



**UNIVERSITY OF
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Faculty of Education

Creative Subject Choices: Student Pathways through Education and into Employment

Executive Summary

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This study examined how students made creative subject choices across critical educational transitions; how individual, local, and institutional factors shaped these; and whether these creative subject choices translated into later creative employment.

Understanding these pathways is essential because of persistent concerns about inequitable access to creative education and creative employment in the UK. This is despite personal benefits to individuals that go beyond the intrinsic value of creative education, and the economic benefits to the UK economy from the creative sector.

RESEARCH APPROACH

The study employed a mixed-methods design, combining quantitative analysis of large-scale administrative and cohort data with qualitative and arts-based participatory approaches. The quantitative component analysed administrative education records for three cohorts of English students, following them from age 16 onwards into post-16 options and, if relevant, into higher education. This component also included data from the Next Steps longitudinal cohort study, also linked to administrative education records. The qualitative component included participatory arts-based workshops and a qualitative open-ended-questions survey.

Creative subjects were defined consistently across educational stages, from age 16 qualifications to higher education, to include art and design, dance, drama and theatre studies, film and TV studies, media studies, music, and photography, amongst others. This definition offers comparability with previous studies on creative subjects and ensures consistency within the analysis reported here.

CREATIVE SUBJECT PREFERENCES

The research revealed substantial early interest in creative subjects among young people. These creative preferences showed a U-shape pattern, whereby high and relatively uniform creative subject preferences decreased from age 14 onwards and then increased again around key educational transition points, especially for those who intended to pursue higher education. The results also showed modest gender and socio-economic differences in these preferences.

CREATIVE SUBJECT CHOICES

Importantly, early creative preferences did not translate into students making a creative subject choice later on. Students' chances to make a creative subject choice across their educational pathways were shaped by gender, personal economic circumstances, as well as prior educational choices and attainment, and the deprivation level of the areas where they lived. These factors were reflected in the stage-specific probability of students making a creative subject choice: at age 16, in post-16 education, specifically in post-16 further education, and in higher education for those who accessed it.

At age 16, students facing economic disadvantage (eligible for free school meals, FSM) were slightly more likely than their non-eligible peers to make a creative subject choice. However, post-16, this pattern reversed and widened: FSM-eligible students became less likely to have made a creative subject choice, even after accounting for other personal characteristics and their educational trajectory, including prior outcomes. The economic gap narrowed again in higher education, though FSM-eligible students remained less likely to have made creative subject choices, even after accounting for the HE institutions they attended, as well as their prior attainment and earlier subject choices.

This socio-economic flip suggests that while initial interest in creative subjects may be relatively evenly distributed or even higher among students facing economic disadvantage, the resources, cultural capital, and institutional support required to continue in creative pathways post-16 may be unequally available.

These complex socio-economic disparities were experienced by students and staff responding in the qualitative component of this study. Insights from both groups highlighted how economic disadvantage operated through accumulated barriers to cultural capital and early creative experiences. Multiple participants described lacking the foundational skills, portfolio materials, or perceived required resources in younger years that would make creative subject into viable options. Financial considerations also fundamentally influenced educational and career choices beyond initial subject selection, with several respondents describing how perceived economic stability drove choices away from creative subjects, even when these choices went against personal interests.

On the one hand, this evidence emphasises the complexity of how economic deprivation shapes creative choices. On the other, it highlights the post-16 transition as a key juncture where economic barriers become more visible.

Gender also emerged as an interesting factor in shaping creative subject choices, operating differently at different educational stages. Girls consistently reported higher creative subject preferences than boys early on. This pattern largely translated into actual choices at age 16. Statistical modelling corroborated this and suggested that, when controlling for prior attainment and school characteristics, girls were more likely than boys to make creative subject choices at age 16, and in post-16 education, including in further education. However, this gender gap reversed in higher education, where boys became slightly more likely to have made a creative subject choice, all other factors considered.

INTERSECTING GENDER AND ECONOMIC INFLUENCES

The interaction between gender and economic disadvantage revealed particularly distinct constraints on creative pathways for women facing economic disadvantage (FSM-eligible girls). At age 16, girls and FSM-eligible students were, separately, more likely to have made a creative subject choice, other socio-demographic and educational factors considered. When considered together, FSM-eligible girls were, however, less likely than their otherwise similar counterparts to have made a creative subject choice. This pattern was present at age 16 and intensified post-16, with the largest interaction effect observed in post-16 further education, suggesting heightened drop-off from the creative subject pathway among disadvantaged female students during this transition. In higher education, the interaction between gender and economic disadvantage remained negative, suggesting

that women from economically disadvantaged backgrounds were still less likely to have made a creative subject choice.

These findings point to a differential functioning of economic deprivation by gender, placing women facing economic deprivation at additional disadvantage in terms of their opportunities to make creative subject choices. They also suggest that socio-economic differences post-16 and in higher education reflect differential continuation rather than differences in initial choices alone.

FURTHER EDUCATION

Further education emerged as an important and distinct pathway into creative subject study. In the administrative data, students studying age 16 qualifications in FE or other colleges were substantially more likely to make a creative subject choice compared to their peers in other school types. Even more strikingly, attending FE post-16 was associated with some of the largest positive effects on the probability of making a creative subject choice observed across the analysis.

However, students who attended FE were less likely to be observed making a later creative subject choice in higher education. Given evidence, outlined below, that creative degrees were important for creative employment, this suggests clear barriers to progression. Workshop participants highlighted the value of FE for practical and vocational skills development, and for the intrinsic value of creative subjects. Some FE students had chosen this route specifically to develop creative and technical skills but still appreciated the academic nature of some of their qualifications.

Qualitative evidence from FE students and staff revealed significant challenges, including limited resources, precarious funding, and inadequate career guidance. Students in FE creative programmes often reported a lack of clarity about progression routes and struggled to access professional networks in creative industries. They appreciated the freedom to make their own choices within the many options that the FE route offered them; but also identified the risks and uncertainties involved in navigating alone what they perceived as complex combinations of qualifications, subjects, opportunities, and risks.

FE staff emphasised the importance of supporting students, who often had to contend with insufficient resources and constraints. Staff described working in resource-constrained environments where they could not provide the level of support and equipment that might be available in HE or private creative education settings.

EMPLOYMENT IN CREATIVE OCCUPATIONS

The analysis then explored the last key transition point in the realisation of making a creative subject choice: employment. This was possible because the Next Steps longitudinal study traced people into their young adulthood and employment. Having a creative higher education degree (conditional on engaging with higher education in the first place), emerged as strongly associated with being in a creative occupation at two points in early adulthood (ages 25 and 32), over and above all other economic and socio-demographic factors. The analysis also explored how creative occupations were sustained, finding that having a creative occupation at age 25 was the strongest explanatory factor for having a creative occupation at age 32, all economic, socio-demographic and educational

factors considered. This is consistent with evidence of high graduate representation in the creative sector.

The qualitative evidence suggested that the relationship between a prior creative subject choice and creative employment was however not straightforward. Some graduates responding in workshops, as well as some survey respondents (all of whom were working in the creative sector), outlined that even when they did secure employment in the creative sector, this was not necessarily in artistically fulfilling roles. Survey respondents further described the precarious nature of their creative careers, involving multiple income streams and the need to balance creative work with non-creative income generation.

INSTITUTIONAL EXPERIENCE AND INFLUENCE

The analysis further revealed how institutional structures and cultures fundamentally shaped creative subject choices at all stages. Students in workshops and survey respondents reported sometimes having faced limited availability of creative options in school, as well as guidance away from creative subjects, and restrictive timetabling that forced their choices. For them, the framing of creative subjects as risky or illegitimate choices appeared embedded in some institutional cultures. These students saw careers and subject guidance focused primarily on achieving good grades rather than exploring genuine interests.

Further from an institutional perspective, FE and HE staff in the qualitative component of this study observed differences between these sectors and acknowledged the different positionings of FE and HE institutions in relation to the education sector and to the creative sector. They also discussed how students could acquire, via family, schools and others, a useful grasp of the structure of each of the relevant institutional fields (FE and/or HE); but that this grasp differed by the background resources of each individual, and therefore the support required from FE and HE institutions needed to be different and to reflect students' needs, so as to enable the realisation of individuals' creative intentions and preferences.

Workshop participants' insights also revealed that institutional positionings varied significantly, especially around further and higher. These shaped both the reasons students chose these institutions, often for their perceived strong connections to the creative sector, and what institutions emphasised in their creative curricula. Skills and employability were important in both FE and HE, but FE respondents' experiences suggested a less instrumentalised role (that is, exclusively aimed at raising employability) of skills in FE.

Both FE and HE staff recognised degrees, not just in creative subjects, as important for progression into creative employment. Staff also acknowledged the importance of non-academic or non-traditional routes and expressed concerns about non-HE routes into creative employment not being available. FE staff were particularly explicit that their students' varied sets of qualifications, subject choices, experiences, resources, and outcomes should be seen as assets when moving into employment.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This research provides comprehensive evidence of a progressively narrowing pathway from early creative preferences, into creative subject choices, and to creative employment. The

narrowing operates through multiple mechanisms at different educational stages, with cumulative effects that create substantial inequalities in who ultimately accesses creative careers.

Socioeconomic disadvantage increasingly constrains creative participation as students progress through education. While early creative interests show only modest socioeconomic gradients, the influence of economic disadvantage intensify post-16 and through higher education. Interactions with gender point to women from economically disadvantaged backgrounds facing greater challenges to accessing creative subjects than their peers, which might explain some of the later gender imbalances in creative employment.

The strong association between creative higher education and subsequent creative employment, combined with the barriers faced by economically disadvantaged students in sustaining creative pathways, suggests that current patterns are more likely to perpetuate, rather than disrupt, existing inequalities in the creative sector. The role of place and geography adds further complexity, with local deprivation and regional creative sector strength shaping both opportunities and constraints in ways that interact with individual and institutional factors.

Policy recommendations therefore focus on actively promoting the value of creative subjects for all while recognizing the complexities of progression into, and experience of, creative employment. Emerging from the evidence is a strong push to challenge existing hierarchies: between further and higher education institutions; between creative and non-creative subjects; between different types of routes into later creative study or into creative employment. One way this could be achieved is by building on existing best practice around cross-sector collaboration, expanding links between further and higher education and the creative sectors in ways that some institutions already do. Another way is by supporting the post-16 transitions which the evidence points to as being particularly important for sustaining creative subject choices: a simpler qualification framework, clearer communication to students about their options, and support to address any prior disadvantages emerging from available resources, personal or otherwise could address this and highlight further education as a key route into creative study and creative employment.

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This research underwent ethical review via the Faculty of Education University of Cambridge.

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