

# ARMED FOR A MULTITUDE OF TASKS

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***Employers bemoan graduates' lack of skills, but Paul Kleiman believes that the performing arts are proving that they can provide students with the variety of 'soft' skills coveted by CEOs***

“If I want someone to design and build bridges, I’ll recruit an A-grade engineering graduate, but if I’m looking for potential managers and leaders of this company, I’m more likely to employ the editor of the student magazine or the director of the dramatic society.”

This, said by the chief executive officer of a major engineering company, encapsulates many of the concerns and challenges in the debate on skills in higher education.

Record numbers of young people may be entering higher education but, according to Margaret Michell of the British Chambers of Commerce New Skills Taskforce, many do not really understand the work ethic and they lack professionalism. This view is shared by many employers across the industrial, commercial and professional spectrum. They claim graduates are leaving universities lacking a number of the essential skills required by the market-driven, consumer-led, image-focused, technology-intensive, rapidly changing world of employment in the 21st century.

But are employers right? There is a tendency, particularly in government and policy-making circles, to accept the employers’ view without question. However, while there are genuine concerns about skills, the views and statements of employers need to be treated with some caution. Ulrich Teichler in his report for Unesco, *Requirements for the World of Work* , points out the disparities between what employers stated to be the case about skills and their recruitment and selection policies. The views of employers are often based on ignorance of what goes on in universities.

Teichler did, however, find an “amazing consensus” among employers on the attributes they expected graduate recruits to possess. These included: flexibility; an ability to contribute to innovation and creativity; an ability to cope with uncertainty; an interest in life-long learning; social sensitivity and communication skills; an ability to work in teams; an ability to take on responsibilities;

and to be entrepreneurial. These skills fall into the area known as “soft” skills, as opposed to the “hard” skills associated with technical or discipline-specific abilities and the basic skills associated with the 3Rs. Soft skills are also related to what has become known as “emotional intelligence”.

The CEO’s example of the director of the dramatic society as a potential manager or leader confirms the belief that the creative arts generally and the performing arts in particular have the potential to provide students with precisely the types of experiences and skills that employers value. Further evidence can be seen in the phenomenon of large companies bringing in leading practitioners in dance, music and theatre to train and motivate staff. This lucrative line of business has grown to such an extent that a number of arts organisations, such as the Royal Shakespeare Company, have special units to promote and run such courses.

Through the arts, students learn to innovate and think creatively - qualities that are valued by many new and expanding industries. Performing-arts programmes provide opportunities for the exploration and formation of values, the development of feeling and sensitivity and an opportunity to develop social skills that do not occur as naturally in other disciplines.

The performing arts also help to develop self-confidence. A paying audience arriving at a specific time on a particular day to see a performance is great motivation to develop time-management and decision-making skills. Entrepreneurial, problem-solving and negotiation skills are acquired out of necessity when faced with minimum or non-existent budgets, inflexible production managers and recalcitrant health and safety officers.

But there’s no room for complacency. Some areas, such as traditional acting, dance and music conservatoires, have focused little on developing transferable, more general skills required to build and sustain a career in an unpredictable and insecure field of work. But even they are recognising that training to be an artist is not incompatible with training to be employable and that music-making and theatre-making are skills-rich areas of enterprise.

Certainly, the performing arts have the potential to deliver skills that are in demand, but even in that area of work, administrators and managers complain that practitioners are often not equipped with effective entrepreneurial, communication and self-management skills.

Jobs are increasingly demanding a combination of highly developed specialisms. Many of the recruitment difficulties reported relate to finding the right range of skills. Two contradictory trends are at work: an increasing specialisation of job roles and a need for what someone called “magnificent generalists” - people with the skills and experience to cross boundaries.

Perhaps “crossing boundaries” suggests a way forward for those concerned to enhance and broaden the skills of their students. Engaging with the skills that the performing arts have to offer is not about turning accountants into actors or medics into musicians. But it is about exploiting the many and rich opportunities for skills development that the performing arts have to offer.