the common practice amongst art and design oriented departments of asking course applicants to visit the department, bring a portfolio of their own creative practice and, probably as one of a number of activities, participate in an interview with members of academic staff where the lecturers will look at the applicant’s portfolio, discuss it and ask more general questions about the applicant’s background, experience, knowledge, their expectations of the course and their career aspirations. The characterisation of this process as an ‘interview’ sends a message that this is a selection process and that the decision as to whether to offer the applicant a place on the course will be made on the basis of their performance and so puts pressure on the applicant to perform well according to their perception of the criteria being used by the interviewers. By emphasising the selective nature of the activity the value of the place is signalled to the applicant. However, with strict student number controls in place over recent years, departments may be balancing the need to recruit a specific number of students within a very narrow band against a professional judgement of whether the course is suitable for any particular applicant. Both under-recruitment and over-recruitment can have financial consequences for a department.

Participant 08 see problems with this process and with no suggestion that the interviewers would deliberately set out to favour particular groups of applicants, she is uncomfortable with the selection aspect of the interview (“*you might make a decision, if they haven’t, they are not suitable for the course. And, of course, actually if you dig a bit deeper you might find out it’s because of their social background.*”). This unease stems from the criteria (“*if you want someone who has been to all these galleries and done all this stuff and seen all these films and read all these books*”) which are seen as measures of “*cultural capital*” (a term associated with Bourdieu (1990)), that are based on “*assumptions made about someone’s exposure to culture*”.

Jackie McManus’ study of interview practices in art and design courses also identifies:

“the view of knowledge, ability and talent found in the admissions process in the art and design academy, which persists in framing selection interviews around what are seen as legitimate forms of cultural capital.” (McManus, 2006, p.81)

Both McManus and Participant 08 use the term “*cultural capital*” to describe the attributes of potential students that are privileged by conventional admissions interviews. McManus takes care to note that the issue is not around a lack of applicants’ cultural capital but rather that the interview process is based on a limited view of what constitutes “legitimate forms of cultural capital”. The term ‘cultural capital’ derives from Bourdieu’s work on *habitus*; “*the product of social-conditionings and thus of history*” (Bourdieu, 1990, p.116) and, according to Lamont and Lareau (1988, p.153), has “*come to assume a large number of, at times, contradictory meanings*”. They note the use of the term *cultural capital* to encompass ideas such as the knowledge of high culture, high educational

attainment, “*the symbolic mastery of practices*” or the “*capacity to perform tasks in culturally acceptable ways*”. These can all be seen to relate to the admissions interview process as an explanation for the participant’s unease. When describing the purpose of an admissions interview to prospective students the institutional description typically emphasises a focus on motivation and commitment rather than cultural capital. For example:

“Interviews are an opportunity for you to demonstrate to us your self-motivation and commitment to your area of study.”
(Arts University Bournemouth website, 2014)

This mismatch between the published intended focus of an admissions interview and the implicit criteria is an issue for the departments that have a culture and tradition of selecting students through a face-to-face mechanism. Many departments offering media studies courses do not use interviews as part of a selection and admissions process. Seeing the interview as a barrier to participation, they put the emphasis on providing prospective students with as much information about the course as possible, and, crucially, providing ‘taster’ experiences that provide the prospective student with an opportunity to self-evaluate their suitability for the course. Participant 09 (Course leader for a foundation degree in an FE/HE college) puts the emphasis on providing prospective students with opportunities to experience the production facilities available to students as a way of promoting applications and allowing students to decide whether the course is the right opportunity for them:

Students do come to us because they want to have an experience of, you know working in ... they know this is not a television station but they want to have an experience of what it might be like to work in a television ... so we have the three cameras set up in the room we’re in and we’ve got studio down there lights and I think, I think for

some institutions they'll say yeah we'll invest that money and it does mean laying out some money at the beginning. (Participant 09)

League tables are a significant element of higher education public discourse and their production and analysis form a regular source of media representations of higher education. The advent of increasing amounts of publically-available data has resulted in a range of league tables that appear to offer an objective view of the relative merits of various institutions but, through the use of differing datasets and by combining them in different ways, league tables are an important part of the political discourses of higher education (Amsler and Bolsmann, 2012). Underpinning these public discourses is an assumption that market-led competition is best served by providing readily comparable indicators of the quality of education offered by providers and that applicants will use this information to make a rational choice when applying to institutions, an approach that underpins *Students at the Heart of the System* (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, 2011) and discussed in Chapter Seven, Section 7-3 in relation to the advice prospective applicants receive and Chapter Seven, Section 7-5 as an element of the '*student satisfaction*' discourse. The research literature does not support this assumption. Gibbons *et al.* (2013, p.3) show that league tables have a disproportionate effect "*on the most able students and for courses in the upper-middle entry standard tariff group, whereas the effect for the elite Russell Group of universities does not differ from other universities*".

This view is supported by the participant responses. Participant 13 (secondary school headteacher) confirms that only high-attaining students consider league tables as a factor when making application choices:

I would say the vast majority are not looking at league tables, I would say that some of them who've got a lot of choice in terms of their grades and where the courses they want to do and you know they're your real top end, then I would say some of them are definitely looking at the league tables. (Participant 13)

But she goes on to confirm that her school takes their students' university applications extremely seriously and seeks to support them where there is a perceived competition for places:

I'm a great believer in giving our students whatever edge is possible to get these places (Participant 13)

This is echoed by Participant 15 (Russell Group Course Leader) who, speaking at a time of unrestricted recruitment of AAB students but capped recruitment at lower tariffs, recognises that her university and journalism course have to compete very hard with other similar institutions to recruit students whose grades bring them a significant amount of choice:

Well (...) students who come here are very well- very aware of the competitive nature of the, the entrance process to get into this course that you have to be (...) you know you have to be a- achieving high A levels and those students really (...) could do anything with their (...) their (...) their choices of what degrees to go on and so (...) I suppose (...) i-it's very clear to them that the type of (...) degree that they're going to be taking isn't just a training course and if they want that they should go somewhere else (...) because (...) we make it explicit to them in open days and in all our literature. (Participant 15)

Her pitch to these students is that the degree that they are offering “*isn't just a training course*” echoing the discourses of ‘*employability*’ and ‘*media training*’.

Summary and Conclusions

Taken together with the examples of public materials, the participants' responses demonstrate some of the variations in discursive practices across the sector as

institutions position their media studies courses in relation to the key aspects of a rationale for the subject. The responses show a consistency with the institutional representations of media studies to applicants but question the ways some selection processes have the potential to exclude some applicant groups more than others.

The institutional discourses explored here conform to a hierarchy of institutions that is reinforced by the presentation of subjective judgements as objective metrics through league tables. With media studies provision clustered into certain types of institution (See Chapter One), this leads to a distinctive picture of media studies recruitment and admission discursive practices that reflect the historical development of the subject and the tensions in the rationale for the subject explored in Chapter Five.