

**Written evidence submitted by Professor Lisa Purse, Dr Dominic Lees, Andrew Philip, and Dr Shweta Ghosh, University of Reading**

**What can the industry and Government do to ensure British film and high-end television can adapt for the future?**

Professor Lisa Purse and Andrew Philip research the screen industries' current challenges as part of the AHRC-funded University of Reading Impact Accelerator Account. Dr Dominic Lees is the leading UK expert on AI in the screen industries, and co-founder of the Synthetic Media Research Network. The University of Reading, Shinfield Studios, and Slough-based CIC Resource Productions co-created Screen Berkshire, one of the BFI National Lottery Skills Clusters, on which Dr Shweta Ghosh is knowledge exchange lead. We address the last three questions of the inquiry call.

**What should be prioritised to ensure a strong skills pipeline and retention in the film and high-end TV industry?**

The UK lacks the scale of skilled workforce required by the current rapid expansion of film and HETV production. Failure to address the skills shortage will constrain growth and opportunity. We identify key causes of the failing skills pipeline:

1. Lack of diversity: the screen industry fails to capitalise on the talents of most of the UK's communities, with recruitment to many behind-the-camera roles not broadening beyond entrants from white middle-class backgrounds.
2. Ageism: screen industry employment favours the young and semi-experienced professional, with a structural hostility to older and more experienced workers. The resulting retention crisis leads to the attrition of skills and knowledge.
3. Precarious employment: the nature of freelance work in the sector militates against the inclusion of classes and communities unable to withstand the vagaries of screen industry employment patterns.
4. Lack of training: the industry invests very little in training. Small scale skills initiatives and the current interface with UK film schools, colleges and universities are inadequate to meet the needs of the industry.
5. Regional skills gaps: new-build studio production spaces have spread beyond established creative centres, generating regional talent shortages (and opportunities).

We propose an expanded role for the Higher Education sector in building a strong skills pipeline for the film and high-end TV sector:

- Universities can play a pivotal role in assessing regional skills needs and meeting them at pace, through engagement with and coordination of industry partners (both large companies and SMEs), freelancers, training providers, and sector advocates. Our work in Berkshire – the county with the fastest growing screen economy in the UK – provides a model for this work.

- Leveraging universities' regional locations in this way can provide a robust, responsive set of talent pipelines to address industry needs as they continue to evolve into the future. We propose the establishment of seven Screen Industry Centres across the UK and Northern Ireland, each bringing together the foremost academic departments specialising in Media Industries and screen sector business studies with regional governmental and film industry stakeholders.
- Develop an industry-relevant curriculum in UK universities. Film and Television production studies across the four nations is uncoordinated, generating large numbers of talented graduates, but who may still be lacking in the skills and employment awareness required by the film and high-end TV industry. The British Film Institute should undertake an expanded responsibility to define the training and educational needs of the industry, coordinating with the Screen Industry Centres to develop curricula in HE institutions.
- Equally importantly, encourage the development of structures around early career opportunities to ensure clear and equitable entry points for people transitioning from education into industry. Increased partnership working between education and the sector is critical, but also wider investment by industry in supporting placements, mentorship, traineeships, and bursaries to ensure these opportunities are not dependent on existing income. We propose a training levy on the major streamers to provide resources for this skills support programme. Or equivalent] Worth mentioning LSA as a good example of industry engagement at FE level??
- Use the HE sector's knowledge and experience of expanding the diversity of its student intake to generate proactive policy initiatives for the film and high-end TV industry. Universities' outreach work in regional communities should be a model for a well-funded effort by the screen industries to extend the appeal of careers in the sector into unrepresented groups.
- Establish pathways for returning industry professionals or those who wish to retrain into the industry, including appropriate career mentoring.
- Provide structural support for the film and high-end TV industry's freelancers, who make up the largest proportion of the industry's production talent pool. Our research reveals a lack of networking capacity for this time- and leverage-poor pool of screen workers, leading to an associated deficit in career mentoring and retention. Our proposed network of Screen Industry Centres would allow regional universities and industry partners to address this problem.

### **What are the risks and benefits of artificial intelligence to the sector?**

Artificial Intelligence applications in the film and high-end TV sector can now be classed as forms of 'Synthetic Media', with major implications for moving image production, voice, and

performance. The sector now faces a profusion of new generative AI tools with multiple risks and potential benefits.

**RISKS:**

- Traditional working practices in the screen sector will transform, impacting multiple areas of behind-the-camera professional employment - from screenwriters to designers and the Visual Effects (VFX) workforce.
- Disrupted professional roles may undermine the attractiveness of employment in these areas.
- Failure to develop a national programme of AI upskilling could weaken the competitive status of the UK's screen workforce, undermining inward investment.
- Integration of AI into screen performance will threaten the status and remuneration of UK actors, with voice actors already impacted.

**BENEFITS:**

- Major potential benefits to the UK's international role in providing postproduction services and Visual Effects.
- Swift integration of AI technologies into screen production practices may enable the UK to extend its reputation as a high-quality, lower cost destination for inward film and television investment.
- AI will democratise access to advanced VFX, enabling low-budget films to match the production values of Hollywood movies.
- Rapid adoption of Virtual Production technology enables UK studios to shoot scenes previously requiring travel to distant locations.
- AI in voice dubbing will reduce the costs of audio postproduction and increase the overseas market for UK-produced film and high-end television content.

**The need for regulation**

Our research with SMEs and large corporations in film and high-end TV shows a consistent voice from this industry: the need for government to establish sensitive guidelines on the use of generative AI in the sector. Such regulation needs to be carefully balanced between the rights of producers, performers and the public. We believe that this can be achieved without cramping creative freedom and the health and competitiveness of the sector. The experience of businesses in this space is that the lack of regulation does not stimulate opportunity, it creates uncertainty which is detrimental to growth. (Guidelines and collective contracts produced by organisations like BECTU and Equity respectively offer useful reference cases.)

**What needs to change to ensure the industry is supporting inclusivity and sustainability?**

The lack of inclusivity and diversity in the film and high-end television industry is well-established. Our interim research data confirms that poor work culture (long hours,

discrimination, etc) increases talent attrition, and unduly limits the talent pool in the first place. SMEs tell us the deadline- and budget-focused work culture does not provide space/time for reflection on working, recruitment and career progression practices. This prevents highly talented personnel from historically marginalised groups from joining and remaining part of the talent pool.

We propose changes that integrate the role of Higher Education in strategies to support inclusivity:

- Universities with conjunctions of strong business schools and relevant industry research expertise can provide consultancy on organisation management to large companies and SMEs tailored to their specific business need.
- Implemented at scale, this would address inclusivity and sustainability through a business need framework, achieving benefits for the individual company while enhancing working culture practices across the industry.
- Equally, universities can be key partners in:
  - building aspiration amongst young people, and historically marginalised and economically disadvantaged groups, and
  - directing existing local skilled talent outside the sector (from the trades, accountancy, etc) towards the film and television industry, and
  - creating and sustaining local film and television cultures to strengthen communities and local cultural and creative engagement.
  - Example models of practice include Dr Ghosh's collaborative community filmmaking project in Whitley, Berkshire, and Resource Productions' Creative Collective local training and mentoring provision in Slough.

**Sustainability in the zero-carbon film and high-end TV industry:**

Regionalism is key to reducing the carbon footprint of this industrial sector. Current employment and working practices draw freelance workers to sites of production from across the UK and beyond. Central government support for economically strong regional clusters of screen industry activity will enable the growth of highly skilled workforces in each region, reducing travel and carbon waste.

18 September 2023