DICO Toolkit for Digital Career Stories

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Building skills for cultural and creative sectors in the digital era: current needs, trends and challenges

Mara Cerquetti*

Abstract

This chapter discusses the role of higher education institutions (HEIs) in training cultural and creative graduates and professionals and improving their skills in the digital era. After analysing how culture and creativity can help innovation worldwide, the paper examines the uniqueness of the cultural and creative sector (CCS) and its positive and negative aspects, such as high rates of precariousness, fluctuations in income, contract instability and difficulty accessing social protection, in addition to its sizeable contribution to the European economy. The discussion then turns to European policies and the scientific literature to understand how the current debate addresses these issues. Among them are the need to fill skills gaps, including entrepreneurship and digital innovation, and the scant consideration given to differences between cultural and creative sub-sectors. In the final part, the essay points out the need to reshape the role of HEIs by improving students' awareness of and critical thinking regarding their career path and supporting their resilience in uncertain times through co-creativity-based activities.

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> What is Enlightenment? It is man's emergence from his self-imposed immaturity. Immaturity is the inability to use one's own understanding without guidance from someone else. This immaturity is self-imposed if its cause lies not in any lack of understanding but in indecision and in the lack of courage to use one's own mind without the help of someone else. *Sapere aude!* Have the courage to use your own understanding is therefore the motto of the Enlightenment.
> *Immanuel Kant*

1. *Introduction*

In its 2019 *Impulse paper on the role of cultural and creative sectors in innovating European industry*, the European Commission recognised the contribution of the cultural and creative sectors (CCSs) in triggering innovation in the wider economy and society. On the one hand, CCSs account for 4.4 of the EU's GDP, 12 million full-time jobs, and €509 billion in value added to GDP, thus acting as one of Europe's strategic assets[1]. On the other, they contribute to revitalising economies and territories by generating significant broader impacts on other sectors. We can identify at least three different spill-over effects: 1) *knowledge spill-over effects*, referring to new ideas, innovations and processes developed within arts and creative organisations; 2) *industry spill-over effects*, including both the vertical value chain and horizontal cross-sector benefits to the economy and society in terms of productivity and innovation; and 3) *network spill-over effects*, that is, impacts and outcomes for the economy and society coming from a high density of arts and/or creative industries in a specific location[2].

More recently, the 2022 OECD report *The Culture Fix: Creative people, places and industries* suggested that CCSs can be a driver of a resilient recovery for cities and regions, despite workers, firms and organisations in these sectors being among the worst hit by the Covid-19 crisis and although the recovery will be uneven across cultural and creative sub-sectors[3]. The report provides evidence of how cultural and creative industries (CCIs) can generate skilled and qualified jobs, along with the knock-on effect of creating additional jobs in other traditional business sectors. Even though CCSs tend to be concentrated in cities and capital regions, where they stimulate urban regeneration processes, they are even more important in industrial cities in decline and inland or peripheral areas. Developing linkages between CCSs and other economic sectors is fundamental to promoting sustainable growth and innovation in these areas. Universities can play a crucial role in this process by facilitating and enabling such networks.

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[1] European Commission 2019, p. 10. See also: Boix Domenech *et al.* 2022.

[2] European Commission 2019, p. 12.

[3] Massi *et al.* 2020; Lazzeretti *et al.* 2022.

In this challenging context, the present chapter analyses the role of higher education institutions (HEIs) in training cultural and creative graduates and professionals and improving their skills to meet the needs of the current labour market. After examining the uniqueness of the CCS, its strengths, weaknesses and internal variety[4] (Section 2), the discussion turns to European policies and the scientific literature to understand how the current debate addresses the need to fill skills gaps such as entrepreneurship and digital innovation (Section 3). In the final part, this opening essay points out the need to reshape the debate focusing on students' awareness and critical thinking about their career path and supporting their resilience in uncertain times by improving co-creativity (Section 4).

2. *The uniqueness of a sector: some reflections on required skills upon the 2022 OECD report*

According to the already mentioned 2022 OECD report, cultural and creative employment accounts for up to 5% of jobs in some OECD and EU countries, and up to 10% in some regions and cities, with 40% of cultural and creative professionals outside of CCSs as "embedded workers" who help to drive innovation throughout the economy[5]. Before Covid-19, cultural and creative employment also underwent constant growth[6], and CCIs also proved crucial to rebalancing the economy[7].

The digital transformation has had a disruptive effect on the CCS, in that it has initiated a dialectic dynamic of "integration/disintegration of activities" and "disintermediation/re-intermediation"[8]. Nevertheless, the sector is equally knowledge- and labour-intensive, driven by soft innovations, such as cultural, social and content innovations, new processes and business model innovation, and reliant on intangible and people-centred assets[9]. Its highly skilled and non-repetitive nature means that it is unlikely to be automated[10].

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[4] The partner HEIs participating in the DICO project cover different arts and culture areas in their programmes, from visual and performing arts to cultural heritage, from media to design. Within the framework of the project, the paper aims to investigate differences between the needs of the arts sub-sectors and those of the heritage sub-sector.

[5] OECD 2022, p. 105.

[6] Between 2011 and 2019, cultural and creative employment grew to 13.4% compared to 9.1% for overall employment across OECD and EU countries (OECD 2022, p. 112).

[7] De Propris 2013.

[8] Massi *et al.* 2020, p. 2.

Women are well represented when it comes to the gender composition of the sector: «in 2020, the proportion of women in full-time cultural and creative employment across the OECD (50%) was slightly higher than the average share of women in employment across the whole of the economy (46%)»[11].

Regarding education, cultural and creative workers are highly educated and skilled and have higher literacy and numeracy skills than the overall average: «on average across OECD countries, 62% of cultural and creative employees hold a tertiary degree, compared to 40% of the workforce more generally»[12].

In addition to these aspects, a number of vulnerabilities need to be highlighted. First, the Covid-19 pandemic put a dent in longer-term growth in cultural and creative employment, despite the sector's resilience[13]. Most affected were venue-based businesses and institutions, like museums, theatres, live music venues and cinemas, due to the series of lockdowns which forced many businesses to close their doors to the public and the successive social distancing measures, which imposed restrictions on visitor numbers. This entailed loss of revenues, downsizing staff and suspending freelance/temporary contracts, besides accelerating the digitalisation of the sector to meet an increased demand for online content[14].

As argued by Banks, Covid-19 shone a light on the extreme fragility of the cultural and creative labour market:

> When it comes to cultural workers (as for workers elsewhere) while C-19 might be regarded as an unprecedented event, a stochastic irruption in ordinary time, it could also be read as an expansion of an established trend, and, further, the exaggeration of an apocalyptic mood, since the virus has helped amplify some long-instituted feelings of precariousness as well as the inscribed social tendency to sacrifice labour to the prevailing demands of economic priority[15].

Compared to other sectors, the CCS is predominantly characterised by many SMEs, freelance work, and "external labour markets" (ELMs)[16]. During the pandemic, high rates of precariousness and contract instability, fluctuations in income and lower access to social protection arose as the main issues to address. This was particularly true for artists ("starving artists") due to high levels of self-employment, part-time work and temporary contracts. Relief schemes adopted between 2020 and 2021 were not always well suited to providing income support and in many cases were only available in the short term. However, it should also be noted that, within CCSs, the impact of Covid-19 has been extremely diverse. While museums were forced to close, other sub-sectors benefited from increased demand, such as the home entertainment industry[17].

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[9] European Commission 2019, p. 11.

[10] OECD 2022, p. 119.

[11] OECD 2022, p. 112.

[12] OECD 2022, p. 123.

[13] UNESCO 2021.

[14] For the museum sector, see: ICOM 2020; NEMO 2020.

[15] Banks 2020, p. 650.

[16] «These markets [ELMs] are formed where the buying and selling of labour is not linked to jobs which form part of a FILM [firm-specific internal labour market] or a long standing and clearly defined OLM [occupational labour market]. Movement of labour in ELMs is determined by the price attached to the job and/or contract on offer and the requirements of the individual

Analysis of inclusiveness in cultural and creative employment also provides some data that require better investigation. Even though ethnic minority numbers have been growing in the last decades, they remain underrepresented compared to the demographic characteristics of places where cultural and creative activities are concentrated[18]. Moreover, a lack of social mobility and a class divide persist, as in the case of the UK[19]. Inequalities also affect the geographical distribution of CCIs. Despite stimulating regeneration processes, even in marginal areas, they tend to be localised in large cities, where their concentration has increased in recent decades. The "success-breeds-success"[20] paradigm can be risky, if, say, it prevents the creation of positive externalities in all territories and intensifies territorial inequalities.

Finally, a number of significant ongoing skills gaps should be considered, such as technical and managerial/entrepreneurial skills. In a large-scale survey of cultural and creative businesses undertaken by CFR Research in 2017, 33.3% of businesses reported skills gaps in business marketing and communication (53.1%), problem-solving (47.5%), vocational skills relating to business support occupations (45%), fundraising skills (43.8%) and social media skills (40%)[21]. However, the skills mismatch between the current workforce and the skills needed is not the same in all cultural and creative sub-sectors. For example, a study carried out in the UK reported wider skills gaps for museums, galleries and libraries (10%), compared to music, performing and visual arts (5%)[22].

Among policy perspectives, the 2022 OECD report highlights the need to close skills gaps, by better integrating entrepreneurship-related curricula as part of arts and culture education and training programmes, in addition to

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concerned and such jobs/contracts in the creative and cultural industries tend to run the gamut from high to low skill» (Guile 2010, p. 3).

[17] OECD 2022, p. 117.

[18] OECD 2022, p. 113.

[19] Brook *et al.* 2018; Carey *et al.* 2021.

[20] OECD 2022, p. 110.

[21] Bowes *et al.* 2018.

[22] Giles *et al.* 2020.

mentoring and coaching[23]. Strategies should also be built on a close analysis of current and future skills needs and gaps. Moreover, the need to support the sector's digital transition is highlighted, to be achieved by addressing divides in digital infrastructure, tools and skills across workers and firms.

Several remarks can be made regarding the implications for HEIs in the field of arts and culture.

First, the data summarised above suggest the need to support students' resilience in uncertain times, which also means strengthening their entrepreneurial skills. Second, digital skills need to be improved. Third, a distinction should be made between the different cultural sub-sectors vis-à-vis their different needs. As we have already said, the Covid-19 pandemic had different impacts on the museum and home entertainment industries. Moreover, the shortage of some skills is more pronounced in museums, galleries and libraries. Indeed, the difference between creative businesses and the core cultural sector, including heritage, archives, libraries and museums, should not be overlooked. As recently argued by Donato, culture is the nourishment of creativity, and the two fields are mutually interrelated to a very significant extent. However, in the European context, we can also clearly discern important differences in the sector's structural make-up. The cultural sector is typically made up of small- and medium-sized organisations that are scattered, fragmented and sometimes operate on a "prototypical" logic, according to which each cultural product or service is unique. Conversely, the creative sector, although counting many small organisations among its ranks, is flanked by large, often multinational groups with high levels of capitalisation, economic and financial investment capacity and organisational complexity[24]. On this matter, although it uses the terms CCS and CCI interchangeably, the European Commission's *Impulse paper* mentioned at the beginning of this chapter also recognised that a distinction exists between the core cultural sub-sectors largely relying on public funding and other sub-sectors with an industrial cultural and creative dimension[25].

3. *Emerging skills for the future of the CCS*

The second decade of the twenty-first century saw more intense international debate on the skills needed to develop the cultural sector in the context of the creative economy. However, as the creative industries generally receive more attention[26], the debate has mostly been confined to the skills needed in those sectors[27]. In light of a focus on «those activities which have their origin in individual creativity, skill and talent, and have the potential to create wealth and jobs through the generation and exploitation of intellectual property»[28], less attention has been given to analysing differences between the CCSs and between the related sub-sectors[29].

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[23] OECD 2022, p. 128.

[24] Donato 2021, p. 356. On the same topic, see also: Donato 2013.

[25] European Commission 2019, p. 8.

Boosted by the creative economy, this debate has placed the spotlight on the role of universities and public policy in meeting the needs of an increasingly turbulent work environment[30]. Within the European context, a seminal and turning point in recognising the role of creativity in innovating European society and the economy was provided by *Decision no. 1350/2008/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council of 16 December 2008 concerning the European Year of Creativity and Innovation (2009)*[31]. That decision stressed the role of training and formal education in addition to non-formal and informal youth activities. The need to strengthen the synergies between culture and education was also highlighted by the Green Paper on *Unlocking the potential of cultural and creative industries* (2010)[32], which defined cultural diversity, globalisation and digitisation as key drivers for the development of CCIs. In the same year, *A Digital Agenda for Europe*[33] was released. In this climate, Mercer prepared the EENC Paper titled *Which skills for culture in a globalised and digitised world?* The document tackled the urgent need for new skills, including business management, marketing, social network development, and event and venue management, and a whole new "tool kit" for digital cultural management skills[34]. The paper brought to the fore the need to develop hybrid skills related to understanding and developing new business models, team- and project-based management styles, as well as new forms of creative leadership[35].

One of the priorities is the need to hybridise very different skills that have long been kept separate, such as those related not only to know-what (declarative knowledge) and know-how (procedural knowledge), but also to the objectives that are to be achieved (imaginative knowledge)[36]. In this context, when focusing on cultural organisations, scholars also talk about the need to acquire "mestizo professionals" or "mixed figures"[37]. Mietzner and Kamprath, for example, suggest combining professional, methodological, and personal and social competences[38]. In line with this approach, in Italy, the 18th Federculture Report recently pointed out that the skills of cultural professionals should not only meet technical standards, but should also be relevant to communities and social ties. Thus, cultural work is identified as a society builder[39].

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[26] Lazzeretti *et al.* 2018.

[27] In this debate, the creative industries sometimes include certain cultural sub-sectors, such as the visual and performing arts (Bridgstock 2011) or museums, galleries and libraries (DCMS 2016).

[28] Brisgstock 2011, p. 123.

[29] For example, few studies to date have dealt with specific skills for the heritage sector. See: Wickens, Norris 2018.

[30] Ashton, Noonan 2013; Mietzner, Kamprath 2013; Nanoon 2015; Gilmore, Comunian 2016; Harte *et al.* 2019.

[31] European Parliament, Council of the European Union 2008.

[32] European Commission 2010a.

[33] European Commission 2010b.

[34] Mercer 2011, p. 8.

[35] Mercer 2011, p. 7.

The technical skills needed for improving competitiveness among arts and culture graduates include continuing development of digital skills throughout life[40]. Given the gaps highlighted in the previous section, several contributions have focused on digital skills for museums[41]. As already argued, the Covid-19 pandemic accelerated the ongoing process of digitalisation of the cultural offer (products and services), accentuating the need for skills, including IT skills, for designing and managing digital platforms and producing suitable content for distribution through social media. Moreover, there is now an increased need for digital skills for interacting with institutional players and cultural markets.

More broadly, in order to respond to uncertainty and to the rapid evolution of the external environment caused by digitisation, but also due to globalisation and socio-demographic changes – i.e. ageing population, urbanisation, multiculturalism, migration and mobility[42] – cultural management studies cannot neglect the following key ingredients: *internationalisation*, for acquiring the intercultural communication skills needed to work in global and international contexts; *strategic marketing*, for expanding and strengthening relationships with diversified audiences; *leadership*, meaning the ability to manage and guide processes and personnel; and *entrepreneurship*, not necessarily in the sense of starting and managing a self-owned business, but also, in behavioural terms, the ability to integrate different economic opportunities[43]. As argued by Bridgstock, there are three different types of arts and cultural entrepreneurship: 1) new venture creation, according to a more traditional approach; 2) "being enterprising" in a broader sense, with less focus on tangible capabilities such as opportunity recognition, entrepreneurial behaviour and resilience; 3) employability, that is, «the artist's ability to build a sustainable career through recurrently obtaining or creating arts employment, and the skills relating to career self-management»[44].

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[36] Argano 2016, p. 69

[37] Quaglia 2020, p. 266.

[38] Mietzner, Kamprath 2013, pp. 289-290.

[39] Federculture 2022.

[40] Poce 2019; van Laar *et al.* 2020; Pilege *et al.* 2021.

[41] Marty 2006; Gainon-Court, Vuillaume 2016; Silvaggi 2017; Sturabotti, Surace 2017; Carvalho, Matos 2018; Parry *et al.* 2018; Jensen 2019; Zardini Lacedelli *et al.* 2019.

[42] Van Lakerveld *et al.* 2017.

[43] Schramme 2016.

With regard to that, in recent years, there has been growing demand for entrepreneurial skills, alongside managerial skills[45], supported by the European Union under the aegis of the *Entrepreneurship Action Plan 2020*[46], aimed at encouraging creativity and innovation, including an entrepreneurial attitude, at all levels of education and training[47]. On the one hand, the shift from the rhetoric of management to the rhetoric of entrepreneurship highlights the need for proactive behaviour, capable of responding effectively and innovatively to the uncertainties of the context in all fields; on the other, it cannot but be interpreted from a neoliberal perspective. Especially in sectors such as the core cultural field, where the role of the public is central, this rhetoric could hide a defensive attitude aimed at shifting to the market not only the difficulty of public policies in promoting and supporting effective and innovative interventions, but also public responsibilities. More generally, some scholars consider the acquisition of multiple skills to be the product of the neoliberalisation of the creative industries resulting from the values of entrepreneurship, individualism and the search for private resources[48]. Over the last decade, the same rhetoric has assailed creativity, annexing its concept «in the service of a neoliberal economic programme and discourse»[49].

4. *Reshaping the role of HEIs*

According to Argano, cultural organisations face five challenges within the global context. The first, which encompasses all the others, is about *strategies* and relates to the need for a prospective vision capable of reading and interpreting the reference environment, seizing its opportunities and facing its threats. The second is about *relationships*, also known as “friend-raising”; recognising the need for multi-scale governance, it views the cultural organisation as a network of networks capable of building relationships with external actors, exchanging and sharing resources and enhancing its reputation. The third focuses on *planning*, highlighting the need for a results-oriented and project-based approach to innovation management. The fourth is about *re-*

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[44] Bridgstock 2013, p. 127.

[45] Beckman 2007; Kooyman 2009; Bridgstock 2013; Pardo-Garcia, Barac 2020; Naudin, Agusita 2021.

[46] European Commission 2013.

[47] Cerquetti *et al.* 2021.

[48] McRobbie 2002; Mietzner, Kamprath 2013, p. 290.

[49] Banaji *et al.* 2010, p. 70.

sources and references the need to diversify sources and ways of funding and to contain costs. Finally, there is the *organisational challenge*, which requires flexibility and adaptive self-organisation. Each challenge demands specialist knowledge and specific skills, both technical (economics, management, law, planning, etc.) and transversal (analysis, interpretation and evaluation, relating and negotiating, problem-setting and problem-solving, leadership, etc.)[50].

In order to meet these needs, HEIs are required to rethink their role, programmes and teaching activities. Indeed, the way they currently respond to the demand from the labour market shows some room for improvement. In a recent international survey on businesses' satisfaction with the preparation of graduates and the development of their soft skills, 60.2% of respondents stated that students are not sufficiently prepared, that they lack self-awareness and are unable to identify their own strengths and weaknesses[51]. In this context, the concept of entrepreneurial skills should be broad and transversal, not merely in terms of new venture creation, but also as regards the necessary awareness and critical thinking, proactiveness and desire to learn, strategic and innovative thinking, capacity for judgement, and decision-making. To improve students' resilience in increasingly uncertain times, arts and culture courses should support «students through an iterative process of adaptive career identity building, whereby students reflect upon their own core career needs and values, and in turn, learn about, and experience first-hand where possible, various aspects of their intended occupations»[52].

Alongside this, creativity should be tackled as co-creativity without underestimating the role of team-working and it should be promoted through interdisciplinary, international and interactive activities[53].

Digital skills should be developed using a social approach in HEIs, by balancing technical skills with humanitarian and social ones to avoid a skill gap in social, emotional and cultural competencies in the future[54]. The focus on digital competencies cannot neglect the need to develop empathy and the ability to listen to others and understand their behaviours and moods[55]. This would also include scope for understanding and satisfying the specific needs of the contexts in which digital technologies are to be applied.

Finally, in providing these skills, the different structural characteristics and needs of cultural and creative sub-sectors and their labour markets should be understood, while overcoming the neoliberal rhetoric of creativity focused only on the creative industries.

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[50] Argano 2016.

[51] Succi, Canovi 2020, p. 1841.

[52] Bridgstock 2011, p. 21.

[53] Robinson, Stubberud 2014.

[54] Pilege *et al.* 2021.

[55] Pardo-Garcia, Barac 2020, p. 7.

In this scenario, the challenge for HEIs is to understand how to incorporate soft skills into the teaching of hard skills[56] and in study plans.

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[56] Schulz 2008; Cimatti 2016.

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